

*New Caledonia or Kanaky?: The Political History of a French Colony* by John Connell, Pacific Research Monograph No. 16, Canberra, National Centre for Development Studies, the Australian National University, 1987, xx+493 pp.

## I

For more than two years the former French conservative government followed a repressive policy, which included calling out police and military forces, against the independence movement of the New Caledonian aborigines. This policy culminated amidst the last French presidential elections (April–May 1988) in one of the most violent incidents the South Pacific overseas territory has ever experienced. The Kanak *indépendentistes* attacked police squads, and took twenty-seven gendarmes as hostages while calling for withdrawal of security forces, nullification of planned regional elections and nomination of a mediator in order to “discuss the true referendum of self-determination.” In the assault by French military special anti-terrorist forces to liberate the hostages, which was carried out three days before the opening of the presidential elections, nineteen Melanesians and two soldiers of the anti-terrorist force were killed. New socialist Defense Minister J.-P. Chevènement has acknowledged that “acts contravening military duty were... committed” (*Le Monde*, June 1, 1988) by the special intervention force concerning the deaths, after the assault, of three Melanesian commandoes including their leader. The tension between aboriginal Kanaks and white *Caldoches* has so irreparably mounted that preventing another serious incident is said to be a touch-and-go affair.

The “problème calédonien” has been a growing thorn in France’s side since the beginning of the 1970s. It was a major controversial issue in the last presidential election campaign, and will constitute one of the most urgent and difficult questions confronting the Rocard government.

Very little is known, however, about the present political state that has made New Caledonia a focal point in the South Pacific. Although some eminent ethnological and geographical studies on the French overseas territory do exist both in French and in English, and though much has been written, especially in France and in journalism, about the successive political events since the late 1970s, few efforts have been made to establish a connection between the academic world and the actual situation in New Caledonia. Connell’s work provides this missing link through its study of the historical background to today’s political situation in New Caledonia.

In this nearly 500-page volume, Connell covers almost all aspects imaginable of this issue. He traces New Caledonian history from the first human settlement of at least 4,000 years ago to the revival of the French right-wing Chirac government in 1986, examining political, economic, and social phases during each epoch. Without doubt, we find in this work practically every English and French title ever published on New Caledonia, and one would be hard pressed to find literature on this subject written with such breadth, precision, and documentation.

As readers make their way through this voluminous work, they will begin realize that the detailed accounts are not simply encyclopedic accumulations of descriptions, but facts carefully selected and analyzed to elucidate the roots of the actual problem. What we have in hand, in fact, is an ore of information concentrated and analyzed by an author who has wide and solid knowledge not only of New Caledonia but of other oceanic islands as well. The multiplicity of descriptions is simply a reflection of that of the archipelago’s reality, from which readers are led to discover historical continuities according to their own interests.

## II

One such continuities running throughout the history of New Caledonia is the land problem. On that barren stony land, Melanesians formed a traditional tribal society based on the cultivation of taro and yams and characterized by extremely close ties with the land. "These ties between people and land, which have never been extinguished, . . . have been the single most important influence on the course of New Caledonian history" (p. 10). For the aborigines, the land represented "not only the principal resource of Melanesians and the source of livelihood, wealth and power, but the means of identification with the continuity of the contemporary and ancestral worlds" (p. 43).

Colonization began after Captain Cook's discovery in 1774. Missionaries arrived first. Though British missionaries first influenced New Caledonia, it was French Catholicism that dominated the religious rivalries. European traders exported such products as sandalwood and pearl shells. Settlers made various attempts to introduce the cultivation of profitable commodities to the "country of rocks and pebbles." They felt they had to ensure the viability of the new colony, and "to do so it was necessary to own and cultivate large areas of land, control of the land being crucial to economic growth" (p. 42). Following annexation in 1853, France transferred sovereignty over the land from the aboriginal clans and tribes to the French state and to French settlers. Because of its remoteness, France also utilized New Caledonia as a penal colony. Some 22,000 convicts in total, including political prisoners of the 1871 Paris Commune, were sent to the island and its dependencies. Prison farms and small landholdings of freed prisoners "quickly extended the frontiers of European settlement" (p. 47). To the growing demand for land, the administration "simply responded by establishing more [aboriginal] reservations, smaller, more remote and on poorer agricultural land" (p. 61).

Conflict was a logical consequence. Sanguinary rebellions and French military repressions culminated in the 1878 insurrection, "the bloodiest revolt New Caledonia has ever known" (Saussol, cited in p. 61) in which some 200 whites and their supporters and 1,200 rebels are estimated to have been killed. The leader of the revolt, great chief Atai, has a legendary status among today's Kanaka *indépendentistes*. Revolts subsided during the inter-war period under the French administration's divide-and-rule measures, and there was a serious decline of Melanesian population.

After World War II and a recovery of the native population, the Melanesian claim on the land revived due to a growing insufficiency of land on the reservations and to legislative liberalization. Pressure on land rose again with the end of the nickel boom following the first oil shock in 1973 because many Melanesian mine workers returned to the reserves. Demands for reclamation land multiplied. But it was not until 1978 that European landownership ceased growing because of land redistribution measures which finally brought the expansion of settler colonialism to an end. "The social, psychological and economic significance of Melanesian land cannot be overemphasized. Land has remained for more than a century the basis of Melanesian opposition to colonial rule; it is the crux of the political and economic history of New Caledonia" (p. 43), the author emphasizes.

Connell's analysis of the land problem behind political incidents, often passed over by journalists, gives us a key to the intricacy of the New Caledonian problem. It is indispensable for a full understanding of how deep-rooted the actual problems are, and how closely their amelioration is tied to the solution of the land problem.

## III

Another historical continuity this work points out is the persistence of a sharp dichotomy between whites and Melanesians and the renewed social and economic marginalization of the latter.

Since the very beginning of colonization, "contrast between development in Noumea and their absence elsewhere" (p. 54) was clear. In spite of the code of *Indigénat* stipulating mobilization of natives as a cheap labor force, "the people of the Grande Terre were never employed in large numbers" because "disorganized and demoralized, concerned with their own security and renewal, they were an unwilling, intermittent and inadequate labour force" (p. 95). Instead, there was a massive import of laborers from Vietnam, Java, New Hebrides, Japan, India, and elsewhere for the agriculture and mining industry, rendering Melanesians a demographic minority on their own land (31,000 Melanesians against total population of 62,700 in 1946).

Practically with no civil liberties and confined on reservations in mountainous and sterile regions occupying little more than 7 per cent of the Grand Terre, the Melanesians suffered a rapid population decline (from an estimated population of 40,000–62,500 in 1853 to 27,100 in 1921). Europeans regarded them as no more than an inferior race which was dying out, and which had to be separated and prevented from threatening the European community. But at the same time the confinement on reservations played a role in protecting the Melanesians against physical and psychological menaces, allowing them a "separate development" (p. 105) and an economic and demographical revival after the 1920s.

Although postwar institutional changes brought about a gradual recognition of civil rights, the marginal status of the Melanesians has changed little and social dichotomy in New Caledonia has increased even further. The steady rise in Melanesian population was surpassed by massive immigration, mainly from France, promoted by the French government during the nickel boom. The purpose, as explicitly expressed by the French Prime Minister, P. Messmer, was to protect France's presence in New Caledonia from "nationalist claims by the indigenous people supported by allies from other Pacific communities" through "improving the numerical balance of the races" and to make New Caledonia "a small French territory as prosperous as Luxembourg" (cited in p. 218). As a result, the Melanesians have remained a minority, representing 44 per cent of the total population as of 1983.

Dualism between rich white Noumea and poor Kanak rural regions has also been accentuated by internal migration during the boom years. Apart from developing the mining industry, no serious effort was made by the administration to develop the rural economy until the 1980s, which "effectively ensured the continued marginalization of the Melanesian population." "Economically, socially and geographically Melanesians are largely apart from the mainstream of the modern economy; inequalities in every arena emphasize this marginality" (p. 171). This dichotomy, however, is not only a product of colonial rule, but also supported by the Melanesians who consider the reservations as "the only means of ensuring the survival of Melanesian culture and the adaptation of Melanesian society to the modern economy" (Tjibaou, cited in p. 192).

This almost total dichotomy and marginalization are factors which explain the exaltation of an exceptionally intensive independence movement in the South Pacific. Recent political evolution in the territory can also be better understood in this context; successive violent incidents and mounting hatred between the two communities since

the late 1960s, and especially since the beginning of 1980s, seems to dissuade any attempt to diminish the dichotomy. The cleavage has grown so irreparably wide and deep that both Kanak and *Caldoche* leaders recently declared themselves ready to discuss the possibility of a kind of segregation, in order to avoid a "civil war." The new statute they are viewing would create a partition of the territory under the direct arbitration of the metropolitan government. After the miscarriage of the Lemoine statute amid the barricades and gunfire of boycotting Kanaks and the failure of the Pisani plan in face of a plain refusal by both sides, it may represent the only direction remaining which the new socialist government can pursue.

#### IV

The final continuity of New Caledonian history which comes out of the book is, naturally, the development of the Kanak independence movement. Its evolution during the last decades is traced with extreme breadth and precision.

With the modification of status from French colony to overseas territory after the war, the code of *Indigénat* was finally abolished and the Melanesians' right to vote was gradually enlarged. Union Calédonienne (UC), the first political party which supported interests and aims of the indigenous population, offered them a place for enfranchisement and brought the first Melanesian members to the Territorial Assembly and later to the French parliament.

The postwar liberalism, however, was soon confronted by a conservative renaissance as well as the opposition of the de Gaulle government because of the strategic importance of the islands. They not only possessed half of the world's nickel reserves, but had a vital political importance in assuring French presence in the South Pacific following the establishment of the Centre d'Expérimentation du Pacifique, a nuclear testing center, on Mururoa atoll. Violent clashes erupted in the territory and while Algeria and other African colonies gained independence, the UC's continual demands for self-government met a categorical refusal from Paris.

The nickel boom starting in the late 1960s "totally transformed the economy and led to the arrival of a large new conservative electorate that made the Melanesian population a minority" (p. 257). Stimulated by the first Melanesian university students baptized with "mai '68" in France, awareness of the colonial reality grew among the indigenous population, leading to a rise in radicalism. By the end of the 1960s "political divisions had become more like battle lines" (p. 258). Several Melanesian radical groups broke away from the UC, while Europeans withdrew from the multiracial party to form new ones opposing independence.

Splits and fusions into numerous small parties resulted in a political and racial polarization. After the 1977 territorial elections, European conservative parties formed a majority under the Rassemblement pour la Calédonie dans la République (RPCR), an anti-independence coalition, while Melanesian parties, including the UC, strengthened their unity around the common objective of full independence. The polarized situation became entrenched as extremists on both sides gathered strength, despite the Giscard d'Estaing administration's Dijoud Plan, the first reform program recognizing and attempting to improve the "unsatisfactory" social and economic position of Melanesians. The Melanesian parties formed the Front indépendantiste (FI) to fight the 1979 territorial elections.

The achievement of independence in Vanuatu in 1980 and the accession to power of the French Socialist Party offering their clear support for "the right of Kanak people

to freely decide their future" (p. 285) suggested to Melanesians that the 1980s were going to usher in a new era, though "it was a dream that in a few years would become a new nightmare" (p. 285). There is abundant mass media information on the political evolution since the beginning of the 1980. The reform plans of the left wing government were, in effect, "scarcely different from those of Dijoud" (p. 289) and their principles took recognition of Kanak interests only "a little further" (p. 308).

A precarious calm after a round-table discussions at Nainville-les-Roches near Paris crumbled the moment the French government announced in 1984 its plan for a referendum on the independence of New Caledonia. The progress of incidents thereafter is well known: the FI's declaration to boycott anticipated territory elections and to create a provisional Kanaky government, the FLNKS (Front de Libération Nationale Kanake et Socialiste); an "active" boycott by the FLNKS of the November 1984 election, showing a surprising mobilization of Kanak militants, followed by two months of violence across the whole territory; the arrival of a special government envoy, E. Pisani; the return of violence after the publication of his proposals; the violent death of E. Machoro, Minister of Security in the Kanaky government; announcement of the Fabius Plan which deferred the referendum to 1987 and divided New Caledonia into four regions, each having large administrative autonomy.

The book ends with the arrival of the right-wing government in March 1986. But, to those who have read this outstanding work, the subsequent evolution of events will seem logical and even predictable. The Chirac government pushed a strongly pro-RPCR policy, excluding and cracking down on the FLNKS as "a handful of minority terrorists." In September 1987, the long-pending referendum was carried out in relative calm amidst an exceptional mobilization of police and military forces, while Kanak militants conducted nonviolent boycott campaigns. As is well known, however, the referendum was nothing but another reaffirmation of the deep social antagonism, and the murderous incident of last May marked the last step in a return to the starting point. Another Nainville-les-Roches is reported to have been started between J.-M. Tjibaou and J. Lafleur, presidents of the FLNKS and the RPCR.

After getting Connell's history of New Caledonia, readers are almost compelled to admit "whatever legal and constitutional proposals are eventually chosen, . . . it seems improbable that any proposals will both end violence and satisfy Kanak nationalism" (pp. 444-45). Despite the political nature of this book, the author has been careful not to fall into an easy ideological bias or interpretation. The author's perspective is, in contrast, realistic and, therefore, pessimistic: "in any event the future is unlikely to be one of steady progress and development, . . . but more likely one of uncertainty, hatred and division" (p. 445). In today's world "New Caledonia stands alone as a discrete territory where a majority of the historic indigenous population demand independence and seek the end of their colonial status" (p. 411), but "the strongest independence movement that has ever existed in the South Pacific is located where independence is quite unlikely" (p. 445). (Toshiki Mashimo)