The Ouvéa Factor: Who Cares About Independence?

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In the early eighties, it was the chosen setting for a film called 'The Closest Island to Paradise'. In the mid-eighties, the yacht used by the French commandos who blew up the Rainbow Warrior carried its name. In the late eighties, it was the scene of the bloodiest operation by a European army that the Pacific has seen since the end of World War Two. Today, the New Caledonian island of Ouvéa is fast developing a reputation as the cannabis capital of the Pacific.

Two-metre high hedges of the outlawed herb can be found as features in elaborate and carefully tended gardens around people's houses. In the village of St Joseph, a very healthy specimen is thriving in a sunny, well-drained plot between the street counter of the local shop and the ancient logs that surround the courtyard of the high chief Nekelo. It is so widely consumed that after every rainfall, stray seeds germinate where they fall - in people's lawns, driveways or gardens - and often they have already become sturdy little plants by the time they attract their first human eye.

In the rest of this French territory, cannabis is as illegal as it is in France. Possession of a single joint leads to arrest and a criminal conviction. But on Ouvéa the situation has got so out of hand that the best the authorities can hope for is to contain it by searching the bags of passengers arriving from Ouvéa at Nouméa's Magenta airport.

'It could be cleaned up very quickly,' insists Alain Charassier the head of the Ouvéa Gendarmerie. 'But I'd need another whole platoon (of gendarmes) over here, and nobody wants that'. New Caledonia's peace accords, the 1988 Matignon Accords and the 1998 Nouméa Accords, have always been at their most brittle in Ouvéa. The gendarmes and their political masters in Nouméa and in Paris are left with only two possible approaches to enforcing the law on the island - very heavy-handed or very easy-going. They are choosing the latter.

**Memories of a Massacre**

Ouvéa has the reputation, even among Kanak people, of being a relaxed place. There is, for example, no sign of any organised attempt to realise the cash value of the island's substantial crops of cannabis. It's just there - like the fish, the coconut crabs and the beautiful scenery - and nobody seems to view it, as they do in other places, as money growing on trees. But its people have much they are proud of. Amongst
independentists, there is pride in Ouvéa having been the first local body to elect a pro-
independence mayor, Malaki Kapoa in 1977. Ouvéa was also home to the longest running part of the Kanak Popular School movement which was thriving in the northern tribe of Gossannah long after other schools had closed down. And everyone from Ouvéa knows that in 1962 the first Kanak to pass his baccalauréat (the school leaving qualification needed for tertiary study) was Boniface Ounou from Ouvéa.

However, the people of Ouvéa will forever be haunted by the memories of 5 May 1988. In an action widely condemned as a cynical election stunt, the then Prime Minister and Presidential hopeful, Jacques Chirac, rejected a negotiated settlement to a hostage crisis on Ouvéa and sent France's élite 11th Shock unit on an operation that left 19 Kanaks dead, at least five of whom were killed after they had surrendered. Dozens of other innocent civilians were tortured during the two-week siege of the island during which all transport, telecommunication, radio and television links were cut.

Within weeks of the massacre, the newly elected Socialist Party government of Michel Rocard had brokered a deal between the leaders of the main pro-independence grouping, the Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS) and the largest right-wing party, Rally for Caledonia in the Republic (RPCR). The Matignon Accords, as they became known, set out a ten year plan for economic development and 'rebalancing', culminating on a referendum on independence in 1998.

The Accords were praised around the world for bringing peace to a context that was on the brink of all-out civil war. However, they also generated considerable dissent and disillusionment in the ranks of the Kanak independence movement, not least because they were signed without consultation with the movement and offered far less than its agreed minimum demands. In Ouvéa, reaction was particularly hostile. Despite their suffering, nobody from Ouvéa was invited to the talks. And part of the trade-off for an amnesty was that the events surrounding the 1988 massacre would not be fully investigated.

When the Accords were put to the vote in a referendum in November 1988, the French Government, the FLNKS and the RPCR were all urging people to support the agreement and no political party was campaigning for a boycott. However, even though the FLNKS stressed the Accords' promise of the release of Ouvéa's political prisoners, Ouvéa recorded an abstention rate of over 54 per cent of registered voters, the highest in the territory, with a further six percent voting 'no' [Small, 1989]. A
number of the wives of prisoners did not vote and, on their eventual release, several of the prisoners expressed their anger at having been used to sell an accord that they were not consulted about and did not agree with.

This unresolved tension formed the background to the tragic events of May 1989. During a ceremony to mark the first anniversary of the Ouvéa massacre, just metres from the graves of the 19 victims and in front of hundreds of people from all over the territory, Djubelly Wéa, a long-time leader of the independence movement in Ouvéa, shot and killed Jean-Marie Tjibaou and Yeiwéné Yeiwéné, the President and Vice-President of the FLNKS, and was then gunned down by Tjibaou's bodyguards. Wéa went down in history as a crazed and heartless killer. Ouvéa was condemned.

Condemned and Excluded

For the French authorities, Ouvéa has still not paid a high enough price for the killing of the four gendarmes in 1988. Asked today about any problem on the island, Gendarme Charassier explains it in all seriousness as a case of divine retribution for the deaths of his predecessors. And for some within the independence movement who have spent the last ten years naming buildings, boats, sporting events and, most recently, a spectacular cultural centre after Tjibaou and Yeiwéné, Ouvéa has still not paid a high enough price for producing their killer.

In the initial years after the signing of the Accords, the French authorities subjected Ouvéa to a concerted policy of isolation and deprivation of resources on the grounds that not all of the weapons that had been seized from the gendarmerie in 1988 had been retrieved. At the end of 1989, a large stock of arms was surrendered which might have improved things. However, by that time, conspiracy theories about Djubelly Wéa's so-called network of accomplices had been manufactured by French intelligence agents and were being spread with uncritical enthusiasm by many people including leading figures within the FLNKS. The ensuing witch hunts took their toll on many individuals and groups and were also generalised by some to include anyone from Ouvéa. These tensions were also played out within Ouvéa where the Caledonian Union (UC), a member party of the FLNKS which favours the Accords, monopolised control over the allocation of French government money when it eventually became available, and of paid employment in the bureaucracy.

1 For a detailed account of this, see Ouneï-Small 1992.
For many on Ouvéa, the Accords have brought nothing at all. For those who were active within the independence movement, there is a high level of anger at seeing a handful of people, including a number who were uninvolved in the movement, sitting in the provincial offices receiving salaries or driving cars owned by the provinces or getting financial handouts - all from the blood of the 19 people killed in the cave. Ouvéa is not the only part of the territory where Kanak people are feeling shut out of the deal that was struck between the French Socialist Government, the settler business community and what many consider to be an unaccountable Kanak political élite. However, the sense of bitterness and betrayal is probably at its most acute there and has given rise to some developments that might otherwise appear quite bizarre.

In the 1995 provincial elections, for example, Josia Ihmeling, one of the independence activists who had been taken prisoner after the attack on the cave, stood on the list of the anti-independence RPCR party. He was not elected and now, by some reports, has abandoned politics and joined a fundamentalist religious sect. Equally telling was the formation of a political group called 'Ouvéa, the Excluded Ones'. It is led by prominent independence activists including a survivor of the 1988 massacre, Hilaire Dianou, whose brother, Alphonse, led the operation in the cave and was the one most conclusively proven to have been executed by the military after his arrest. The decision by 'Ouvéa, the Excluded Ones' to organise a campaign to support the 1995 presidential campaign of Jacques Chirac was widely recognised not as a serious attempt to have electoral influence but rather as a gesture of contempt for the way the island has been treated by the signatories to the Matignon Accords.

**Development Potential**

Ouvéa is a 40 kilometre long atoll, the northern most of the Loyalty Islands which lie east of mainland New Caledonia. It had been targeted by sandalwood hunters and Pacific slave traders or 'blackbirders', whose activities were cited by France as grounds for annexation in 1865, twelve years after it had claimed sovereignty over the mainland. Ouvéa's Kanak population is made up of two language groups: Iaai, the original Melanesian inhabitants; and Faga Ouvéa, descendants of pre-colonial migrants from Wallis Island (the indigenous name for which is Ouvéa) and other parts of Polynesia. The latest census records a population of 3,540, less than two per cent of whom are non-Kanak. A high birth-rate combined with migration to the island from other parts of New Caledonia saw Ouvéa's population increase by 28 per cent since the previous census six years earlier.
Not that there's any industry to attract people to or even retain them on the island. True, there is copra. And there have been improvements in this sector with almost all product being processed locally in the new oil plant. However, it is still very hard work for returns that are low (the equivalent of less than 100 francs or US1$ per hour) and sporadic.

There is no commercial fishing, even though the island has the best fishery in the territory. It is free of *la gratte* ², an unpleasant sickness that comes from eating fish from many other parts of New Caledonia. And it sports a lagoon which, according to French Government surveys, could sustain annual harvests of many thousands of tonnes. It is also home to abundant supplies of land crabs, including the coconut crab (an endangered species in many parts of the Pacific) which can weigh four kilos and eats only coconuts which it breaks with its huge claw.

Then there is tourism. International guide books have long placed Ouvéa at the top of their 'must-sees' in New Caledonia. Club Med has been trying for years to negotiate a site and market the tourist attractions: the spectacular cliffs of Lekine; deep blue water holes in Hanawa; the Mouli bridge which serves as a viewing platform for a natural aquarium of all kinds of sea life; the *bagyine*, a beautiful and unusual parrot found only in Ouvéa; the stunning limestone caves of Houloup whose depths have never been fully explored; and the pristine white-sand beach that runs the length of the island.

However, the locals have made their feelings clear about foreign-owned tourism. In the late 1970s, the *Relais de Fayaoué* which was the only large-scale tourist resort on the island was burnt to the ground by locals who were upset that virtually none of the benefits were going to the islanders themselves. When the complex was rebuilt bigger and better than ever in 1983, it was again destroyed within a couple of months of its grand opening. Today, the *Relais de Fayaoué* is home only to a few stray goats, its ruins standing as a monument to Ouvéa's resistance to outside control.

The island's current tourist industry consists of a few small-scale family enterprises. The islanders have a very relaxed attitude to their holidaying visitors. As one French tourist remarked: 'They don't mind if you come here, but they don't mind if you don't either.' What they do mind, however, is hearing so many tourists say that they were advised before leaving France to avoid going to Ouvéa. Locals are quick to point out

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² Trans: The scratch
that, although there are occasional skirmishes with the gendarmes, they have no history of attacking tourists. In fact, tourists often comment on how easily they are befriended and brought along to local events. Even young French conscripts finishing their military service are well-received, although the army does try to deter them from visiting the island by providing a free return ticket to Lifou or Maré but not Ouvéa.

As in so many other places, tourism in Ouvéa comes at a price, for example, the effects of package tours of large groups of Japanese. Their day excursions three or four times each week benefit only two local operators but clog the planes for everyone. Locals wanting to travel to or from Nouméa are now regularly finding that 43 out of 46 seats on the plane have been block booked months in advance for the Japanese tourists.

The net result of this sort of 'development' is that, although there has been an increase in the amount of money coming into Ouvéa, it is being distributed very unequally and, in the perception of many, unfairly. The competition for paid employment and the lack of transparency in the allocation of these positions is generating tensions such as occupations of the airport at Houloup by the people from that tribe who insist that their employment needs should be recognised.

The growth of inequalities is damaging the fabric of society in Ouvéa. Burglaries which had been rare are now becoming commonplace. Services which used to be offered freely in the knowledge that they would be reciprocated at some stage by someone else, such as a ride to the post office or the loan of a mower, now command a price. As long as a large sector of society remains in severe poverty, show-piece developments like the new desalination plant will not address the real needs of the people. A common refrain about the plant is that it is 'good for the people who can afford to buy the water from it'. These effects of 'development' are every bit as damaging as the hand-out mentality about which so many Kanak people have expressed fears [see interviews in Leblic, 1993: 389-397].

**The Impact of the Matignon and Nouméa Accords**

As has been pointed out by Raphael Mapou, a former FLNK leader who split to form the CCI, the overall effect of the type of development being promoted in New Caledonia under the Matignon Accords is that, rather than preparing the territory's economy for independence, it is locking it into a position of dependence. This, he
argues, will leave the country with increasingly limited options for future economic development.

However, in the name of economic realism, Kanak people are still being exhorted to follow this path. The UC has opted for development based on a market economy, as its president, François Burck, told the party's 1991 congress:

'We are confronted by a market economy. When we say independence we place our country in a zone where there are rules. If we say no to the market economy, with what do we replace it? And if we say yes to the market economy, this assumes constraints' [Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes, 12 November 1991].

Already, the 'constraints' of this model of development are being used to promote a wide range of policies, some of which have very serious political implications. Immigration, for example, which was promoted by France in the 1970s as an expressly political strategy is now being promoted as a necessity for the fulfilment of the development aims of the Matignon Accords. Calling for more immigration from Europe of 'people who work well to teach people who don't know how to work' [Pacific Report, Volume 6, Number 13], the RPCR president, Jacques Lafleur, has declared:

'New Caledonia needs to increase its population to achieve economic growth... This is a universal economic principle, not a trap to anyone' [PACNEWS, 16 January 1991].

Although in 1998 FLNKS spokespeople still claimed to be working towards the long-agreed goal of Kanak socialist independence, influential people in the independence grouping have long indicated their readiness to abandon this completely along with any alternative development models which might be pursued within it. Burck knew that this would be opposed, not only within the FLNKS but also by his own party:

'If we (UC) announce tomorrow that we no longer support Kanak socialist independence there will be war, because no-one will agree. Our work is to bring people to be realistic, we have to be honest with them. For us it is not a question of Kanak independence, but of what sort of independence and is it possible' [Pacific Report, Volume 6 Number 14]
When the Matignon Accords were signed, Kanak independentists were told that they represented a means of achieving independence. Within three years, however, leaders of both the FLNKS and the RPCR had begun talking about the dangers of the 1998 referendum refocusing attention back on the choice: independence, yes or no? Rather, it was argued, the 1998 vote should enable a continuation of the process that was begun by the Accords and serve as a 'ratification of this consensus' [Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes, 25 March 1991]. In the same vein Burck declared that his understanding of independence had 'evolved and is no longer taken as meaning a break with France but rather a partnership' [PACNEWS, 29 May 1991].

However, in April 1996, FLNKS negotiators were stunned to be told by the RPR Prime Minister, Alain Juppé, that full independence would not be an option in the 1998 referendum and that the best they could hope for would be internal autonomy, a position that had been rejected by most Kanak people twenty years earlier. This led to an FLNKS walk-out of the talks in Paris. The FLNKS now favours the option of becoming an 'associated state' but, as its president, Rock Wamytan, made clear after the break-down of the talks, this political status presupposes a prior step of New Caledonia becoming an independent state [Les Nouvelles Hebdo, 17-22 May 1996]. In response to these developments, a faction within the UC3 succeeded in having the party remove Jorédié, Wamytan and Burck from its negotiating team, declaring that 'the chapter for a consensus solution has come to an end' [Reuter, 20 May 1996].

Despite this purported radicalisation of the FLNKS, compromises have been made that are very similar to those deemed necessary by the old guard. In the Nouméa Accord that was signed in April 1998 and ratified by a referendum in November, the FLNKS agreed to a further deferral of a vote on independence for at least fifteen years. Although it involves transfers of some powers, the creation of a new political status somewhere between an overseas territory and a sovereign state, and the creation of New Caledonian "citizenship" (which has been carefully distinguished from "nationality") the Nouméa Accord essentially represents the ratification of the Matignon "consensus" that Burck foreshadowed over seven years ago.

Thus it is not surprising that levels of support for the new accord were not very different from those of the Matignon Accords. That it, in the settler-dominated Southern Province there was a high participation rate (over 80%) with over 47% of those voting 'no'. In the Kanak-dominated Islands Province, by contrast, the 'yes' vote was over 95% but more than 51% of registered voters did not vote.

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3 This group is led by Bernard Lepeu, Damien Yeiwéné and Charlie Pidjot.
Who is Winning the Bet?

From the outset, Rocard was candid about the aim of the Accords. He considered that they provided the framework for what he described as 'a veritable economic and cultural decolonisation without any change in (French) sovereignty' [Reuter, 28 August 1988]. Rocard believed that at the end of ten years, Kanak people who had wanted independence would have come to an appreciation of the benefits of remaining a French territory. 'My dearest hope' he declared 'is that in 1998 the people of New Caledonia will choose to remain a part of France' [Reuter, 29 August 1988].

For his part, Tjibaou believed that with an unfavourable rapport de force he had to make a deal and he got what he believed was the best one possible in the circumstances. He also believed that New Caledonian society was not ready for independence and needed time and the right conditions to construct it. He spoke of the Matignon Accords as a bet and was confident that, by 1998, the independence movement could win the referendum having convinced significant numbers of their opponents of the advantages of independence [see Tjibaou, 1996, ch.30].

The president of the Loyalty Islands Province and founder of the modern independence movement, Nidoish Naisseline, made a similar point, even though his party, Kanak Socialist Liberation (LKS) had formally withdrawn from the Matignon Accords. 'If the RPCR is not for independence, maybe it's our fault because we have not proven that independence is a gain. At the moment, we in the LKS say that the idea of independence is completely tarnished' [La Voix du Peuple, September 1996]. However, as one activist commented at the 1992 FLNKS congress, 'We need to be careful that we do not make such a concerted effort to attract opponents of independence that we lose our own supporters.'

Conscious of this, spokespeople for those independence groups that support the accords often employ radical language and threaten a return to more militant mobilisations if their demands are not met. It is, however, questionable whether this remains a genuine option for them. If the degree of disillusionment evident on Ouvéa is any indication, it will take more than rhetoric to remobilise the independence movement.
On Ouvéa, many people who had been very active in the independence movement have simply lost interest. They now pay less attention to what they perceive as the latest *magouille*4 in Paris or Nouméa than to the latest news of the footballing career of Christian Karembeu, the Kanak member of the French national team that won this year's soccer world cup. They have certainly not been converted, as Rocard hoped, to the idea of New Caledonia staying part of France. They remain committed to the idea of independence. However, given their experience of the last ten years, they fear the prospect of what independence might actually look like. People from Ouvéa, who ten years ago were prepared to die for independence, are now far from sure that they will even cast a vote for it.

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4 Trans: Underhand political dealings.