New Caledonia

Kanaky New Caledonia is still a work in progress, a multiethnic society seeking “a common destiny,” as proposed by the Noumea Accord of 1998. France, which “took possession” of the territory by unilateral decree almost 150 years ago, continues to play an ambivalent role as peacemaker among the ethnic and political factions that its own policies helped to create. The year 2002 saw lingering tensions over such issues as power sharing in the local government, nickel mining development, relations between immigrants and indigenous Kanak, and the impact of elections at the local, French presidential, and parliamentary levels. Nevertheless, the territory continued to move fitfully toward self-government and expanded its role as an increasingly autonomous entity in the region.

In January 2002, the pro-independence Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) sent to Paris a delegation of nine leaders, headed by Pascal Naouna, to address issues of concern. With French national elections approaching, the FLNKS wanted to remind Premier Lionel Jospin and President Jacques Chirac of a number of items: that the issue of restricting the local electorate to long-term residents was still not resolved; that “collegiality” (consultation in decision-making) in the territorial executive was still lacking, as the loyalist Rassemblement pour la Calédonie dans la République (RPCR) dominated local politics; that immigrants with better diplomas continued to displace locals in the job market, especially with a new nickel boom underway; that the nickel mining project at Goro by Inco, a Canadian multinational, had still not allocated shares to the territory; that violence over land continued between the Wallisian and Kanak communities in St Louis; and that the special accord between New Caledonia and Wallis and Futuna, proposed by the Noumea Accord, remained unresolved (NC, 19 Jan 2002).

RPCR President Jacques Lafleur chose not to attend the annual Noumea Accord follow-up meeting, for “personal reasons,” and dissension showed within the FLNKS party: it had failed to elect a president at its annual congress in December 2001 and had to send a committee to Paris (PIR, 23 Jan 2002). But Chirac met with both the FLNKS coalition and an RPCR delegation led by territorial president Pierre Frogier in what was described as a long and friendly discussion. Naouna raised the electorate issue, urging a vote by the French Parliament on the constitutional amendment proposed in 1998, but Frogier said that the issue was not urgent, because it would only affect the vote on the future of the territory in fifteen years. Frogier told the press that since the consensual accord of 1998 New Caledonia has been on the path of economic development and social harmony, and that Chirac clearly loved the territory, having visited it often. For his part, Chirac met with a delegation from Wallis and Futuna and felt that a special accord with New Caledonia was imminent (NC, 28 Jan 2002). Most Wallisians in New Caledonia vote loyalist out of economic necessity, and Chirac’s local allies won a majority in the Territorial Assembly
in Wallis and Futuna in a March election (PIR, 13 March 2002). One branch of the Wallisian diaspora, however, the Rassemblement Démocratique Océanien (RDO), is a member of the FLNKS. Its president, Aloisio Sako, vowed, “We want to rally around the Kanak to build the country with them” (PIR, 19 Feb 2002).

In January, French Overseas Secretary Christian Paul promised more economic aid to develop Wallis and Futuna’s infrastructure, investment incentives, and educational system, in order to diminish the flow of migrants to New Caledonia and thus reduce the chances of ethnic conflict with indigenous Kanak (PIR, 25 Jan 2002). By the end of the year, France agreed to invest more than US$25 million to end Wallis and Futuna’s “isolation” and transform the local economy from a subsistence base to more “extroverted” activity, although the details of that territory’s accord with New Caledonia remained unresolved (PIR, 23 Dec 2002). The Wallisian diaspora, now 20,000 strong (or about 10 percent of the population on Grande Terre), outnumbers its relatives at home, because New Caledonia’s mining economy provides more opportunities for young people with French citizenship. But violence between Wallisians and Kanak in St Louis, near Noumea, has highlighted the problem of continued Polynesian immigration when the indigenous Melanesians are struggling for self-government. More than half of Wallisians in New Caledonia work as manual laborers, like most Kanak, and thus compete directly for jobs. For a majority of the territory’s inhabitants, the violence at St Louis caused concern that the ethnic conflict would spread and undermine the peace accord signed in 1998 (NC, 12 Mar 2002).

St Louis is a Catholic community founded by Marist missionaries in 1856, three years after French annexation. France granted 10,000 hectares of land to the mission, which welcomed Kanak refugees, but two Kanak chiefdoms contested ownership of the land. In the 1960s, the first wave of Wallisians arrived in Ave Maria, but they observed customary protocol and seem to have lived in general harmony with the Kanak. A second wave of Wallisians arrived in the troubled 1980s, and because they were perceived as loyalist stooges, tensions rose, until December 2001 when young students from both ethnic groups began to fight each other. The conflict escalated as militias were formed, homes were burned, cars were wrecked, and three people were killed and half a dozen wounded by gunfire. French gendarmes tried to separate the factions, while the government treated each incident as a separate crime. Another problem was disunity among local Kanak, who were divided between rival chiefdoms, notably that of Rock Wamytan of the FLNKS and that of Robert Moyatea, who accused Wamytan of being behind gunshots fired at Moyatea’s home in March. At least one young Kanak was killed by rival Kanak, while residents of Mont-Dore organized a defense association to protest the road barricades and lack of security, which were isolating them. Meanwhile, thirty-nine Wallisian families left Ave Maria, and according to a truce negotiated in November, the rest would move out
in 2003 (NC, 9 Feb, 8 Nov, 6 Dec 2002; PIR, 18 March, 23 April, 11 Nov 2002).

The French elections took place against this backdrop, so reminiscent of the tragic events of the 1980s. The FLNKS urged its voters to support Jospin on 21 April, who sought to displace Chirac as president of France, in order to maintain continuity in the Noumea Accord process, particularly on the issue of the electorate (PIR, 25 April 2002). A smaller Kanak party, Libération Kanak Socialiste (LKS), abstained from the election, arguing that the Noumea Accord had failed to limit immigration or to protect, in practice, the role of customary leaders (such as Nidoish Naiseline, LKS leader and high chief on Mare) and affirmative action for locals in hiring (NC, 2 April 2002). In a field of sixteen candidates, Jospin, the Socialist premier, was eliminated in the first round, to the surprise of many. Chirac, the Gaullist incumbent, won first place, and Jean-Marie Le Pen of the extreme right National Front (FN) came in second. In the second round runoff on 5 May, Chirac won 80 percent of the vote, giving him another seven years in office. In response to the FLNKS mobilization, Kanak voters in the North and Islands provinces turned out in large numbers to vote for Jospin, but the South, which is more populous, multietnic, and loyalist, voted mainly for Chirac or Le Pen. On 26 April, one thousand teachers and students marched in Noumea to protest against Le Pen, whom they labeled a racist, and a similar demonstration followed on 1 May. In response, local FN Congressman Guy George criticized what he called the manipulation of children by left-wing adults and declared that Le Pen was not racist but merely a French nationalist who opposed new foreign immigration (NC, 23 April–9 May 2002). The FLNKS expressed concern that the new French premier, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, had not supported the Noumea Accord, but Frogier flew to Paris on May 15th to meet with Raffarin, his old friend: “We have accompanied Jacques Chirac in his combat for several years...” (NC, 15 May 2002).

Fifteen candidates presented themselves in June for New Caledonia’s two seats in the French National Assembly. Naouna’s Union Calédonienne (UC), the largest party in the FLNKS, refused to participate, citing what it saw as the French policy of demographic colonization as the reason why no one from the FLNKS could win a seat as deputy to Paris since Roch Pidjot’s death in 1986. Because Paris refused to put into law the proposal that would limit the electorate to people who had been resident for ten years by 1998, the National Assembly was no longer a forum for “the construction of Kanaky” (NC, 11 May 2002). Yet Palika (Parti de Libération Kanak), the second largest party in the FLNKS, supported Paul Neaoutyine, the President of the Northern Province, against Frogier in the eastern district, while the dissident loyalist Alliance supported Didier Leroux against Lafleur in the western district. Lafleur had won his district ever since it was created in 1978, and although Neaoutyine kept him from winning outright on June 9th, Lafleur won on the second round a week later with 55 percent of the votes, while
Frogier defeated Leroux on the second round by the same margin (NC, 17 June 2002).

Two elections of more local interest also took place in New Caledonia in 2002, both of them unexpected: one for the municipal council on Lifou in the Islands Province, and another for seats in the eleven-member territorial executive. Because of the complexity of local Kanak politics (twenty-eight language groups), the French State Council has repeatedly abrogated election results in the Islands Province due to improprieties inballoting. In fact, Lifou’s voters have gone to the polls ten times in the past four years, leading UC mayor Neiko Hnepeune to comment on the increasingly low voter turnouts, “I think people are tired of voting all the time.” Municipal elections were held in New Caledonia in March 2001, but in September 2002 the State Council said those results were flawed and put a caretaker administration in place until another election could be held in October. One problem is the large number of party lists in each election: five this time, including separate lists of candidates proposed by three members of the FLNKS coalition. The first round of voting on 20 October gave no list a clear majority, and only one list was eliminated. So a second round was held a week later, when an alliance between the UC and the LKS won 54 percent of the votes, returning Hnepeune to power with 26 seats on the 33-member council. Palika won 2 seats, while the RPCR and its Kanak allies won 5 seats (PIR, 22 Oct, 1 Nov 2002). In effect, the same team returned to office that had won in 2001.

More dramatic was the struggle between independence supporters and loyalists in the capital that led to the fall of the executive in November. In 2001, Raphael Mapou of the Fédération des Comités de Coordination Indépendantistes (FCCI), the RPCR’s Kanak coalition partner, had maneuvered the RDO’s member of the executive, Aukusito Manuohalalo, out of office on a technicality. Manuohalalo soon returned to his post when Wamytan resigned from the executive in protest over the lack of collegiality. But in late July 2002, Mapou himself was dismissed from office by the RPCR for criticizing its “giving away” territorial mineral resources for almost nothing in its deals with Inco over the Goro nickel-processing plant. After replacing Mapou with an RPCR party member, the loyalists commanded eight seats out of eleven on the executive and often made decisions by simple majority vote without even consulting with the FLNKS, thus confirming Wamytan’s complaint (PIR, 2 Aug 2002). The FCCI was divided in its response to Mapou’s dismissal. Mapou wanted to break entirely with the RPCR, but others (who had once been in FLNKS parties but allied with the RPCR to try to work with the loyalists) sought a compromise. François Burck, former UC head and now FCCI president, opted for maintaining relations with the RPCR but also calling the attention of all groups in New Caledonia to the serious issue of protecting local resources (NC, 7 Aug 2002).

Meanwhile, the three members of the FLNKS who remained in the executive refused to move into new offices that month. Dewe Gorodey (Palika),
Gerald Cortot (UC), and Manuohalalo (RDO) said that the new offices were, in effect, an annex of the government of the Southern Province, which was controlled by the RPCR. “The FLNKS is not in tow to the RPCR,” declared Victor Tutugoro, coalition spokesman, despite the fact that all telephone, fax, and computer lines to the old offices had already been cut off and that the territorial executive was now meeting in the new building (NC, 15 Oct 2002).

In November, the UC held its annual congress and reelected Naouna president. He reaffirmed that the primary goal of New Caledonia’s oldest party was sovereignty: “The collegiality erected in general principle and consecrated by the Noumea Accord has remained a dead letter because of the hegemonic power that the RPCR exercises without sharing” (NC, 9 Nov 2002). A few days later, the battle of the bureaux took on new significance. As he had warned he might do back in January, Naouna told Cortot and all the members of the UC list below him to resign from the executive on 13 November, thereby causing the fall of the government, in accordance with Article 121 of the Organic Law of 1999. Unlike the previous resignation by Wamytan in October 2001, which had no practical support, this action required that a new executive be elected within fifteen days. Other parties in the FLNKS said that such a crisis was to be expected, considering the RPCR’s arrogance, but Manuohalalo of the RDO called it “irresponsible” (NC, 14 Nov 2002).

Typically, Lafleur reacted with “a great serenity” and called the act “a sword thrust in the water,” while Frogier was more critical, calling it first a “non-event” that cost time and credibility and then “a turning away from the Noumea Accord” (NC, 19 Nov 2002). Yet Leroux of the Alliance said it was foreseeable, because the RPCR had been playing with fire for some time, with its lack of collegiality, premature grant of mining rights to Inco, moving of the executive into the annex of the Southern Province, and general disrespect and distrust among parties (NC, 20 Nov 2002). It was in reality the first major crisis in the new government of a quasi-autonomous New Caledonia. The RPCR–FCCI majority in the Congress quickly organized a riposte. When Congress met on the 21st, in a tense mood, to determine how many members it should elect to the executive, Frogier pointed out that Article 109 of the Organic Law specified between five and eleven, so he proposed ten, and the change passed. The UC immediately protested this reduction, but to no avail (NC, 22 Nov 2002).

Three lists presented themselves: RPCR–FCCI, led by Frogier; FLNKS, led by Gorodey; and UC, led by Cortot. On the 28th, the RPCR–FCCI won seven seats out of ten, with Frogier as president of the government again; the FLNKS won two, held by Vice President Gorodey and Wamytan (making a comeback); and the UC one, Cortot. Manuohalalo was out again, because he had finally moved into his new office and had also criticized the fall of the executive. Frogier ridiculed the “infantile” behavior of the pro-independence parties, said that collegiality did not mean “veto power by a minority,” and ironically proclaimed his commitment to “con-
sensus, nothing but consensus” (NC, 29 Nov 2002; PIR, 29 Nov 2002). Plus ça change. . .

The territory also sought to improve its economic autonomy, but the sticky question of development priorities caused tensions. Pacific Island countries often rely on tourism as a major source of income, but in New Caledonia aid from France and nickel-mining revenues have usually relegated tourism to a small sector. In the first half of 2002, about 57,000 tourists visited the territory, a 5 percent increase over 2001; Japanese and New Zealand visitors dropped, but more metropolitan French (a 22 percent increase) and Australians came (NC, 20 Sept 2002). Political stability and good air connections were expected to stimulate hotel construction, and metropolitan French investors are allowed to deduct half their overseas costs from their income taxes (NC, 8 Nov, 20 Dec 2002). In addition, Air France has formed a partnership with Air Calédonie International, the territorial carrier, to improve links with Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. The local government has been allowed to purchase two airbuses tax free, just as French Polynesia is expanding its own air fleet under similar arrangements. The first airbus plans an inaugural flight in January 2003 (PIR, 18 Sept, 31 Dec 2002). To encourage tourism and protect the environment, local groups also persuaded France to propose adding New Caledonia’s coral reef (second in size to Australia’s Great Barrier Reef) to the United Nations World Heritage list, but by September France changed its mind. Lafleur had lobbied hard against the idea in Paris because it might interfere with mining projects, leading critics to point out the dismal environmental record of multinational mining companies (PIR, 20 Feb, 20 Sept 2002).

“The future of New Caledonia lies in nickel,” Lafleur proclaimed, especially since political stability has given investors more confidence, the territory has one third of the world’s reserves, and the Chinese and Indian markets (for stainless steel) are projected to grow by 20 percent a year (NC, 12 Nov 2002). Yet expanding nickel production caused serious conflicts. The 1998 Bercy Accord arranged for the Société le Nickel (SLN), the largest nickel producer in New Caledonia, to exchange its site at Tiebaghi for another at Poum that belonged to the Société Minière du Sud Pacifique (Smsp). Since the Smsp is owned by the Kanak-run Northern Province, and the Tiebaghi site is more valuable, the deal attracted Falconbridge of Canada into a partnership with the Smsp to build a new processing plant. The North hoped to provide more money and jobs for Kanak to draw them away from the South, where the SLN’s Doniambo plant in Noumea is the only processing facility to date. But when the Smsp closed its Poum site in January, the SLN had no immediate intention of reopening it, and in fact can not do so legally until Falconbridge has completed its studies and made a final decision (by 2006 at the latest) to build at Tiebaghi. This detail meant that 52 workers at Poum lost their jobs, and the Smsp also reduced 600 workers at other sites to part-time. The leading labor union in the mines, SOENC (Syndicat des Ouvriers et Employés de la Nouvelle
Calédonie), called a strike, after months of fruitless negotiations, on 21 January. A roadblock cut off the Tiebaghi site, and strikers also blockaded most other SMSP sites. Sylvain Nea, SOENC president, said that lower profits in 2001 were no excuse, because other local mining firms had not cut back and because the management of the SMSP had made poor investment decisions (NC, 23 Jan 2002).

The irony of this conflict was that the UC mobilized its militants in support of the Poum strikers, while Kanak-elected officials of the Northern Province themselves had made the decision to trade Poum for Tiebaghi and to reduce workers to part-time. In effect, pro-independence parties were on both sides of the strike issue, and the price of industrial development was made clear: labor unrest among the very workers the Kanak administration intended to help.

SOENC occupied the headquarters of the SMSP and ransacked the offices before French gendarmes liberated the building. The Northern Province, run mainly by Palika and the UC, condemned the destruction, as did the FCCI, though the LKS urged more dialogue, to no avail (NC, 1 Feb 2002). After eleven days of conflict, SOENC expanded its campaign to SLN sites, as its locals expressed solidarity with the SMSP strikers, and asked the labor tribunal in Noumea to intervene as mediator (NC, 2 Feb 2002). Since nickel prices had risen to US$3 a pound on the international market, the SMSP, SLN, Northern Province, and French State met to discuss the possibility of reopening Poum (NC, 7 Feb 2002). But the strike continued into early May, when masked, armed strikers took two gendarmes hostage for a night, hijacked a car, and forced schools to close in Canala (NC, 4 May 2002). By mid-May the SMSP agreed to provide employment for the Poum workers for 2002–03 but not to pay them for the ninety days they were on strike, a point that SOENC was still haggling over (NC, 10 May, 14 May 2002).

Besides the proposed new processing plant at Tiebaghi, nickel production would increase as the SLN expanded Doniambo, while promising to reduce pollution (NC, 6 April 2002) and as Inco of Canada undertook to build yet a third processing plant at Goro in the South. But the Goro project aroused more controversy than any other issue in 2002 and united a wide array of groups in opposition to multinational mining. In April, Goro Nickel hired Bechtel, Technip, and Hatch to construct a plant that could process 54,000 tons of nickel and 5,400 tons of cobalt per year, in a deal that was called the largest contract ever signed in New Caledonia: US$1.4 billion. In addition, the Southern Province granted Inco a permit to prospect at the rich Prony site nearby. If all four projects went well, New Caledonia’s estimated annual processed nickel output could quadruple by 2005 (PIR, 16 May 2002). The question was, who would benefit most, since Inco had already received a full tax exemption for ten years and a partial exemption for another five? Inco agreed to grant the province a 5 percent share of the capital, which critics called mere charity. Environmentalists, traditional leaders, and various political parties accused the
rpcr-run South of selling territorial resources for a song. By late August, several thousand protesters marched in Noumea and presented a petition with almost 10,000 signatures to the government of the Southern Province, arguing against the Prony deal and for the protection of the coral reef (NC, 31 Aug 2002). A week later, a roadblock shut down the Goro work site, sending over a hundred Inco personnel, fed up with the hostile atmosphere, to Australia (NC, 11 Sept 2002).

Pierre Bretegnier, vice president of the Southern Province, said alarmists (ecological activists) and racists (those claiming indigenous rights) were risking the sustainable development of the country. But Mapou blamed the disruption of the Goro project on the province’s lack of consultation with local Kanak leaders (PIR, 14 Sept 2002). Bechtel announced plans to hire 3,000 workers from the Philippines for the construction project, when Kanak transporters had been denied contracts (PIR, 17 Sept 2002). A Dutch company would handle transportation (RNZI, 28 Oct 2002).

The 24th of September approached, the annual celebration of the date of French annexation, which pro-independence activists have long treated as a day of mourning. In a display of grassroots nationalism, the Collective for the Defense of Prony brought together the National Council of Indigenous Rights, labor unions, the FLNKS, the LKS, the Greens, women’s and environmentalist groups, the League of the Rights of Man, and other groups. It called for a march on the 27th on behalf of a “dying country.” Sylvain Pabouty of Palika explained, “It’s important for the native people to discuss natural resources” (NC, 20 Sept 2002). About eight hundred people demonstrated, including Sonia Lagarde of the loyalist Alliance, who said, “we know how to unite to defend the interests of New Caledonia and to build this country together” (NC, 28 Sept 2002).

But French Minister of the Environment Roseline Bachelot called the World Heritage reef idea “uninteresting, because it has no binding impact.” Instead, France would enlist Inco to help protect the environment (PIR, 19 Sept 2002). Pierre Alla of Goro Nickel admitted that only 400 local workers had been hired, but he insisted that the 3,000 Filipinos would be well qualified—and cheap. They would earn only the minimum wage for New Caledonia (four times their pay at home), which he called “an absolutely convenient price [without which] Goro Nickel could not happen.” Once the plant was built, 90 percent of jobs would be reserved for local workers, 12,000 of whom had already applied for employment (NC, 26 Nov, 8 Oct 2002). Inco finally agreed to give an additional 5 percent of the capital to the territory, for a total of 10 percent to the province and territory. But critics pointed to the arrangement in the North, which held a 51 percent share of the SMSP–Falconbridge joint venture (NC, 20 Nov 2002). By December, Inco said its expenses had risen 15 percent and postponed work for another six months. The year ended with Goro Nickel (and Prony) still in limbo (NC, 7 Dec 2002; PIR, 29 Dec 2002).

On a more peaceful note, the year began with a special accord between France and New Caledonia to pro-
mote Kanak languages, support the Agency for the Development of Kanak Culture, and protect the Kanak art heritage by undertaking an inventory of objects held in foreign museums that needed to be brought home (NC, 19 Jan 2002). Daniel Constantin arrived in late July to take up his post as French high commissioner, having worked for two predecessors in that office in New Caledonia in the 1970s. By November, he had negotiated a pledge of nonviolence between the Kanak and Wallisian communities in St Louis; the remaining Wallisian families would be relocated to the suburbs of Noumea over the next two years (PIR, 11 Nov 2002). New Caledonia sent representatives to the Melanesian Festival of Arts in Vanuatu in August (NC, 24 Aug 2002) and to the Pacific Forum, including its investment meeting in Beijing, in September (PIR, 6 Sept 2002). France encouraged increased trade and investment as well as more academic exchanges between New Caledonia and Fiji (PIR, 26 April, 9 May 2002), and the University of New Caledonia agreed to host the 2004 convention of the Pacific History Association. In late August, the territorial Congress passed a law regulating the hiring of foreign workers, granting them the same rights as local workers, except that their stays would be limited to one to three years and their hiring should not displace local citizens (NC, 28 Aug 2002). Local employers proposed a long-term strategy of training people of the country so they could better compete for jobs (NC, 7 Dec 2002), though the RPCR and FLNKS disagreed over whether the high-school exams should be graded in France or in country, respectively (NC, 27 April, 2 May 2002). In December, the territorial executive proposed to Congress the creation of a Consultative Committee on the Environment (NC, 9 Dec 2002).

Soon afterwards, French Overseas Minister Brigitte Girardin toured the country. After witnessing initial demonstrations by the anti-Prony and indigenous rights movements, she promised that France would uphold the Noumea Accord with “total impartiality.” She said that the electorate issue was not urgent, because the current Organic Law allowed people resident in the country for ten years after 1998 to become voters on key issues, so the deadline for reflection was 2008. The French National Assembly now wanted to change the law to limit the core electorate only to those resident in 1998 and their descendants, but the European Court of the Rights of Man had not even ruled on the first version yet. In the meantime, France would continue to delegate powers and finances to the territory, and “Quarrels must not compromise the future of the country” (NC, 16 Dec, 17 Dec 2002).

DAVID CHAPPELL

References