

Dialogue

An Interview with Oscar Temaru

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AND TARCISIUS KABUTAULAKA

*The Corporate Food Regime and Food Sovereignty
in the Pacific Islands*

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and Tarcisius Kabutaulaka*

On 11 January 2012, TCP Editorial Board members Terence Wesley-Smith, Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, and Gerard Finin interviewed then-President of French Polynesia Oscar Temaru. President Temaru was in Honolulu to meet with local business leaders and to visit the United States Pacific Command (USPACOM) at Camp Smith. The interview was conducted in the offices of Hawai'i State Senator J Kalani English, chair of the Committee on Transportation and International Affairs and host of the president's visit. Although the meeting took place at the end of a very busy day, President Temaru was eager to talk about his career in politics as well as current issues in French Polynesia.

*Oscar Manutahi Temaru was born in the district of Faaa on Tahiti on 1 November 1944 of a Tahitian father and a Cook Islander mother. He grew up in Faaa and in Papeete, where he attended a Catholic secondary school. During school holidays he visited his maternal relatives in New Zealand and worked in the freezing works in the suburbs of Auckland. After graduating from secondary school in 1961, he served in the French navy for three years. During that time he was deployed to fight in the Algerian war, which left a lasting impression on him. After returning to Tahiti in 1964, he worked as a customs officer, a position from which he retired in 1999. In 1972, he married Marie, from the Tuamotu Islands, and they have seven children. Temaru founded the pro-independence and antinuclear political party *Front de Libération de Polynésie* (Polynesian Liberation Front) in 1977. The party's name was changed to *Tavini Huiraatira No Te Ao Maohi* (Serving the People of Te Ao Maohi) in 1983, the year in which Temaru was elected mayor of the City of Faaa, a position he has held ever since. In 1986 *Tavini Huiraatira* won two seats in the Territorial Assem-*

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French Polynesia President Oscar Temaru (center) with Hawai'i State Senator J Kalani English, Gerard Finin, Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, and Terence Wesley-Smith, in Senator English's office, Honolulu, 11 January 2012.

bly, and by the late 1990s it had become the leading opposition party. In the territorial elections of May 2004, Tavini Huiraatira formed an alliance with smaller opposition parties, collectively styled the Union Pour La Démocratie (UPLD, Union for Democracy), and Temaru became Gaston Flosse's successor as president of French Polynesia. Since then, due to slim majorities, the presidency has changed ten times, passed between Temaru, Flosse, and Gaston Tong Sang (a former Flosse ally), often in opportunistic coalitions between two of the three leaders. After several intermittent episodes, including an ephemeral alliance with former archenemy Flosse and a loss of the 2008 territorial elections to the party of then Paris-favored Tong Sang, Temaru regained the presidency in April 2011 and held it until the May 2013 elections.

Since the beginning of his political career, Temaru has worked tirelessly to get his country back on the United Nations list of non-self-governing territories (NSGTs), from which it was unilaterally removed by France in 1947. Backed by an assembly resolution in favor of reinscription, as well as strong support from Richard Ariihau Tuheiava, one of French Polynesia's two senators in the French Senate, Temaru has spent much effort lobbying the United Nations to act accordingly. Thanks to the strong support of several Pacific Island nations and the Non-Aligned Movement, whose 120 member states pledged support for French Polynesia at their latest summit conference in Tehran in August 2012, the UN General Assembly

voted on 17 May 2013 to put the country back on the list. Unlike its hitherto ambiguous status as an “autonomous” overseas collectivity within France, NSGT status will guarantee the right of the Maohi people of French Polynesia to self-determination.

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THIS INTRODUCTION *was written by Lorenz Gonschor, drawing on information from an article titled “Mais qui donc est Oscar Temaru?” which appeared in Tahiti-Pacifique Magazine 159 (July 2004): 15–19. Thanks to Candice Steiner for expertly transcribing the recorded interview.*

TCP: We are very grateful for your spending some time with us, President Temaru. We thought it would be good if we could put on the record some of the things that you have been working for over the years.

TEMARU: Yes, there is a need because in the anglophone world, you don't always have that much information about what's going on in our backyard, and what you do get is often filtered through the French media and reflects French ways of seeing things. You don't get our perspective.

TCP: Well, might it be possible to go back in time a little bit and talk about some of your first ideas about politics and how you became interested in public service?

TEMARU: I remember when I was a kid in the 1950s my father and his friends used to talk about what was happening and the problems in the islands. I didn't understand why they spent all night talking about politics. But now, I *do* understand [laughs].

TCP: And now *you* are spending the whole night talking about politics!

TEMARU: That was sixty years ago. Later, when I was doing my military service, I went to Algeria and realized that that situation was similar to ours in the Pacific. The last time I was in New York I met the Algerian ambassador and we agreed that we had experienced exactly the same problems. I also went to France, and at that time the first nationalist leader in our country, Pouvanaa a Oopa, was in jail there. The French knew Algeria would become independent and that Pouvanaa would be a troublemaker when they started nuclear testing in Tahiti. That's the only reason why they put him in jail in France for ten years.

When I went back to Tahiti, I saw that the situation was changing very

drastically. After the independence of Algeria in 1962, the French army started to pour huge amounts of money into building infrastructure in Tahiti and at the testing site at Moruroa. You know, it was really scary to see all this happening in our country. And in 1976, I was a civil servant working in customs and used to go to Moruroa to check all the big ships and planes coming from France. I stood up and organized the first demonstration against the French nuclear testing because I had seen notices telling the people in the lagoons and on the atolls that it was strictly forbidden to drink the water and not to eat fish anymore. Nobody was allowed to go there. When I saw these things, I thought, “Oh, my poor children, my poor people.” So I went back home and organized meetings, which was very risky at that time because the military were all around.

At that time I didn’t have the idea of going into politics—I just felt it was my duty to stand up and tell our people, “No, we have to stop this.” When I started to oppose testing, I was invited by antinuclear activists to go to Japan. That was the beginning, because while I was in Japan my friend told me, “The French spies are trying to find you.” They were very good to hide me [laughs]. When I got back to Tahiti, I learned that the French had organized a meeting with the French high commissioner. Although I was a civil servant, I had strong support from others in our organization, and they were hesitant about sacking me. That was the beginning, and after that I started to learn all I could about radioactive fallout, what it’s all about, and what problems it will cause for our people in the future.

But, you know, it’s unbelievable, because when we went on the streets to protest everybody told us, “You’re crazy, man, the French nuclear testing is harmless, it’s clean, it’s the cleanest one in the world, you won’t have any problems.” And forty years later, I’m pleased that there is a book written by French scientists recognizing that, yes, there are problems. Now we have tons of nuclear fallout on the atolls of Moruroa and Fangataufa. That’s why the decision was made in 1963 that after nuclear testing the two atolls would remain under French control. It is still a forbidden zone. I will say it: forget about those two atolls.

In 1976 I first participated in elections. People around me right away asked me, “Oscar, what are you looking for for our country?” And I told them, “Well, if you want to follow me, this is my direction. We have to be free from French colonial rule.” We started our training in Fiji, talking to all the Pacific leaders at that time, like Ratu Mara, Walter Lini, and Jean-Marie Tjibaou. And you look around, all those countries are now independent, except the French colonies, New Caledonia, Wallis, and French-

occupied-Polynesia. That's the French way. When you look at the history of Indochina, Algeria, all over, they went through bloodshed.

Becoming politically active was very risky, not only for me, but also for my family, for my children. But we have to decide what we want for our children, for our great-great-grandchildren. So that's why we keep participating in politics. In 1986 we got two members into the Parliament, and five years after that, four. The numbers were growing. In France, when they saw what was happening, they started to try to change the statute of the country every few years. [French President Jacques] Chirac and [President of French Polynesia] Gaston Flosse were like two brothers working together on strategy to oppose us. We had to find ways to break the power of Flosse's party. I got together with all the other small parties and told them, well, if we want to be alive, we have to see what we can do together. And that's why in 2004 for the first time we won the election.

That was a big surprise for everyone. The French minister for overseas territories at that time said that the election in French Polynesia was not over. I thought she meant that they were going to recount the ballots, like they had in Florida during the 2000 presidential elections in the United States. But twenty-four hours later, we knew that she meant that they did not accept our victory. She said that France would shut off the tap—no more water. After six months, we decided to dissolve the Parliament and have a new election. [laughs] We won again, this time with more support. We have won five times since 2004. And it is a very special moment because in France they had amended the law to allow Gaston Tong Sang to stay in power for the rest of his mandate. That amendment required 35 votes to overthrow the government. When we won the last time, our opponents were caught by their own rule because they didn't have the 35 votes to throw us out. So, here we are in office for another year until the elections in March 2013.

TCP: Mr President, you have fought for independence for a very long time. Could you talk about some of the challenges that you see if your country achieves independence? Also, is full independence the only option, or are there other alternatives, like the self-governing arrangements in the Cook Islands and Niue?

TEMARU: France does not understand the word “autonomy,” or they have another understanding of it. Supposedly we have had autonomy since 1977, but we don't want that kind of arrangement. When you read the statute, you can understand very easily that the main power will stay

in the hands of the French. So, there's no way to organize another kind of relationship with France. As you say, the Cook Islands has internal autonomy. They control everything—everything. If we had a partner like New Zealand, I'm more than sure that we could have a different type of relationship. But with France that's not the case. Even worse, in 1996 and again in 2003 the French parliament amended provisions in the constitution relating to overseas territories. We used to be in the French constitution as an overseas *people*. Now we are a *population* overseas. In French, the distinction is between *peuple d'outre-mer* and *population d'outre-mer*. When you say *peuple d'outre-mer*, that means you have your own identity, you have your own culture, you have your own country, you have your own history. When you say you're a *population d'outre-mer*, you're part of someone else's community, which amounts to assimilation. That's why [French President Nicolas] Sarkozy said there is a red line, it's there, you cannot go further. They gave us this kind of internal autonomy. We have that competence, but if there's a problem, we go before the French court.

Since the beginning, the International Airport of Faa'a was run by the local people. But just when we came back to the helm, they decided to bring in a French company to run the airport. We sued them in court, but no, they decided we could not change that. So, we are not in control and every day we see what's going on. It's a racist government and terrorist government we are facing. Yes. Yes.

TCP: Perhaps you could expand a bit more on the relationship with France. Since the end of nuclear testing, what is the French interest in remaining? Are there any circumstances that you can imagine where they would be inclined to let Tahiti Nui claim its independence?

TEMARU: A couple of months ago I was in Auckland for the meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum. French Minister of Foreign Affairs Alain Juppé was there, and he said, "I'm speaking on behalf of the three collectivities," by which he meant Wallis and Futuna, New Caledonia, and French Polynesia. Just like that. France has a *huge* interest, a strategic interest. We know we have phosphate in our different islands. Just a month ago, people from Australia came, and they were ready to exploit the phosphate in Makatea again. But I told the mayor of Makatea and mayors from other islands, no, we have to organize international competition because we have phosphate in Makatea, in Rairoa [or Rangiroa], in Tikehau, in Mataiva, and Niau. We have phosphate all over. We also have manganese, cobalt, and rare earth minerals. So there's a huge economic interest. The

French know that we have the right to exploit these resources, but they also know we don't have the means to exploit them. So now we are writing a new document and organizing international involvement. We'll see how the French government reacts.

Each year, we have financial problems in our treasury. And just before the end of the last budget process the French high commissioner came to me and said that France was ready to help, but under certain conditions. For example, we have to sell them our buildings in Paris—St-Germain, a seven-story building. With the land, and shares in our development bank, it's worth about 15 billion Pacific francs. It's incredible. They are asking us to give up our development bank so they will control everything.

And then we said, "Okay, we will sell the shares to another bank." They said, "Oh, no, no, no. You're not allowed to." We said, "What, we're not allowed to sell our shares?" They said, "No, you're not—you're only allowed to sell shares to us." And it's because of me. It wouldn't happen if Gaston Flosse were still the president of the country. That's why I said it's a racist and terrorist government. I know what I am talking about.

TCP: Is there any possibility that the dynamics would shift with the 2012 French presidential elections? Would any of those candidates be more sympathetic and easier to work with?

TEMARU: We have a special relationship with the Socialist Party. We are closer to that party. But when we go further with our agenda, we'll have to see. I'm preparing to go to New York, and the idea is to get our country back on the United Nations list of non-self-governing territories. After that we'll see the real attitude of the French government.

TCP: You've tried before to work through the Pacific Islands Forum to get French Polynesia on the decolonization list. How do you see the relationship with Pacific Island countries and in terms of getting this issue to the United Nations?

TEMARU: New Zealand and Australia are playing a different game now. I talked to [New Zealand Prime Minister] John Key. I talked to the Australian ambassador. I told them that I didn't understand why in 1986 they helped New Caledonia get back on the list. Why not our country? We have more political support than the FLNKS (Front de libération nationale kanak et socialiste) had then. Well, I know Australia and New Zealand need France's support for other things, like Australia's bid for a seat on

the UN Security Council. But the fight is not over. That's why we will fly to New York after our Honolulu trip is finished. We will meet all the ambassadors of non-aligned countries.

TCP: What role might China and the United States play in your quest for independence?

TEMARU: It's very hard to know what the attitude of the Chinese and US governments might be. When the resolution on New Caledonia went through China, the United States and Russia abstained, while France voted no. I hope they will abstain this time too, but not vote against.

TCP: To what extent are you in contact with people here in Hawai'i who are pushing for a greater degree of sovereignty or social justice?

TEMARU: I don't want to interfere with internal issues in the state of Hawai'i, but I fully understand the Hawaiian people and their struggle.

TCP: Is there anything else that you would like to say? Any other issues that we haven't covered?

TEMARU: We are looking for support from the *people*—from the people, as opposed to the government. Because we have been treated like animals, you know, in our small islands. Our people are dying of cancers, *all* kinds of cancers, related to nuclear testing. We are paying for the stupidity of human beings. The people of the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific movement, and other nongovernmental organizations, continue to give us great support. That's the kind of moral support that we're looking for, from all over. It's a fight for freedom.

TCP: That sounds like a very appropriate way to finish. Thank you so much for sharing your ideas.

TEMARU: Thank you for helping send the message to people throughout the world.