

Political Reviews

Micronesia in Review: Issues and Events,
1 July 2020 to 30 June 2021

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PITCAIRN

The islands of Pitcairn, Henderson, Ducie, and Oeno (commonly known as Pitcairn) make up a single territory, the last remaining British Overseas Territory in the Pacific Ocean. During the period under review, two key events shaped the territory. First, there was the continuing threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. If COVID-19 had entered Pitcairn, it would have posed an immediate existential threat to a small and aging population. Pitcairn's isolation was an advantage in minimizing its exposure, but because of the severe limitations on travel, accessing health care off island was a real concern. Second, and related to the economic impacts of COVID-19, was discussion between Pitcairn and the UK government regarding levels of funding for the territory. This review also highlights several other developments, but it first considers Pitcairn's response to COVID-19.

Despite the challenges, there were several positive developments in relation to COVID-19. The first and most important was that Pitcairn remained COVID-19 free; it was one of only ten nations and territories that had not yet recorded a positive case (*Pitcairn Miscellany* 2021c, 5). However, there was a scare in mid-July 2020 when Pitcairn's medical officer was "unable

to currently confirm that Pitcairn is no longer COVID-19 free" after she determined that five returning travelers had not adequately adhered to isolation requirements while in New Zealand. In response, she recommended that the Pitcairn Island Council limit social gatherings for fourteen days. The recommendation was discussed by the Council, but it was not accepted. It felt there was "insufficient evidence to support [it]" (PIC 2020a, 6). Fortunately, no cases were subsequently reported. Another positive development was the vaccination program funded by the UK government. The AstraZeneca vaccine doses were taken on a fifteen-thousand-mile journey from London to Pitcairn via Dubai and New Zealand. The doses arrived in mid-May 2021, and within a few days, over 80 percent of the population had received the first of two injections (*Pitcairn Miscellany* 2021b, 2–3). An official from the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO) stated that the vaccine rollout was "a potent symbol of what being an overseas territory means. It would have been inexplicable if we had not looked after our British communities around the world" (Adams 2021). Prior to the vaccination program, a public meeting was held involving representatives from Public Health England to answer any questions and address any concerns the Islanders had (*Pitcairn Miscellany* 2021b).

Despite the vaccination program and remaining COVID-19 free, Pitcairn struggled with its heightened isolation, particularly in relation to health care off island. There were discussions throughout the period in review regarding the restrictions on

travel to receive medical help. The preferred medivac pathway was to New Zealand, and for those twenty-two Pitcairners who held New Zealand passports, access was relatively straightforward. However, for others, the process was more complicated, and they were required to apply to enter New Zealand on an individual basis; there were no blanket exemptions for medical treatment. It was noted that “there is a lot of concern in the community” (PIC 2020c, 4). A route to Tahiti was open, but it was difficult to navigate. Conversely, and not surprisingly, access to Pitcairn remained tightly controlled. It was expected that fewer than twenty people would arrive on Pitcairn during 2020 (FCDO 2021, 8). However, toward the end of the review period, Pitcairners hoped that their border with New Zealand could at least start to be reopened (PIC 2021b, 1).

Pitcairn’s financial position was also a matter of considerable debate. Even prior to COVID-19, Pitcairn received significant funding from the UK, amounting to between 90–95 percent of its budget requirements; the shipping service represented 55 percent of this (FCDO 2021). The UK government noted, perhaps unsurprisingly, that domestic revenue performance was “weak” (FCDO 2021, 7). And with the continuation of the pandemic, what revenue sources existed, particularly from cruise ship visitors, were largely lost. In an article from *Asia Pacific Report*, Pitcairn Islander Meralda Warren described the situation: “We’re very strict. No yachts, no ships are allowed to stop. We’ve had a few come by but they haven’t been allowed to come ashore” (Round

2020). In addition to the United Kingdom’s usual annual grant to meet Pitcairn’s reasonable assistance needs, which totaled £4.32 million for the 2021–22 financial year (equivalent to about £93,000 per person), the FCDO also provided a debt support package worth NZ\$171,000 (US\$116,229) for all on-island adult permanent residents. The Pitcairn Island Council added a further NZ\$4,000 (US\$2,719) from its discretionary fund, which meant each adult resident received NZ\$555.55 (US\$377.61) per month from July 2020 until March 2021 (PIC 2020b, 2). Efforts were made by the Council to persuade the FCDO to continue with the debt support package into the new financial year, but these were unsuccessful. The main reason given was the United Kingdom’s worsening financial position (PIC 2021a, 1), a situation not helped by the UK government’s controversial decision in November 2020 to reduce its overall aid budget (including support for all foreign nations and the overseas territories) from 0.7 percent to 0.5 percent of national income (FCDO 2020).

In the business case the FCDO provided that set out the amount of financial assistance to Pitcairn, some interesting observations were made. In particular, there was a stark assessment of Pitcairn’s economic situation: “HMG [Her Majesty’s Government] recognises that the prospect of economic self-sufficiency for Pitcairn will never be possible, given its extremely small population [of thirty-nine] and remote location. Without UK financial aid, the government would be unable to provide most essential public services and the islanders would have

to return to basic subsistence or leave the island” (FCDO 2021, 2). Later, the document notes: “The able-bodied population has declined, and the natural growth rate of the population is already far below a sustainable rate. . . . However, even with an increase in population by 40/50% Pitcairn’s dependency on financial aid will continue” (FCDO 2021, 3, 4). Then a rhetorical question was asked about the long-term sustainability of the island: “who will do the work; who will look after the increasingly ageing population and how; who will operate the long boats, critical to the island’s economic and social opportunities?” (FCDO 2021, 4).

In other developments, initial progress was made on a renewable energy project for Pitcairn; its electrical distribution network had not been updated since the late 1960s. However, there were some concerns over how the project would be funded. The European Union, in one of its last tranches of funding, contributed €480,000 (US\$568,915), but a funding gap was projected. It was hoped that the UK government would cover any shortfall, but there was no confirmation that this would happen (PIC 2020c, 2). The fallout of the United Kingdom’s decision in February 2020 to block an attempt by TRON, a Blockchain-based decentralized operating system, to establish a cryptocurrency in Pitcairn continued into the period of review. The island’s administrator was forced to remind the mayor and councilors in November 2020 that they “are not permitted to receive gifts from [TRON] as they have been offered in an attempt to influence” (PIC 2020c, 6). The UK Department

for International Trade published some statistics on the UK-Pitcairn trade relationship in 2020. Pitcairn was the United Kingdom’s 227th largest trade partner, accounting for less than 0.1 percent of total UK trade. The top four goods exported from the United Kingdom to Pitcairn were road vehicles other than cars (worth £40,000), organic chemicals, mechanical power generators, and general industrial machinery (Department for International Trade 2021, 1, 5).

Also during the year in review, Pitcairners paid tribute to Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh on his death at the age of ninety-nine on 9 April 2021; he had visited Pitcairn in February 1971 (*Pitcairn Miscellany* 2021a).

The period under review was one of Pitcairn, with the support of the United Kingdom, managing the continuing threat posed by COVID-19. The vaccination program was undoubtedly a success from both a public health and a logistical point of view. The additional economic assistance provided by the United Kingdom was also crucial in helping to support Islanders’ day-to-day incomes. However, the long-standing vulnerability of Pitcairn and its people could not be masked. Access to medical care off island was a real concern, as was the level of financial support the United Kingdom was willing to provide in the medium to longer-term, including for the shipping service. There is no doubt that funding will continue (because, as the FCDO explained, there is no choice), but cuts are likely, and this will undoubtedly make a difficult life on Pitcairn even more so.

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SĀMOA

The Samoan general elections dominated headlines in 2020–2021. Samoans worldwide watched intently as the two leading political parties battled for seats in the XVII Parliament during the April 2021 general elections. The Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP), which had been in power for over thirty years, was challenged by a newly formed opposition party, Fa‘atuatua i le Atua Sāmoa ua Tasi (FAST). This year’s political review also includes the passing of the controversial Land and Titles Court