

Political Reviews

Micronesia in Review: Issues and Events,
1 July 2016 to 30 June 2017

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NORFOLK ISLAND

In the time since the passage of the Norfolk Island Legislation Amendment Act 2015 in the Australian Parliament, Norfolk Island has endured the most tumultuous years since its settlement by the HMS *Bounty* descendants from Pitcairn Island in 1856. That act abolished the limited form of self-government enjoyed by Norfolk Islanders since 1979 as enshrined in the Norfolk Island Act 1979, removed any acknowledgment of the special position of the Pitcairners in regard to their homeland on Norfolk Island, and determined that governmental arrangements henceforth would be based on a New South Wales (Australia) “regional council” model. These moves were made against the express wishes of the great majority of Norfolk Islanders and island residents as expressed in a referendum and were described by internationally recognized human rights lawyer Geoffrey Robertson QC as “a heavy-handed act of regression” (Robertson 2016).

These legislative actions precipitated the formation of the grassroots organization Norfolk Island People for Democracy (NIPD); a petition to the United Nations by the NIPD together with the Norfolk Island Council of Elders (COE) for the Island to be listed as a non-self-governing territory under the aegis of the United Nations; and the occupation of the “Tent Embassy” in the grounds of the Old Military Barracks in Kingston, Norfolk’s historic precinct and administrative

center. Complaints against the conduct of the Norfolk Island administrator (appointed by the Australian government) became widespread. An account of these and other events of 2015–16 has been given in the pages of this journal (Gonschor 2017). A series of contemporary articles published in the local media outlets the *Norfolk Islander* and Norfolk Online News is also available in book form (Nobbs 2017).

The year under review has continued to see a high level of political activity both on and off the island, initiated by the COE and the NIPD on the one hand and the Australian government on the other. The Australian government's plans were implemented on Norfolk Island on 1 July 2016. In the lead-up to that day, elections for a new Norfolk Island Regional Council (NIRC) were held on 28 May 2016. For this election and contrary to previous Island practice, residents who were not Australian citizens (including, in particular, New Zealanders and British) were disenfranchised. The NIRC comprises five councilors elected for a term of four years and from whom one member is chosen as mayor, with that position to be held for one year (now amended to two years). At the council's inaugural meeting of 6 July 2016, Ms Robin Adams—a former member and minister in the disbanded Norfolk Island Legislative Assembly—was elected mayor. In a period of continuing transition to new arrangements, the NIRC's activities are regulated under the New South Wales Local Government Act 1993, in addition to various Commonwealth Acts and Norfolk Island Acts still applicable to Norfolk Island.

Norfolk Islanders have no democratic representation in New South Wales. The Norfolk Island administrator remains overseer of the island in relation to commonwealth (ie, Australian federal) matters.

In July 2016, Australian Senator Fiona Nash was appointed minister for local government and territories and became responsible for Norfolk Island affairs. In the following month, Norfolk Island received a fact-finding visit from an all-party group of parliamentarians from the United Kingdom (UK) House of Commons. Following their visit, the parliamentarians read a public statement into the record of the British House of Commons, reporting that “the Administrator of Norfolk Island . . . has lost the confidence of the overwhelming majority of the people of Norfolk Island. The current situation is untenable and cannot go on. It is damaging the lives of the people of Norfolk Island as well as the reputation of Australia” (Kawczynski, Sherriff, and Rosindell 2017).

Minister Nash made her first visit to the island on 16–17 September 2016. Major issues discussed with the new council included the provision of electricity services and the role of solar power; waste management; connection to the Hawaiki submarine telecommunications cable system; a waiver on repayment of the commonwealth loan for the resealing of the airport runway carried out in 2006; and possible commonwealth financial assistance grants.

The focus on telecommunications was precipitated both by the impending rollout of the Australian national open-access broadband data network (the NBN) and the breaking of ground for the installation of a

new undersea fiber optic cable linking Australia and New Zealand with the West Coast of the United States. This cable, being installed by a New Zealand consortium called Hawaiki Cable, is proposed to include spurs that will connect Hawai'i, American Sāmoa, Tonga, Fiji, and New Caledonia in the network. The route will pass within ninety kilometers of Norfolk Island, and an option existed to connect Norfolk Island into the system or alternatively to install a connector in the cable for future connection as a lower cost option—estimated at A\$2.5 million (US\$2 million).

In October 2016, Norfolk Island received a visit from controversial Australian Senator Pauline Hanson. Many on Norfolk lauded Hanson's visit as possibly representing the first from a current Australian politician who was prepared to engage directly with and listen to Islanders across the spectrum of opinion, and who, having undertaken at a public meeting to do certain things on her return to Australia, actually did them (eg, Hanson 2016). As the UK delegation before her had done, Senator Hanson called for the removal of Norfolk Island Administrator Gary Hardgrave on account of his conduct on the island (see Gonschor 2016 regarding complaints about Administrator Hardgrave).

An NIPD delegation made a visit to Canberra in late November 2016, its declared purpose being to “progress the rights of the Norfolk Island People for an Act of Self-Determination; to explain the practical ‘on the ground’ problems the Norfolk Island people face as a direct result of Canberra’s newly imposed ‘remote control’

administration of the island; and to find common ground for a more democratic way forward” (Magri 2016). The delegation met with more than thirty commonwealth members of Parliament and advisors from across the political spectrum. The parliamentarians they talked to knew very little about Norfolk Island but expressed genuine distress at that situation when its realities were explained. Leader of the delegation Chris Magri commented: “No one was able to provide us with a rational explanation which supported the abolition of our Parliament” (Magri 2016). While “We are not going back” appeared to be the mantra emanating from the Australian government, the NIPD delegation left with some optimism as to future possibilities.

On 11–12 December 2016, Minister Nash revisited the island to meet with the NIRC and representatives of other organizations including the COE and NIPD, as well as with groups from the business community. Nash's meetings with the NIRC addressed topics previously canvassed, albeit with a stronger focus on the island's telecommunications future. The island's appeals for a connector to the Hawaiki cable and for a waiver on repaying the 2006 loan for the airport runway reseal were rejected by the commonwealth, although the issue of guaranteed annual financial support for the Island's tourism industry (previously provided by the Norfolk Island Government) remains under discussion at the time of this writing.

The Island was thrown into further turmoil by the announcement on 16 December by Air New Zealand that it would be withdrawing air services

from Auckland to Norfolk Island as of May 2017. However, a New Year's announcement by the company Norfolk Island Airlines indicated that they would be stepping into the breach. These flights have commenced, but at the time of writing the future of this initiative remains uncertain.

Meanwhile, in London on 22 November, COE President Albert Buffett and technical advisor André Nobbs, accompanied by the UK parliamentarians who had visited Norfolk Island, delivered a petition to 10 Downing Street calling for an act of self-determination for Norfolk Island under the requirements of the United Nations Charter (COE 2016; Vollmer 2016). This petition was tabled in the House of Commons the following day. This visit to London also saw the launch of the United Kingdom–Norfolk Island All-Party Parliamentary Group. The COE delegation from Norfolk Island was back in London in March 2017 for further consultations and a meeting with the United Nations high commissioner for human rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, before continuing to New York for additional consultations. The COE also wrote to Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, inviting him to support an act of self-determination for Norfolk Island through a UN-mediated process (COE 2017). This act of self-determination remains the core demand for the COE and the NIPD, who envisage a choice among the options of integration with Australia, self-government in free association with Australia, and independence.

At the end of March 2017, Eric Hutchinson, a former Liberal Party politician from Tasmania, was

appointed Norfolk Island administrator following the completion of Hardgrave's term.

At the grassroots level, the NIPD's Centre for Democracy in the Burnt Pine shopping precinct continues to promote the cause of self-determination locally. Members of the Norfolk Island community had on 27 April 2016 commenced a peaceful occupation of the area surrounding the despoiled Legislative Assembly building in the Old Military Barracks compound. The "Tent Embassy," as it has become known, has provided a focus for protest banners, meetings, and explanations to tourists, against the actions taken by the Australian government (see Gonschor 2017). The Tent Embassy has been continuously occupied from its inception up to the time of this writing. The NIRC has in the past twelve months been actively engaged in developing its forward plans, including those involved with long-term strategy, operations, and workforce.

The Australian government has continued to invest monies in Norfolk Island over the course of the year in review. These investments have included expenditures on Island infrastructure, including the Central School, health services, the pier at Cascades, and the extension of the NBN, together with the provision of wider access to social services (Nash 2016b). The infrastructure investments may well become substantial assets for Norfolk Island in the future. However, they have not been received without question or controversy. Claims have been made that investments have been more in line with what the Australian government thought Norfolk Island

should have than what Islanders considered appropriate for the island; that the Island's hospital has been downgraded to a non-procedural service (without anesthesia and unable to carry out operations); and that some investments have been poorly planned and wasted money. This set of issues has been actively discussed in local media (eg, Nobbs 2016b).

Minister Nash has claimed that the overall investment of the Australian government in Norfolk Island will be around A\$143 million (US\$112 million) over four years (Nash 2016a). However, the figure has never been itemized and appears grossly inflated. It is claimed on the island that the cost of implementation of the panoply of commonwealth and state laws and regulations now imposed on Norfolk Island should not be held to the Island's account; that the assets of the Norfolk Island community taken over by the commonwealth have not been appropriately compensated; and that the economic and social losses from the Australian intervention must also be brought to account (Nobbs 2016a).

Norfolk Island continues to face major economic, social and cultural, environmental, and organizational issues. Reliable funding to support forward planning for tourism, as well as a waiver on the debt for the runway reseal, are among the economic issues of importance. Other looming issues include rising costs for businesses as the Island adjusts to Australian national employment standards, minimum wages, superannuation legislation, and regulatory compliance. Business confidence on the island is currently at rock bottom.

Perhaps the most contentious

current issue is how this island of two thousand citizens can finance its needs as a regional council, given that previous abilities to raise general revenues (from a goods and services tax, customs duties, a gaming authority, and philately, among other things) have been abolished. The imposition of land rating by the commonwealth (Commonwealth of Australia 2016) is likely to have a devastating effect on many Norfolk Islanders, who are land rich and cash poor, holding land as a part of their heritage and tradition and not merely as a commercially fungible asset. A nascent anti-land rates movement has recently formed on the island to protest this development.

Other issues that the island is having to come to terms with include the Australian government's proposals for new commercial development of the island's World Heritage site, the Kingston and Arthur's Vale Historic Area; the creation of a marine reserve around Norfolk Island; and extensions to the boundaries of the Norfolk Island National Park. The new NIRC functional arrangements also pose problems that remain to be resolved.

Over the last two years, Norfolk Island has been subject to very substantial changes on two different fronts: (1) the removal of self-government; and (2) economic issues relating to how and to what extent the island can pay its way in the world. Robert Ellicott, the Australian minister responsible for Norfolk Island when limited self-government was granted to the Island in 1979, managed to discriminate between the two. But the joint standing committee that in 2014 reported on Norfolk Island to the Australian Parliament, as well as

the legislators who imposed the Norfolk Island Legislation Amendment Act 2015, merely conflated them. Academic reflection suggests that this imposition was done with inadequate consideration of its consequences (Wettenhall 2017).

As far as I can determine, the Australian Government has never given an adequate explanation for the removal of self-government (see also Magri 2016). To independent observation, it appears fundamentally as a regressive neocolonialist act (Robertson 2016). Both nationally and internationally, the NIPD and the COE continue to seek the means to express Norfolk Islanders' right to make a reasoned choice as to their appropriate relationship with Australia.

The economic and social issues discussed here draw attention to the general problem faced by all Pacific Islands—namely, the difficulty of achieving infrastructure investment and balancing their budgets over the longer term. Notably, this is not a problem that metropolitan countries themselves have been able to avoid. All Pacific Islands have required and continue to require subventions of one sort or another from metropolitan powers (compare Hezel 2012). The key question thus becomes: What are the assumptions of the metropolitan powers that underlie their provision of assistance to small, isolated islands? This is at base a political (ie, ideological) issue. One might take what could be called a “colonialist” or “absorptive” approach to this issue, or alternatively, an “island developmental” one.

The Australian Government has chosen to take an absorptive approach

to Norfolk Island, with the proclamation that “citizens on Norfolk Island will have the same rights and responsibilities as those in other parts of Australia” (Fletcher 2016). This approach centralizes power and imposes on Norfolk Island the overwhelming panoply of legislation from commonwealth and state—and their concomitant bureaucratic processes—whether appropriate or not. In some cases this is backed up with a social security system for those seriously disadvantaged, but any policy adjustments relevant to Norfolk Island must emerge from underneath this imposed approach. Major decisions about the island are made by a legislature 1,900 kilometers away and on behalf of a community with little or no influence on those decisions or electoral outcomes. The Norfolk Island economy and society now have no defense against unrestrained immigration to the island, depredations wrought by privatization of public service monopolies, the imposition of debilitating levels of land rates, and the increases in fees and charges as a result of new regulatory requirements. This absorptive approach also entails deep wounds to Norfolk Islanders who now question the good faith of the Australian government.

An alternative “island developmental” approach would recognize that small, relatively isolated islands have particular needs with regard to economic security and sustainability within environmental limits. It is an approach that chooses policies that emphasize response flexibility rather than rigidity, that balance precaution against economic growth, and that acknowledge the importance of lived

experience in the specific island context (Nobbs 2015).

The experiences of Norfolk Island in 2016–17 provide an important case study for the entire Pacific region on the dangers to Island societies' genuine interests that can arise from the implementation of metropolitan neocolonial and neoliberal policies.

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The current Norfolk Island administrator declined an invitation to discuss the Australian government's perspective on these matters for this review.

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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 United Kingdom Overseas Territory in the Pacific Ocean. As of March 2017, Pitcairn, the only inhabited island of the group, had a total resident population of forty-one—a near historically low figure. The entire population lives in the lone settlement of Adamstown. The only way of accessing the island is by sea, but due to the difficult terrain, ships must moor offshore, with longboats operating between the ships and the landing at Bounty Bay. Due to its relative isolation, its small and aging population, and the high level of subsidy provided by the UK government, there are concerns over the future viability of the settlement. Therefore, during the period under review (1 July 2016–30 June 2017), there was significant focus on the ways in which Pitcairn’s future could

be secured. Also considered in this review are implications for Pitcairn of “Brexit” (the United Kingdom’s decision to leave the European Union [EU]); problems of smuggling between Pitcairn and French Polynesia; and Pitcairn’s mayoral elections.

The sustainability and security of Pitcairn have been long-standing concerns not only for the Islanders but also for the UK government. Over the past year there has been a concerted effort on the part of both groups to discuss what the future might hold for Pitcairn, and what initiatives could be undertaken to secure its future as a permanent settlement. However, the fundamentals underlying this process are extremely difficult. Pitcairn relies almost entirely on budgetary support from the United Kingdom—totaling £3.48 million in 2016–17 and £3.01 million in 2017–18 (£1.00 = US\$1.31). The per capita spending is £73,000 (DFID 2017, 2, 14). Over 60 percent of the funds go toward supporting government and civil society activities, and 20 percent for other social infrastructure and services (DFID nd). The amount of money spent on Pitcairn is not usually considered a big issue in the United Kingdom, although in January the *Daily Express* tabloid published an article criticizing UK financial support of Pitcairn (Culbertson 2017).

Pitcairn does have a few domestic revenue streams, such as tourism, craft sales, and the production and sale of honey, but these are limited. The highest revenues derive from passenger fares and landing fees, totaling NZ\$295,000 in 2016–17 (NZ\$1.00 = US\$.72). Other sources of revenue that were successful in the past are