

## France and the South Pacific

Fonds Pacifique Lecture – 16 March 2011

**Professor Darrell Tryon; Professor Serge Tcherkezoff; M. Labbe, Conseiller de Coopération de l’Ambassade de France**

It is an honour to be invited to present the annual *Fonds Pacifique* Lecture, this year coinciding with the inauguration of the special link between the Australian National University and the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, and in particular to welcome the presence of Professor Serge Tcherkezoff from the *École*.

A principal focus of the ANU’s research from its inception has been Pacific studies, and it is unique and pre-eminent amongst Australian universities in this focus, just as it is uniquely tasked to address matters of national importance, consistent with its location in the national capital<sup>1</sup>. When, in the early 1970s, I was an undergraduate student here at the ANU, I completed a Bachelor of Arts degree majoring in French language and literature. Our focus was entirely France, the hexagon; France, the European power; France, and its unique legacy to the world of literature emanating from its European presence and identity. Apart from Manon Lascaut’s adventures in French Northern America, we did not touch at all on France’s overseas presence past or contemporary. Never did we see France as a South Pacific presence and neighbor. Never did we even venture to the shores of New Caledonia, just two and a half hours flying time away.

Fortunately, at least for French language students at the ANU, that particular situation has changed. Dr Peter Brown, Associate Professor of French Studies in the School of Language Studies, regularly heads group visits by ANU’s lucky French students, to New Caledonia, where there is now a time-honoured tradition of immersion in French language study at the CREIPAC (*Centre de Rencontres et d’Échanges Internationaux du Pacifique* or Centre for International Cultural and Educational Exchanges) combined with a unique cultural (and gastronomic) experience.

So too have the ANU’s formal links with France in the Pacific strengthened over the years. From their inception in 1999 as offshoots of the then French University of the Pacific, the

---

<sup>1</sup> See ANU website, History, [www.anu.edu.org](http://www.anu.edu.org).

respective Universities of New Caledonia and of French Polynesia have included ANU representation on their boards, notably in the person of Professor Darrell Tryon, one of the authors of the event today. This cooperation provides a framework for the joint hosting of conferences and the publication of the journal, *The New Pacific Review* or *La Nouvelle Revue du Pacifique*, the first and only Australian-originating academic journal I have seen in my research on France in the Pacific which is in both English and in French. And I would be remiss if I did not mention here the important role in cementing links between the French Pacific universities and the ANU, contributed by Professor Paul de Deckker, formerly *Président* of the New Caledonia University. Paul died last year and his contribution is sorely missed. His personal link lingers on however, in his brother who is a professor of Earth Sciences at the ANU.

Apart from these formal and personal links with the French Pacific, it has to be said that in recent years, the ANU has tended to focus its main South Pacific research effort on the neighbouring Commonwealth Melanesian countries, with relatively less recent analytic attention on the sovereign French South Pacific. By saying this I do not overlook the ongoing work of eminent ANU-based researchers including Professors and Doctors Brij Lal, Stewart Firth, Darrell Tryon, Peter Brown, Margaret Jolly, Bronwen Douglas, Chris Ballard, Jon Frankel, and Greg Fry amongst others. I would only observe that in the main, the primary focus has been on the independent island Pacific countries and issues, with reference and study on occasion of the French Pacific, often by engaging visiting writers from other institutions. And yet France's sovereign entities in the Pacific represent, in their expanse, over a quarter of the Exclusive Economic Zones of the entire membership of the South Pacific Commission countries;<sup>2</sup> and bookend the countries of the Pacific Islands Forum, from New Caledonia to the west through Wallis and Futuna to French Polynesia at the east. The strategic location alone of the French Pacific presence demands greater attention from Australian scholars. The appointment of Professor Tcherkezoff, and the formalizing of an ongoing link with the EHESS, is an important step in recognizing the significance of keeping the French Pacific within the purview of ANU's work on the Pacific, and is a welcome initiative by the University and the French government.

---

<sup>2</sup>Together the French entities represent an EEZ of over 7 m. square kilometres, compared to a total EEZ area of the entire membership of the South Pacific Commission of 27.8 m. square kilometres, see SPREP website [www.sprep.org](http://www.sprep.org) accessed 5 March 2011.

The new EHESS link, like much of the cooperative relationship between ANU and the French Pacific universities, is underwritten by the *Fonds Pacifique*, or Pacific Fund, under the able administration of an old friend and colleague, His Excellency M. Hadelin de la Tour du Pin, France's roving Ambassador to the South Pacific. The Fund was established by France, in 1986, originally as a mark of France's desire to participate constructively in development cooperation in the Pacific amidst the controversy surrounding its nuclear testing and decolonization policies at the time. From 2003, the *Fonds* has also aimed at programs and activities specifically to assist the integration and engagement of the three French Pacific entities in the life and work of the South Pacific region<sup>3</sup>. (I note here that my reference to Pacific entities means the three French sovereign collectivities New Caledonia, French Polynesia and Wallis of Futuna, which have varying status within the French constitution, but are all overseas possessions of France.) This is an important change, reflecting a more open approach to the region. It has been part of a broad sweep of links with the South Pacific region that have been strengthened, and deepened, by France over the last ten years or so. I propose to look at some of these current links, and along the way, flag areas of importance for the continuing engagement of France and its acceptance by the South Pacific region in the future.

### **France strengthens its links in the Pacific from the mid 1990s**

Many aspects of France's current presence in the Pacific represent regional assets, from the perspective of Australian national interests but also from those of the small Pacific island states. The presence of a well-disposed friendly western ally with important strategic interests spanning the northern half of the South Pacific region, can potentially strengthen a traditionally isolated, fragmented and economically weak string of archipelagos as the new, less well-known, influence of China begins to make itself felt in the region. For these assets to be recognized by Pacific island states, France's presence as a constructive partner needs to be accepted.

France has shown itself willing to develop new relationships with the region as a whole. This process began with its decisions first, to cease its controversial nuclear testing in the Pacific, which took place by 1996; and second, genuinely to address decolonization issues, including by

---

<sup>3</sup>see "*Le Fonds Pacifique*", website of the French Embassy in Papua New Guinea, [http://www.ambafrance-pg.org/article.php?id\\_article=427](http://www.ambafrance-pg.org/article.php?id_article=427) accessed 8 March 2010.

negotiating a long-term peaceful resolution of New Caledonia's future initially through the 1988 Matignon Accords, and subsequently by its extension and elaboration, in the 1998 Noumea Accord. Because they responded to specific, strongly-held concerns of regional countries about nuclear and decolonization issues, these decisions represented a first step in securing acceptance of France as a regional partner, by countries in the region.

To complement these major policy changes, the French State has built upon its existing web of links relating to the South Pacific from the late 1990s.

From 2003, France has hosted triennial summit-level meetings with Pacific Islands Forum leaders in its Oceanic Summits. The Summits discuss regional issues including sustainable development, fisheries and environment concerns. The Oceanic Summits provide a valuable window for Pacific island government leaders into the wider world, and an opportunity for genuine cooperation with a unique regional partner, a well-resourced western power with research experience on issues of concern to island countries, by virtue of its research work in its collectivities who are themselves regional neighbours.

Apart from its own status from 1989 as a dialogue partner with the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) countries, France has encouraged the participation of its three entities within the PIF, initially as observers, and then by securing the creation of a special status of Associate Member for its two largest entities, New Caledonia and French Polynesia.

France has maintained a more open approach to the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), the sub-group that was formed specifically to target French policy in the region, in recent years, for example agreeing to Noumea hosting a meeting by the Group in 2002. So far, France has recognized the special nature of the MSG, even though it includes as a full member the pro-independence FLNKS rather than the New Caledonian Government (which is yet to define its own future international status, see comments below).

France has endorsed the participation of its entities in high-level working meetings of the PIF, such as the Forum Finance and Economic Ministers meetings, and their consideration of

participation in the regional trade agreements, the Pacific Island Countries Trade Agreement (PICTA) and the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER).

France has hosted the seat of the principal regional technical body, the Secretariat for the Pacific Community (SPC), in Noumea from 1947 (when it was the South Pacific Commission). It is a testimony to the maturity of the Pacific region that France has continued to host this body throughout the controversies and difficulties of the 1980s. And France has proven a generous host. It supported the construction of an impressive headquarters on prime Anse Vata beach property in 1995, injecting 75 m. francs, over \$A 20 m., into the project. France's three entities participate behind their own nameplates, no longer as part of the French delegation as in the early years. In some form or other, there is representation by France and at least one of its entities in seven of the ten Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific (CROP). These include the SPC itself, the South Pacific Regional Environment Program, the South Pacific Applied Geoscience Commission, the Pacific Islands Development Program, the South Pacific Tourism Organisation, the Forum Fisheries Agency and the Pacific Power Association. All three entities, however, do not participate in all these organizations at the moment.

The three remaining CROP institutions in which there is no French entity participation are the University of the South Pacific, the Fiji School of Medicine, and the South Pacific Board for Education Assessment. There may be scope for the Universities of French Polynesia and of New Caledonia to associate themselves with these regional tertiary research and educational institutions in coming years. Issues that need to be addressed in such cooperation would include language issues, recognition of qualifications, and ensuring genuine two-way exchange, to send French Pacific teachers and students to the other Pacific universities, and also to welcome students and teachers from independent island countries into the French entities.

More broadly, whereas the will to participate in regional forums has been established, by France and the governments of its three Pacific entities, the full participation by the French Pacific entities in the Pacific Islands Forum, in the SPC, and in its related bodies, has met some practical stumbling blocks. The language issue is foremost amongst these. It was heartening to see, during the recent visit by the New Caledonian Government delegation to Canberra, that they

used portable translating equipment, with their own professional translators. This was a gesture demonstrating a readiness to reach out to the region and will be appreciated as such by regional island government leaders and officials, many of whom speak numerous local languages and understand the difficulties. The establishment of ongoing, well-resourced and staffed local secretariats in each of the three French Pacific entities will be important, to ensure an institutional memory and capacity for briefing and advice to underpin effective participation in regional working bodies, and the appropriate evolution of local policy on often intricate and complex regional matters. There is also a lack of a corps of skilled local diplomats and specialists from the French entities themselves, as opposed to those posted from France. France has begun by attaching officers from its Pacific entities to its own French diplomatic missions, a welcome first step, although within the Pacific they may be perceived to be representing France rather than the entities they come from. I note the presence at the ANU of an Ausaid-funded indigenous New Caledonian undertaking a Masters degree in International Relations and Diplomacy. There may be scope for the expansion of such training within the region. This could involve the short-term basing of diplomatic trainees from the three French Pacific entities in the diplomatic missions of other Pacific Islands Forum countries, including, on a two-way basis, with diplomats from other PIF countries spending time in the French Pacific entities' international secretariats.

Beyond these practical matters, there are more complex policy challenges affecting future participation. An example, related to the PICTA and PACER, is the continuing close dependence of the French entities on European-sourced imports at considerable cost, which can impede their participation and contribution to regional trade initiatives. Understandably, some of these issues can only be addressed after the future status of the French entities, particularly New Caledonia, is resolved.

The engagement of France in regional development cooperation has been steady, and appreciated, in recent years. The principal bi-multilateral vehicle has been the *Fonds Pacifique*, which dates from 1986, and which averaged assistance worth 2.4 m. euros (\$A 3.3 m. converted 7March 2011) a year 2007-2009. French official figures on assistance to the Pacific region vary, sometimes including EU funding and sometimes including some expenditure in its own entities,

but Foreign Ministry figures indicate it was worth 103m. euros (\$A142 m.) in 2008 or 2% of France's bilateral aid.<sup>4</sup> France's contribution to the SPC in 2007, of about \$US 7 m. at the time, was about half of Australia's contribution that year, and about half of New Zealand's.<sup>5</sup> Importantly, in recent years France has encouraged direct bilateral development cooperation between its two largest entities, French Polynesia and New Caledonia, and their immediate neighbours. For example, French Polynesia has since the mid-1980s been amongst the first of regional governments to step up and assist its immediate neighbours when natural disasters occur. New Caledonia has a bilateral cooperation agreement with Vanuatu, and is engaged in several joint programs with that neighbor.

And in a move which has boosted aid dollars in the region, France has led the way for EU engagement. The Tenth European Development Fund, covering 2008 to 2013, has allocated around \$A 90 m. a year to the South Pacific region.<sup>6</sup> France contributes about 20% of EU EDF funds. Apart from the financial contributions of the EU, the role of France in sensitizing the EU to the needs of the Pacific region cannot be underestimated. It was France that pushed for, and led, the Africa-Caribbean-Pacific process within the EU. It was France that led to the inclusion of overseas territories of the EU in the EU structure, which in turn enabled engagement by the EU in the Pacific region through France's Pacific entities. Strategically and conceptually, this is an important regional contribution by France. It will continue to be an important contribution for the future, particularly if France can use its knowledge and contacts in the region (and in the complex EU bureaucracy) to help shape a more effective implementation of EU funding, and achieve full actual expenditure of allocated funding, for example through existing SPC mechanisms and small-scale non-governmental activity.

It is important too to recognize the investment France is making in scientific research in the region through its presence in its entities. Major French institutions such as the IRD (*Institut de Recherche pour le Développement*, Development Research Institute), IFREMER (*Institut Français de Recherche pour l'Exploitation de la Mer*, French Research Institute for Marine Exploitation), and agricultural institutions (*Institut Pasteur*, *Institut Agronomique de Nouvelle-*

---

<sup>4</sup> French Foreign Ministry website [www.diplomatie.gouv.fr](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr) accessed 14 May 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Secretariat for the Pacific Community, Financial Statements and Audit Reports, *Annual Report*, Part 2, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> European Commission, *The European Union and the Pacific*, Brussels, 2007, p.7.

*Calédonie*) are all operating in the French entities. And it is a pleasure to welcome M. Gilles Fédière from the IRD here today. These institutions represent a wealth of intellectual property for the region. France is well disposed towards cooperative research (the IRD has relationships with at least ten different Australian universities alone), particularly in areas of priority for Pacific island countries such as fisheries, preservation of corals, and environmental sustainability. It hosts regional research stocktakes from time to time. Once again, the language difference comes into play, and so such meetings can become discussions between French experts with other Pacific players present, rather than maximizing the opportunity for genuine exchange of information and research cooperation. But a greater habit of cooperation and collaboration will engender change. And in this context, too, the two French universities in the region, the University of New Caledonia and the University of French Polynesia, represent regional assets. The Pacific region, and France and its entities, have much to gain from greater academic and scientific research exchange. The beginning of the EHESS presence within the ANU is a promising step.

While the bilateral links between France and Australia and New Zealand are not my focus here, it is worth mentioning some of the trilateral regional cooperation France has been party to over the last decade, taking a bigger role as a constructive regional partner. The 1993 FRANZ arrangement is one example, whereby the three governments work together on fisheries and ocean surveillance, and emergency disaster response; and share intelligence with island governments. The three governments also sponsor defence exercises, including Pacific island government defence teams, with disaster and emergency response scenarios. Many other bilateral links France maintains with Australia and New Zealand complement its regional activities, for example in the defence, scientific, and educational spheres. As in other fields, France's defence cooperation is taking place at a time of evolution and transition in the international status of New Caledonia, which can raise some ambiguities. For example, France's 2008 Mutual Logistical Support Arrangement with Australia involving support from Noumea, was questioned by a pro-independence local group as premature. While France is indisputably responsible for defence matters, the claim was that the Noumea Accord specifically provided for future defence issues to be addressed by vote after 2014.

The use of Noumea's military base by Australia in times of emergency (for example as a staging point for an Australian navy vessel travelling to Fiji to back up consular evacuation during the 2006 coup) highlights the fact that France's own investment in its three entities represent substantial regional assets, many of them strategic assets. France underwrites \$A4.6 b. worth of investment in its entities<sup>7</sup> each year. France ensures the delivery of infrastructure, ports, roads, schools, medical facilities, electricity, waste and water services at the standard operating in the motherland, to all of these entities, including remote islands in the archipelagoes. This is a major achievement, one which all regional island countries can appreciate, as they themselves struggle to deliver such services to their own people. In particular, France's development of two new nickel projects each worth an investment of over \$US 2 b., and the exploitation of known hydrocarbon resources offshore from New Caledonia, represent new and potential strategic and economic resources in the region. Still, the disconnect between the massive investment France makes in its own entities, as opposed to its assistance to the region, is not lost on regional island leaders, although they would be too polite (unlike me) to point this out.

## **Governance**

Finally, I come to perhaps the most powerful contribution France is engaged in within the Pacific region. This is its contribution in the area of governance. In many ways, France's administration of its Pacific entities presents models for serious consideration in other parts of the Pacific. One example is its ingenious judicial framework, where local indigenous customary advisors are consulted by French judges in adjudicating criminal cases involving indigenous defendants. Such arrangements, I submit, provide important parallels for our own treatment of our Aboriginal Australians facing criminal charges. The framework is one in which many of our Pacific island neighbours would be interested, if they could see how it worked on a daily basis.

France has invested considerable political and economic capital, and a very large dose of innovation and flexibility, at times at odds with its own Constitution, in encouraging greater

---

<sup>7</sup> \$A 1.9 b. or 121.5 b. cfp to New Caledonia in 2007 in *Tableaux de l'Économie calédonienne*, Institut de la Statistique et des Études Économiques, Noumea 2008 p. 960; \$A 2.7 b. or 159.1 b. cfp to French Polynesia in 2006 from Press Release, French High Commission, Tahiti, 7 August 2007; and \$A 5 m. or 373.7 m. cfp to Wallis and Futuna in 2006, figures from the Service Territorial de la Statistique et des Études Économiques, on SPC website [www.spc.int/prism](http://www.spc.int/prism) accessed 19 May 2009.

autonomy for its two largest Pacific entities, always, up till now anyway, within the fold of the French republic (expressed most recently by President Sarkozy in January 2010).<sup>8</sup>

Notwithstanding a mixed record over the last sixty years, characterized in the early years by statutory reforms paving the way for new autonomy only to be revoked by subsequent reform, it is important to recognize that for New Caledonia, and to a lesser extent French Polynesia, France has drawn on the failures of the past to legislate extensive new statutory provisions by which it is encouraging elected local governments to decide on their future.

I mentioned earlier in this presentation that, along with the cessation of nuclear testing, France's seriousness in genuinely addressing decolonization concerns, including through the Matignon/Noumea Accords, was a first step towards greater acceptance by regional island government leaders of France and its presence in the region. Why only a first step? Because the process is incomplete and ongoing.

As far as New Caledonia is concerned, the Noumea Accord expires in 2018. In many of the areas of France's engagement that I have rehearsed today, it is precisely the still-uncertain future status of New Caledonia which underlies some of the limitations to the full practical participation by the French Pacific entities across the range of regional activity (from participation in defence and trade initiatives, the MSG, the SPC and other CROP bodies, and in the PIF itself).

The Pacific Island Forum leaders are aware of this and maintain a watching brief on New Caledonia and the implementation of the Noumea Accord process, most recently evident in the Communiqué following their August 2010 Summit. New Caledonia is currently an Associate Member of the Forum, a status expressly created for it and for French Polynesia. Its then President, Philippe Gomès, had sought full membership for New Caledonia in August 2010.<sup>9</sup> Referring to this request for “*eventual* full membership”, leaders recognized “that a number of issues relating to New Caledonia's international standing would be resolved *as it advanced with France the self-determination process under the Noumea Accord*” (my italics) and requested that

---

<sup>8</sup> As recently as January 2010 the President of the Republic told the French overseas entities that France would countenance numerous innovative institutions to address their concerns, while drawing a red line which could not be breached, that of independence, Nicolas Sarkozy, New Year Speech to the Overseas France, 19 January 2010.

<sup>9</sup> *Flash d'Océanie* January 19, 2010.

the Secretariat explore with New Caledonia ways in which its engagement with the Forum could be expanded and enhanced, including “through reactivation of dialogue through the Forum’s Ministerial Committee on New Caledonia” .<sup>10</sup> This was an oblique reference to the Ministerial Committee’s mandate for ongoing monitoring of the situation in New Caledonia, including by regular visits, which have not taken place since 2004. And the Forum simply “welcomed the continuing interest of French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna to deepen their engagement with the Forum”.<sup>11</sup>

So the region is watching the evolution of New Caledonia’s status under the Noumea Accord. Regional leaders are aware that the 1998 Noumea Accord deferred a vote on independence by another twenty years, and that the Accord itself followed the Matignon Accord which deferred a vote by ten years to 1998. The general expectation is that the promised vote (in fact, up to three votes) will now occur, as agreed, some time between 2014 and 2018 (although I note that recently a senior French advisor has indicated that technically these votes may stretch to 2023).<sup>12</sup> The Accord provides for the progressive transfer of a number of responsibilities to the locally elected government of New Caledonia by 2014. Assuming that these transfers will have duly taken place, the referendum or referendums after 2014 will focus on three things: the transfer of the, by then, remaining five “*régalien*”, or sovereign, responsibilities to New Caledonia (ie justice, law and order, defence, currency and foreign affairs); on its access to “an international status of full responsibility”; and on the organization of citizenship and nationality.<sup>13</sup>

The Noumea Accord represented an unprecedented model of evolutionary democracy in the region. It explicitly acknowledged the Kanak identity, and conferred on New Caledonia a unique status, a *sui generis* “*pays*” under the French constitution; its own notions of citizenship (relating to longstanding residents of the entity); and the ability to pass its own legislation. It built on earlier elements of the Matignon Accords, and played a vital role in diffusing serious ethnic and political tension and violence by deferring a vote on independence over a period of years. Authored by the French State and symbolized by a historic handshake between the two leaders,

---

<sup>10</sup> Communiqué, Pacific Islands Forum, 5 August 2010 summit, PIF website <http://www.forumsec.org.fj/>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Alain Christnacht, *Il faut trouver une solution définitive, Nouvelles Calédoniennes*, 11 March 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Article 5, Noumea Accord 1998.

Jean-Marie Tjibaou and Jacques Lafleur, it represented hard-won compromise by both the pro-France and the pro-independence groups. Tjibaou was subsequently assassinated by one of his own supporters, reflecting the strength of feeling about the issues. Jacques Lafleur, who died at the end of last year, tirelessly reiterated to his fellow New Caledonians that the lessons of the violence of the 1980s must not be forgotten. The ingenuity of the basic idea, that of setting aside the key question for a defined time-frame, was taken up by negotiators in neighbouring Papua New Guinea in the form of the Bougainville Agreement.

But the Accord is an interim measure only, and will be evaluated on its ultimate success in enabling a truly democratic and peaceful long-term solution for New Caledonia.

As a privileged close observer to the evolution of the democratic institutions set up in New Caledonia, where I served as Australian Consul-General from 2001 to 2004, I can say that the investment by the French State in this process, and by the principal pro-France and pro-independence parties, is breathtaking and in some ways unprecedented. (I say this from the perspective of someone who, spent two years with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Canberra addressing issues related to our interests arising from another unique historic agreement, that of the transfer of Hong Kong to China in 1997.) Australia, and the region, are indeed fortunate in having a regional partner whose citizens are prepared to work hard on their innovative steps to define their future democratically.

It is too early to judge the implementation of the Noumea Accord. There are areas of remarkable progress, including the political institutions themselves which have generally been working well after three elections of 5-year governments. As young institutions, a learning process is understandably occurring, evident as we speak as politicians test the system and jockey for power, particularly as the final phase of the process, from 2014 to 2018, nears. The scheduled transfer of some powers has slipped, including in important areas such as education, and there have been mixed messages from France on its treatment of central issues such as defining the electorate which votes for the local Congress, the agreed deferral of the currency issue until 2014, and issues surrounding the census. But generally the institutional framework has been working well, and all parties are working on aspects of implementation, even controversial

aspects, so far relatively peaceably. This is no mean feat, when we recall that just 23 years ago, blood was spilled on both sides of the political spectrum over the status of New Caledonia.

Apart from these delicate political processes and transfers, there are difficult issues in implementing the fundamental economic promise underpinning the Accord, that of the development of new nickel mining projects, including in the largely Kanak north, and the distribution of mining profits more equitably to New Caledonia and within New Caledonia to all areas, Kanak and non-Kanak. Despite serious efforts by all sides, and the large injection of investment and backing by the French State, progress has been slow, for a variety of reasons, including the complexity of massive nickel processing projects, and the effects of the financial crisis. The development of two large new nickel projects, each with an investment of over \$US 2 b., is no small objective and all parties, pro-France and pro-independence, are working with the French State to address difficult issues including environmental issues in a fragile island setting.

In early 2004, France sent a strong, positive message to the region in the UN context, when it cast aside its longstanding position, dating from 1947, not to countenance the non-self governing status of New Caledonia. From 2004, the French State quietly began to report as administering authority for New Caledonia on the implementation of its Noumea Accord commitments. France also hosted a regional meeting of the UN Decolonisation Committee in Noumea in May 2010. Although it stopped short of accepting a visiting UN investigatory mission at the time, as proposed by some Committee members, France did accept a visiting mission by the Melanesian Spearhead Group in June 2010.

By agreeing to work within UN Decolonisation processes, France is signaling that it accepts the decolonization process as set out in United Nations Resolution 1541 of December 1960, that is, the achievement of self-government by (a) Emergence as a sovereign independent State; (b) Free association with an independent State; or (c) Integration with an independent State”.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> United Nations Resolution 1541 December 1960, Annex.

The convening by the French State of an internal colloquium last week focusing partly on future options for New Caledonia, reflects the commitment of the French State to implementing its Noumea Accord promises. It canvassed a range of models of association status from other parts of the world and from the Pacific. It also responded directly to a call by President Sarkozy for discussions on the future of New Caledonia<sup>15</sup> to ensure electoral agreement on the future path.

A brief word on French Polynesia. There, too, autonomy is evolving. Although it is operating on extensive statutory provisions legislated by the French State over many years, there is no Agreement or deadline on deciding its future status, as there is for New Caledonia. While its internal dynamics are different to that of New Caledonia, the pro-independence leader, Oscar Temaru, has proposed a *Tahiti Nui* Accord based on the Noumea Accord, including by raising it with the Pacific Island Forum.<sup>16</sup> The idea has so far not gained traction, partly obscured by chronic political instability in French Polynesia, with constant changes in government. In some ways French Polynesia is more advanced than New Caledonia, for example, in already having its flag, anthem, and a unique status for its President. But at this stage, the practical reality is that eyes in French Polynesia are on New Caledonia and the future that it decides for itself. The outcome in New Caledonia will have implications for French Polynesia. This underlines the importance of the promised New Caledonian referendums not just for fully resolving its own internal differences, and for acceptance by the wider region, but for stability in the broad expanses of the French Pacific entities themselves.

## **Conclusion**

It is evident that the investment, achievements and challenges characterising France's current presence in the Pacific, are impressive and complex. These elements impact on important interests of other countries of the region, including strategic political and economic interests.

---

<sup>15</sup>Speech cited, Sarkozy January 2010.

<sup>16</sup>Raised with the visiting Minister for Overseas France, François Baroin, March 2006, *Tahiti Pacifique*, No 180, April 2006 and in Temaru's address to the Tonga Pacific Island Forum, August 2007, *Tahiti Presse*, 16 October 2007.

France has begun a series of steps to strengthen its relationships in the region. An integral part of the success of this process will be the way in which the future of New Caledonia is democratically decided, in keeping with commitments made in the Noumea Accord.

There is an important role in all of this for further interface between researchers of the region. Person-to-person links between the thinkers of the region add to understanding and shape the policy process. In this context, the establishment of an ongoing presence of French researchers from the EHESS is particularly significant, beginning with the appointment an eminent French academic, Professor Serge Tcherkezoff, within the ANU's College of Asia and the Pacific.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.