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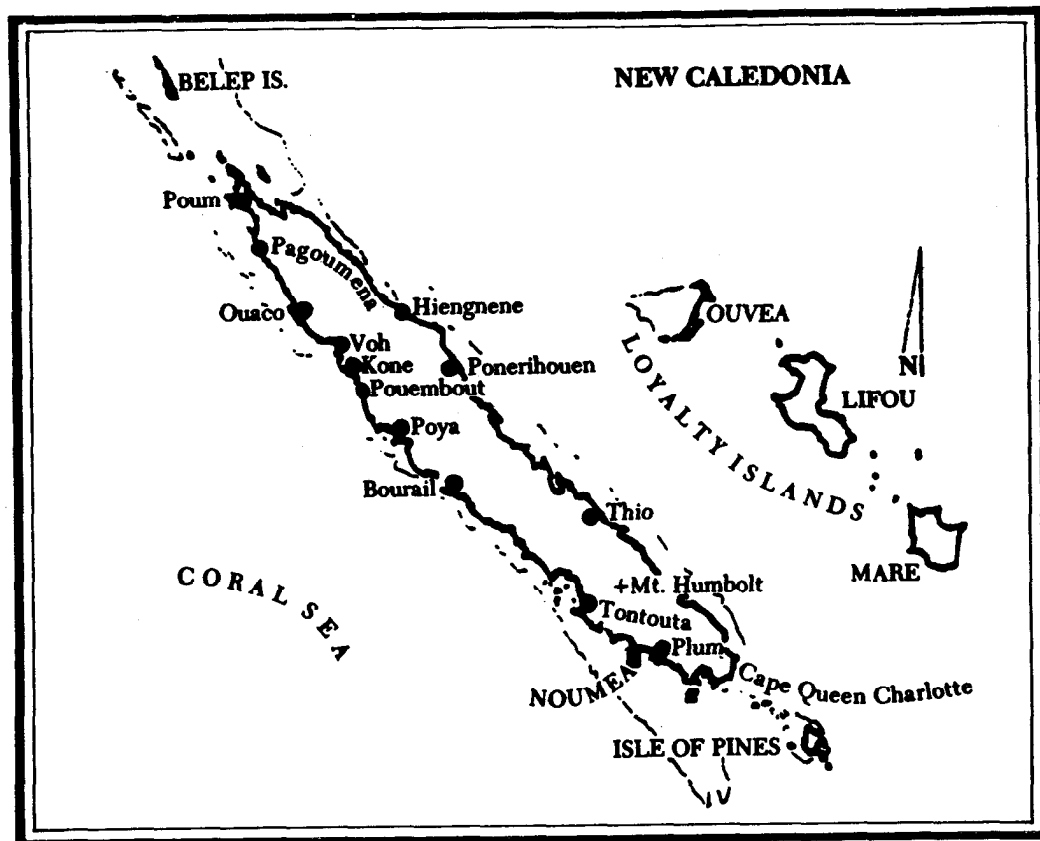
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FORMAL CONFLICT: ON RECENT ELECTIONS IN NEW CALEDONIA

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Introduction

This paper aims to provide detailed, predominantly quantitative information illustrative of the current condition of New Caledonia's political culture. Its core is a full examination of the most recent formal redefinition of Caledonian political society: the elections, held in July 1979, to the Territorial Assembly.



Parties and Groups in 1979

Eight parties contested the Territorial Elections of July 1979. (If still large, this figure represented a welcome reduction: the previous election in 1977 had produced no less than nineteen contending groups.) All unsympathetic to independence, five minor parties failed to attract 7.5 percent of the vote: under the recently introduced system of modified proportional representation, they did not gain a seat in the new Assembly. In terms of electoral survival, since July 1979 the greatly simplified Caledonian political scene has contained just three parties: FI, RPCR, and FNSC. Predictably, all three have proved to be more or less shifting, complex alliances.

FI (*Front Indépendantiste*, Independence Front) was the lopsided electoral union of the large *Union Calédonienne* (nine seats in September 1977) with four splinter parties: PALIKA, FULK, UPM, and a minority of PSC (five seats between them in September 1977).

From the early 1950s to the mid-1970s UC had received the support of the bulk of Melanesian voters for its essentially moderate defense of their interests. From 1975 it progressively experienced multiple internal pressures; breakaways occurred (European moderates left from one flank, young Melanesian independentists from the opposing flank); UC policy hardened, in support first of internal autonomy (the party's policy by September 1977) and eventually of outright independence (following the Ninth Congress, May-June 1978). It was still a relatively novel, radicalized UC which, in July 1979, went against its long-established cooperative-integrationist tradition to contest its first election on an independence ticket.

PALIKA (*Parti de libération kanak*, Kanak Liberation Party) was formed by the alliance in May 1976 of two of the earliest independentist groups, *les Foulards rouges* and *les groupes 1878*. Markedly less reticent than UC, at whose expense in part it developed in the later 1970s, PALIKA contained, among others, subgroups of young French-educated Melanesians in favor of armed struggle within a marxistic ideological context of revolutionary worker unity. Nevertheless, the assertive defense of specifically Kanak interests (comprehensive land claims, New Caledonian independence for the Melanesian people alone, and so forth) were common to PALIKA, FULK (*Front uni de libération kanak*, United Kanak Liberation Front--itself the result of a radicalizing split from UPM), UPM (*Union progressiste multiraciale*, Multiracial Progressive Union, whose origins go back to 1971), and PSC (*Parti socialiste calédonien*, Caledonian Socialist Party, a variegated remnant of its 1977 homograph, with sup-

porters ranging from former UC members lukewarm on independence to pro-PALIKA militants).

Independence was the decisive dividing line in the 1979 election. Facing FI across the divide were the two parties of the “national majority”: RPCR (*Rassemblement pour la Calédonie dans la République*, Rally for New Caledonia in the [Fifth French] Republic) and FNCS (*Fédération pour une nouvelle société calédonienne*, Federation for a New [new?] Caledonian Society).

While they were mainly European-led and supported by both European and other non-Melanesian minorities, and while both parties were opposed to independence and in favor of continued integration with France, differences existed. In particular, it was simplistic to see in RPCR and FNCS mere Pacific reflections of the major metropolitan center-right parties, the Gaullist RPR of Jacques Chirac and the Giscardian UDF: each contained far too many of the other’s natural allies--Gaullists in FNCS and vice versa--for the parallel to hold. To a certain extent, the parties’ full titles offered as good an initial guide as any to their distinctive policy emphases, RPCR being the more nationalist-conservative, FNCS looking more to reformist social progress within a French context.

RPCR had undoubted conservative--FI opponents would say reactionary or colonialist--features. An important constituent party, EDS (*Entente démocratique et sociale*, Social and Democratic Union), represented the comfortable bourgeoisie of Nouméa. Jacques Lafleur and Roger Laroque are prominent RPCR members: the first is RPR national deputy for New Caledonia and a large-scale land owner, while the second has for many years been mayor of Nouméa and is a substantial importer. Yet, RPCR attracted Melanesian electoral support too; Melanesian members of the party include Dick Ukéiwé.

Newly formed by Lionel Cherrier, Giscardian senator for New Caledonia, from successive amalgams of centrist parties after March 1978, FNCS was promoted--by Dijoud, among others--in the hope of developing a reformist third party between RPCR and FI, a dynamic hinge-force liable to persuade the immobilist reluctance of (parts of) the first while slowing the rush to radical solutions prevalent in the second. The results of July 1979 appeared to give firm encouragement to such strategic hopes.

The Territorial Elections, 1 July 1979

The Campaign. In 1979 the registered electorate was made up of the following ethnic categories:

Melanesian (43.3% of 1980 total population): 42.9% of electorate

European (35.6% of 1980 total population): 40.2% of electorate

Other Minorities

(Réunionnais; Antillais;

Indonesians; Vietnamese;

Wallis Islanders;

Tahitians) (21% of 1980 total population): 16.9% of electorate

The slight underrepresentation of Melanesian and somewhat greater overrepresentation of Europeans are largely to be accounted for in terms of the two groups' birthrates: the expanding Melanesian population contains by far the greater proportion of electoral minors. The non-naturalized status of some Indonesians and Vietnamese explains the more marked underrepresentation of the remaining category. Since all voters hold equal French citizenship, exact rates of electoral participation by ethnic category are not known, although they may be broadly deducible from voting returns in particular (say, heavily Polynesian- or Melanesian-populated) areas.

The campaign's immediate context was nothing if not turbulent. The high degree of institutional turmoil (the suspension, followed by the dissolution, of the 1977 Territorial Assembly) was both occasioned by and exacerbatory of the persistent economic crisis: in July the year's budget for the Territory had still to be established. New Caledonia's participation some three weeks earlier in elections for the European Assembly might have been a distracting factor.

Later in July President Giscard d'Estaing was to congratulate the new Territorial Assembly for the "calm and serenity" with which the election campaign had been conducted. Perhaps it could be said rather that two distinct, sometimes complementary campaigns were conducted--campaigns that were free of disruptive incident but vigorous, and of which the essential issues were at all times abundantly clear.

The first was the localized, largely rural campaign of grass-roots militancy--one based on personal contact and tribal hierarchy, custom-mediated. Drawing on both UC's unequalled experience in the field and the high commitment levels of PALIKA and FULK supporters, FI, represented throughout the Territory, was--to say the least--at no disadvantage on this level.

Centered in Nouméa the second campaign closely approximated the familiar Western model: intensive but mass-anonymous, and costly, since it was heavily dependent on the printed and electronic media. Nouméa enjoys a tradition--rare in the Pacific--of a lively and varied press. If,

editorially, the two daily newspapers were quite opposed to independence, opposition views were not excluded from their pages. The periodical and occasional press ensured expression of all principal currents of opinion, although here as in other aspects of this campaign the greater financial resources available to the “national majority” parties, and above all to RPCR, were evident. As in metropolitan France, Caledonian radio and television are under the monopolistic authority of the state, via the High Commissioner: a bias toward restrained, conservative or apolitical, superficial coverage of political affairs has often resulted. During the official election campaign FR3 (New Caledonia’s television channel) broadcast for the first time a series of interviews with party leaders, including representatives of FI. Air time was allocated according to the parties’ representativeness as determined at the 1977 elections.

Autonomy, integration, and development--all three were at stake in July 1979. First--and whatever the quarrels over its limitations--for the 1976 internal autonomy statute to function effectively, a stable majority within the Territorial Assembly was indispensable. Second, by universal consensus, these elections doubled as an informal referendum on independence: a majority for FI in the new assembly, all agreed, would set independence for New Caledonia in train. Third, future metropolitan policy with regard to the Territory was at stake, with the choice lying between self-chosen independence (to which Paris would democratically assent) and maintained ties with France within the context of Dijoud’s ten-year reform and development plan accepted by the Assembly in February 1979. It was a case of break (from France) or make (an economically stable and socially equitable future) for New Caledonia.

The Results (Tables A and B). The decisive character of the election was clearly reflected in the turnout of voters. At 73.99 percent, turnout was almost 5.0 percent higher than the 69.06 percent recorded at the previous Territorial Elections in September 1977. No higher rate has been recorded since. Although below the territorial average the turnout in the heavily Melanesian Loyalty Islands electoral district (see Table B) was in fact historically high: in the second round of the Presidential Elections, on 10 May 1981, when offered a perceived similar choice between a national (Giscard d’Estaing) or an opposition FI-backed (Mitterrand) candidate, the turnout was 58.34 percent.

As Table A indicates, the primary aim of the elections was soundly realized. The “national majority” parties’ twenty-two seats ensured a clear majority within the thirty-six-seat Territorial Assembly; the effective functioning of the institutions of internal autonomy appeared certain, providing that RPCR (fifteen seats) and FNCS (seven seats) cooperated. To

judge from the smooth fashion in which the two parties not only elected their representatives to all seven seats of the Government Council but also signed a government agreement covering the Assembly's five-year term of office, such cooperation was not at risk. Now organized more coherently in the formal unity of FI, the opposition held the same fifteen seats as its constituent parties had in the 1977 Assembly.

The results reaffirmed the relative dominance of RPCR, which gained 40.24 percent of all votes, including half (50.11 percent) the votes in the largely European South electoral district. Moreover, it managed 32.54 percent and 29.73 percent of votes on the Melanesian-populated East Coast and in the Loyalty Islands respectively. The election of its Loyalty Islands member, Dick Ukéïwé, to the office of vice-president of the Government Council was open to the charge of cosmetic tokenism, but it served to answer critics who saw in RPCR the right-wing defender of exclusively European vested interests.

On the level of party fortunes, July 1979 was remarkable above all for the substantial and unprecedented breakthrough achieved by the forces of the center: in the two electoral districts in which it presented lists FNCS attracted a quarter of the votes--or more than half FI's total territorial

TABLE A: Global Results

Territorial Elections, 1 July 1979

Registered voters	68,279		
Votes cast	50,524		
Turnout	73.99%		
Valid votes	50,082		
Parties	Votes	% of Valid Votes	Seats in New T.A.
RPCR	20,153	40.24%	15
FI	17,241	34.43%	14
FNCS	8,925	17.82%	7
FSC	1,345	2.68%	0
RPCM	1,020	2.04%	0
UWFC	560	1.12%	0
RDC	544	1.09%	0
UDFC	294	0.59%	0

vote. With seven seats giving it a significant position of leverage over RPCR in the Assembly, and with Jean-Pierre Aifa reelected (4 July 1979) as president of the Assembly, hopes for a dependable center party by which a future reformist dynamic might be mediated had been vindicated in generous measure.

Conversely, it was difficult to claim that the opposition parties' united front strategy had been an electoral success. With a larger electorate and turnout than in 1977, the opposition's share of the vote had dropped 3.09 percent (1977: 37.52 percent; 1979: 34.43 percent). In allocating fourteen seats to FI the new system of modified proportional representation had in fact been generous (38.89 percent of seats for only 34.43 percent of votes): thirteen seats (a 36.11-percent share of the Assembly) would have

TABLE B: Results by Electoral District

	ELECTORAL DISTRICTS			
	South (includes Nouméa)	West Coast	East Coast	Loyalty Islands
Registered voters	32,970	13,484	12,296	9,529
Votes cast	24,374	10,693	9,134	6,323
Turnout	73.93%	79.30%	74.28%	66.35%
Valid votes	24,114	10,609	9,055	6,304
Parties				
RPCR	12,084	3,248	2,947	1,874
FI	3,407	4,091	5,681	4,062
FNSC	6,393	2,532	–	–
FSC	986	359	–	–
RPCM	569	184	267	–
UWFC	464	96	–	–
RDC	211	99	160	74
UDFC	–	–	–	294
Seats				
SOUTH: 17 seats: 10 RPCR; 5 FNSC; 2 FI.				
WEST COAST: 7 seats: 3 FI; 2 RPCR; 2 FNSC.				
EAST COAST: 7 seats: 5 FI; 2 RPCR.				
LOYALTY ISLANDS: 5 seats: 4 FI; 1 RPCR.				

been a more accurate allocation. In its strongholds the opposition's share of the vote was at best barely stable (62.74 percent on the East Coast--1 percent down on 1977) or in decline (64.43 percent in the Loyalty Islands against 68 percent for UC, PALIKA, FULK, and UPM combined in 1977). Less surprisingly, the price paid by FI for its radical unity was considerably higher in the predominantly non-Melanesian electorates: only 14.13 percent of the vote in the South where, in 1977, the nonunited opposition parties had polled 29.68 percent. On the West Coast the drop since 1977--to 38.56 percent--was in the order of 11 percent.

UC's double choice--the hardening of policy in 1978 from autonomy to a demand for full independence and the 1979 tactic of electoral union--was not vindicated by the poll. Considerable potential for tension existed both within UC (between its radical and more moderate factions) and in its relations with the minority member parties of an FI now virtually obliged to reformulate its strategy. The alternative to reformulation was unpalatable: to accept full formal representation in a Territorial Assembly whose solid national majority ensured that such representation would be tantamount to institutional impotence and the postponement of independence for at least another five years.

In the aftermath of July 1979, three possibilities for future FI strategy presented themselves. First, the internationalization of the Kanak case would be intensified, among the countries of the southwest Pacific region and with the UN Committee of twenty-four being a subsequent target. The example had been set during the earlier 1970s by the Vanua-aku Pati in the struggle for independence of Vanuatu, New Caledonia's closest neighbor. This extra-Caledonian promotion began, in fact, within days of the Territorial Elections, at the July 1979 meeting in Honiara of the anglophone South Pacific Forum. The second possibility was the intensification within New Caledonia of an institutional, grass-roots ethnopolitics: as Western democratic mechanisms were incapable of liberating the Kanak people, other channels must be explored. FI councillors boycotted the new Assembly's internal elections in the days following the Territorial Elections. On the part of a radical, multifaceted, electorally ineffective opposition, this withdrawal of democratic participation opened up the perspective of a third, disturbing possibility: the active adoption by one or more minority groups of nondemocratic militancy, including political terrorism. In this respect, much would depend on the durability of FI's unity.

Implications. The elections of July 1979 represented salutary clarification, then, of both territorial institutions and the principal political parties. But no less clearly they threw up a number of problems and para-

doxes, the implications of which reached unsparingly to the segmented heart of Caledonian political society. By 1981 it was still by no means clear that--on all sides--the necessary integrity and perspicacity, the political determination and material means, existed in proportions sufficiently generous to permit such difficulties to be overcome. The problems existed--still do exist--on the same three levels of significance as had characterized the 1979 elections: autonomy, integration, and development.

Perhaps unavoidably, the institutional stability established in July 1979 also accentuated the bipolarization of the Caledonian world--though it did not of course initiate it. Since that date it has appeared that much more simple to make reference--often abusive reference--to the majority versus the opposition, to the bush versus Nouméa, and to Melanesian versus European or non-Melanesian Caledonia. In such circumstances, the fact that the Territory's new legislature assumed as its major policy responsibility the social and economic promotion of the Melanesian people, and in particular the infinitely delicate issue of land reform, smacked at best of technocratic paternalism. Divide and rule? Perhaps, in the short term, as a stopgap measure. But divide and reform? Hardly.

Second in 1979 the electorate firmly declined the offer of independence (FI's 34.43 percent of the poll) and embraced instead one form or another of continued integration with France (65.57 percent--the combined votes of RPCR, FNCS, and the remaining anti-independence minority parties). The raw arithmetic is without doubt impressive: it certainly holds little future hope for FI. It fails, however, to conceal the equivocal dimension of an electoral majority far more determined to refuse a painful divorce from France than it was prepared to accept positively the terms of the renegotiated marriage-agreement with Paris laid down in the 1979 Dijoud Plan for long-term social and economic development. Dominated as it was by Lafleur's RPCR, the new Assembly's majority was more resolutely legitimist in sentiment than it had yet proved itself to be reformist by conviction. That RPCR should respond with unmitigated enthusiasm to Giscard d'Estaing's demand that Caledonian society implement the Dijoud Plan, integrate its Melanesian community, and so become in Giscard's terms "a land of fraternity, justice and progress" seemed on the face of it improbable.

Understandably, in view of the backlog there was to make up, the Dijoud Plan proposed a ten-year framework for the development of New Caledonia. It is therefore not possible to attempt a definitive assessment of the third developmental dimension opened up by the 1979 elections.

In the face of FI's skepticism and the conservative reluctance of the majority electorate, the success of development policies depended largely

on the efforts of reformist elements in both RPCR *and* FNSC and on the resolution and financial commitment of the metropolitan dynamic. The Metropole's role is, unavoidably, as delicate as it is paradoxical: France asserts at once New Caledonia's right to internal autonomy while insisting on reforms which impinge on the interests of members of the Territory's political majority, on whom in turn the implementation of those reforms depends.

This is not to say that such a role is ineffective: substantial economic normalization was achieved during the eighteen months to the end of 1980. Ore exports (1980: 2.01M tonnes) and nickel metal production levels (1980: 48,000 t.) both improved. The long haul of economic diversification was begun: restructuring of local commerce and small-scale industry, agricultural development, expansion and modernization of tourist facilities. Health cover expansion figured prominently in social policy improvements. In 1980 some 10,000 hectares were involved in land reform transfers, either reverting to Melanesian reserve land or being offered for modern agricultural exploitation. Legislation passed in December 1980 should maintain this rate--five times that of 1977--of land reform in the future.