THE FRENCH GOVERNMENT AND THE SOUTH PACIFIC DURING "COHABITATION," 1986-1988

Isabelle Cordonnier
Institute for Political Studies
Paris

A French scholar deals with French policy in the South Pacific during 1986 to 1988, critical not only for French politics in general as the years of the first "cohabitation," but also for the French policy in the South Pacific. There were clearly two separate policies led by different actors: the president and prime minister on one side, and the secretary of state for South Pacific problems on the other. The president and the government were mainly concerned with New Caledonia and relations with Australia and New Zealand, including settlement of the *Rainbow Warrior* affair. The secretary of state for South Pacific problems was a Polynesian politician, who traveled widely in the region and was instrumental in establishing better relations with the island states of the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. A comparison is made with the recent cohabitation period (1993-1995), and the fundamental difference between the two periods is underlined. This article contributes to the study of France in the South Pacific and to the understanding of the complexities of France as an actor in South Pacific international relations.

COHABITATION: THE WORD was coined in the mid-eighties in France to define the simultaneous presence at the head of the government of a president and a prime minister from different and opposing political parties. Cohabitation was present for two years after the legislative elections in March 1986 that gave the parliamentary majority to the conservative parties. Meanwhile President François Mitterrand, who had been elected for a seven-year term in 1981, remained in power. The president named Jacques Chirac, leader of the most prominent conservative party, the Rassemblement pour la République (RPR; Assembly for the Republic) as prime min-

Pacific Studies, Vol. 18, No. 1--March 1995

ister. There was a great potential for them to clash because the 1958 constitution gave each of them substantial but largely ambiguous powers in the management of state affairs.[1]

The main areas of potential dispute related to defense and external policies. These matters have always been considered to belong to the "reserved area" of the president's responsibilities. But Prime Minister Chirac did not intend to renounce any part of his potential power, because defense and external affairs relate in part to domestic conditions.[2] He was adamant in putting forward his point of view in any international forum. He could rely on Minister of Foreign Affairs Jean-Bernard Raimond and Minister of Defense André Giraud, who clearly stood by him from the beginning of the cohabitation period.[3] The fact that the minister of foreign affairs stood fifth in the order of protocolary importance in the government shows in itself the willingness of both the president and the prime minister to handle external policy themselves.[4]

The period of cohabitation was a very active one with respect to French policy in the South Pacific. This policy involved external and defense affairs, because of France's nuclear testing program in French Polynesia, and internal affairs because of the existence of the three French overseas territories (TOM: New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis-and-Futuna). The external and defense affairs were deemed to be within the scope of the president's responsibilities, the internal affairs within that of the prime ministers. Problems emerged because of the lack of coordination and the personal hostility between the president, on one side, and the prime minister and his government on the other. The profile of French policy in the South Pacific increased when the prime minister created the post of secretary of state for South Pacific problems ***(secrétariat d'état chargé des problèmes du Pacifique sud),*** which was held by a skilled Polynesian politician, Gaston Flosse. This post could have operated mainly as a coordinating mechanism for policy in the region, but it became an active element in shaping French policy. During the two-year cohabitation period, between the legislative elections in March 1986 and the presidential election in May 1988, French policy in the South Pacific had three main dimensions: policy in the TOM, particularly in New Caledonia; the difficult bilateral relations with Australia and New Zealand as well as with the island states of the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu; and the activities of the secretary of state for South Pacific problems. An analysis of cohabitation from 1986 to 1988 with respect to the South Pacific seems especially timely because a new period of cohabitation began in March 1993 with the coming to power of the Balladur government.

In the process of examining tensions over South Pacific policy between the president and the prime minister during the 1986-1988 cohabitation

period, this article seeks to illuminate the nonmonolithic character of French policy making with respect to the South Pacific and the complex interplay of influences and pressures from different political and bureaucratic actors. Although the different actors' divergent views on the course to follow about South Pacific issues may be considered the main cause of errors in French policy in this region, there has yet been no academic literature devoted to this specific topic. It seems all the more necessary to bring a French point of view to a field whose analysis has been dominated by Australian and American authors.[5]

This discussion is mainly based on government and official publications, parliamentary proceedings, and discussions with officials and advisers who were active in the policy of these years and who wish to remain anonymous. The aim is to examine the official debates on French policy in the South Pacific during cohabitation from 1986 to 1988 and to illuminate the relations between the different actors in the shaping of this policy.

The New Caledonian Question

New Caledonia had been a contentious issue in French politics for several years before cohabitation. The Kanaks' determination to attain independence had led to violent conflicts in the mid-eighties. Tensions increased during the cohabitation period of 1986 to 1988 because of the Chirac government's attitude toward New Caledonian affairs.

The RPR's position on New Caledonia was to stress its being part of France: French sovereignty in this territory was not to be questioned. During a January 1982 debate in the National Assembly concerning New Caledonia, Mr. Toubon, a prominent RPR deputy, declared, "This would mean to vote in pitch darkness, a vote that we cannot but oppose . . . because you didn't stress, Mr. Secretary of State, your determination to keep New Caledonia within the French Republic, which is, for us, a fundamental issue."[6] Four years later, this attitude had not changed. The RPR had strongly opposed the so-called Fabius Statute (from the name of Socialist Laurent Fabius, then prime minister), which was passed in 1985 and was to govern relations between the French and the territorial government in New Caledonia. Its promoters and detractors considered it a step toward independence-in-association, a compromise formula favored by some French Socialist politicians in 1984-1985. In July 1986, the Chirac government passed legislation calling for a local referendum on the territory's political status.[7] The proposed electoral body would be limited to citizens who had resided in the territory for at least three years.[8]

Three issues were of particular importance in the legislation: (1) the

replacement of the Land Office (created in 1982) with the ADRAF (Agence pour le développement rural et l'aménagement foncier; Rural Development and Land Planning Agency); (2) the granting of economic aid (development funds, compensation, and damage money) to the victims of the 1984-1985 riots and fiscal deductions for investments in the territory; and (3) the adaptation of the Fabius Statute, in order to reduce the powers of the regional councils and to increase those of the Territorial Council (Congress).

This law showed how eager the government was to stop what it considered an evolution toward independence for New Caledonia. It also revealed its commitment as a whole in this action, since the law was signed by six ministers (besides the president and the prime minister). Two additional laws concerning the elections in New Caledonia were passed in June and July 1987. The general atmosphere in the territory was tense. As an observer put it, "Deaf to criticism, listening only to Jacques Lafleur's and his RPCR friends' opinions,[9] the minister for overseas territories and the high commissioner, Mr. Jean Montpezat, were busy depriving the independentists of the very few powers left to the regions."[10]

In 1987 the Chirac government was mainly preoccupied with the preparation of the referendum. But as early as 30 January, the Convention of the FLNKS (Front de liberation nationale pour une Kanaky socialiste; National Kanak Socialist Liberation Front) called for an unconditional boycott of the referendum, which was planned for late 1987. Tensions in New Caledonia between independentists and loyalists, the latter supported by the police and the French army, increased during the months leading up to the referendum.

French military presence in the territory only increased from 5,303 to 6,425 men between April 1986 and October 1987.[11] But the presence also became more obvious. The French government initiated a "nomadization" program under which troops were temporarily stationed in tribes' territory, where they took part in agricultural or building works and also played a social and medical role. This role was not accepted by the Kanaks. This "nomadization" was considered a military operation against the tribes.[12] If it reassured the Europeans in the bush (the ***broussards),*** it was strongly opposed by the FLNKS militants.[13]

The referendum took place on 13 September 1987. Fifty-nine percent of the electorate voted, and the result was 98.3 percent in favor of keeping New Caledonia within the Republic. But as Melanesians had widely boycotted the vote, the outcome cannot be considered the expression of the majority of the whole New Caledonian electorate. It could not possibly be taken at face value and so was a major setback for its promoters.

One of the last episodes of the cohabitation period was the adoption of

the Pons Statute (from the name of the minister for overseas departments and territories at the time).[14] It was signed by twelve ministers and undersecretaries and thus could be considered the legacy of the soon-to-be-dismissed Chirac government. The new statute had two main characteristics. First, it kept the four self-governing regions (East, West, South, and Islands) that were governed by regional councils whose union formed the Territorial Council. The high commissioner (the state representative in the territory) was still assisted by a ten-member executive council. The Assemblée coutumière and the Institute for Promoting the Kanak Culture were maintained. Second, it was to be the most comprehensive statute New Caledonia ever had. Functions, attributions, and competences of each of the territory's institutions were carefully described. The objective was undoubtedly to prevent any later conflict over competences.

The government legislative effort in New Caledonia was the Chirac government's own effort. It was not supported or approved by the president. François Mitterrand remained silent on the issue, and his silence was interpreted as complete disapproval. He may have wished to use New Caledonia as a card in the conflict of ambitions that developed between himself and the prime minister with regard to the 1988 election: Mitterrand wanted to be the first president of the Fifth Republic to be reelected, whereas Prime Minister Chirac wanted to be elected president (he was a candidate for the second time) and was thus a rival to Mitterrand in all areas.

Mitterrand thus let the situation deteriorate and kept aloof in order to avoid any responsibility for it. He nevertheless sometimes voiced his disagreement with the government's policy in New Caledonia. For example, in the Ministers' Council of 18 February 1987, he was reported as saying, "To reduce the debate to a mere electoral opposition would be a dangerous historical error. I mean less the referendum than the policy that led to it."[15]

In December 1986, New Caledonia was reinscribed on the United Nations list of non-self-governing territories that should be decolonized.[16] This act had no immediate consequence for French policy in the South Pacific but revealed the sympathy for the independentists' cause in the South Pacific and elsewhere. The motion on New Caledonia was introduced by the members of the South Pacific Forum in December 1986 after it had become obvious that French policy under the recently elected conservative party would not evolve in the direction they had hoped.

The arguments developed by the representatives of the South Pacific countries summarized reproaches and claims that had been leveled at France for twenty years. However, they were expressed for the first time in a global forum. It was claimed that a state had a right to oversee what was going on in a neighboring state; Mr. Abisinito, Papua New Guinea represen-

tative, said, "The universal declaration of human rights clearly acknowledges that human rights of everybody are not only a matter of inner policy for sovereign states, but are of common concern for the whole of humankind."[17] Also mentioned was the regional duty of states that have to bear the consequences of the political destabilization of a neighboring territory, as the Western Samoa representative explained: "Our considerations were first determined by the fact that the French government's decisions as regards New Caledonia will not only affect the territory residents, but also all of us who are living in the South Pacific."[18]

The charge of arrogance leveled at France was not new. The PNG representative claimed, "The administrative power showed that it was ready neither to cooperate with the U.N. decolonization committee nor to fulfill its obligations. It must then be condemned not only for arrogance and hypocrisy, but also for ridiculing the terms of the U.N. charter as well as their relevant resolutions."[19] The reproach of incoherence in the French approach to the New Caledonian issue was the newest charge. It was both a criticism for having amalgamated the right to vote to elect a government and the right to vote in a referendum to determine the desired level of self-government, which is an inalienable right in any colony, and a criticism for having organized a so-called referendum on self-determination when Paris kept saying that New Caledonia was part of France.

The New Caledonia question took a dramatic turn in the very last weeks of cohabitation. The Ouvea affair started just before the presidential election in 1988 with the killing of four gendarmes and the abduction of twenty-four others by Kanak rebels and their subsequent detention in a cave on Ouvea island (Loyalty Islands). They were released after a military assault on the cave in which nineteen Kanaks were killed, several of them under yet unexplained circumstances. There was strong evidence that some were killed after surrendering.[20]

This event reveals a great deal about the complexity of the cohabitation between Mitterrand and Chirac and about the depth of their disagreement.

The first bone of contention was the decision to organize the provincial elections on the very day of the presidential election. Bernard Pons has clearly stated that he yielded to RPCR pressure.[21] The president, or at least his closest advisers, was aware of the risks. On 20 April, the Committee on the Future of New Caledonia sent a delegation to the Elysée. Guy Leneouanic, Gabriel Marc, Alain Ruellan, and Michel Tubiana had an interview with Jean-Louis Bianco, the secretary general of the presidency They explicitly voiced their anxieties about a possible outburst of violence in the territory around the date of the provincial and presidential elections, which were set for 24 April.[22] The conservative political parties were not unani-

mous in supporting the government's decision: as early as February, Jean-Pierre Soisson, in charge of overseas territories and departments for the UDF (Union pour la démocratie française; Union for the French Democracy, a center-right political party led by former president Giscard d'Estaing), expressed his fears about having the elections coincide.[23]

The second element of deep disagreement between the president and the government relates to the actual freeing of the hostages. This was a complex military operation organized both in Paris and in Nouméa and was all the more difficult because of time and space discrepancies: the two cities are twenty thousand kilometers and eleven hours apart. The internal rivalries of the military did not make it any easier for the ones in charge of negotiating with the rebels. The decision to assault the cave was made in Paris amid a climate of intense electoral competition between the president and his prime minister. The electoral competition had two effects. First, there is strong evidence that both men had their own channels of information on what actually happened on thespot,[24] but that they did not share the information. Second, there is also strong evidence that negotiations could have continued were both men not in a hurry to influence the electors by giving proof of their ability to command a military operation to restore law and order on a small island at the far end of the world. It is noteworthy that the negotiations to release three Frenchmen kept hostage in Lebanon for three years succeeded during this same electoral fortnight and that the prime minister's collaborators were to be credited for this political success. At the same time, the principal failure in the handling of the Ouvea crisis resided in the resorting to force rather than pursuing peaceful negotiations. Such an offhand approach exemplifies a general French attitude toward South Pacific problems and the difficulty of coordinating the approach of the politicians from the capital with local situations.[25]

Disastrous Bilateral Relations

The internal difficulties in New Caledonia reinforced the dissension between France and neighboring states in the South Pacific. Two issues--decolonization in New Caledonia and the ***Rainbow Warrior*** bombing--particularly exacerbated relations with Australia and New Zealand, respectively, but they also contributed to a negative image of France among the Pacific Islands nations. Continuation of French nuclear testing was another source of strong disagreement between France and South Pacific nations.

Australia was worried at the potential destabilization of its immediate environment (Nouméa is just a two-and-a-half-hour flight from Sydney). Libya's interference in New Caledonian affairs increased its preoccupations. In May

1987, Australia closed the People's Office (the Libyan embassy in Canberra) and expelled the head of the office. On a strict bilateral level, the relations between French Prime Minister Jacques Chirac and the Australian government were at a record low. The Chirac era tended to reinforce the negative stereotypes of France in the region; it helped reinforce claims that the French presence was regionally destabilizing. According to Bill Hayden, the Australian foreign affairs minister, "Real problems started when Mr. Chirac's government gained power. I think some tensions are generated inside this government that must face day-to-day problems because its parliamentary majority is tight and precarious in the coalition. This creates uncertainty."[26]

Relations with France deteriorated so much that on 19 December 1986 the French government took the decision to stop all official visits between Australia and France for an undetermined period. This was due, it said, to the unfriendly attitude of the Australian government during the preceeding months toward French policy in the South Pacific in general and in New Caledonia in particular. The Australian consul general in Nouméa was asked to leave the territory; it was claimed that he had interfered in local affairs. On 5 January 1987, France suspended official visits at the ministerial level between the two countries for an undetermined period. This decision was taken at a time when at least three visits were planned for the following February: visits by Secretary of State for South Pacific Problems Flosse, Agriculture Minister Guillaume, and External Trade Minister Noir.[27]

The two sides vied with one another in terms of nasty comments directed at the other. For example, Bill Hayden was reported saying that "France was very active with what one might call fiscal diplomacy" (among Pacific Islands states).[28] On a visit to New Caledonia in August 1986, Mr. Chirac described Prime Minister Bob Hawke of Australia as "very stupid" for warning that there could be renewed violence in New Caledonia if the issue of self-determination was not carefully handled.[29]

Mr. Chirac's clumsiness in his relations to the South Pacific countries was also considered damaging for the whole Western alliance: "Mr Chirac believes there is an Anglo-Saxon conspiracy to get the French to quit the Pacific: that the dirty digger is speaking not merely for the Australians and the New Zealanders, but also for Britain and the USA. In this belief he is only partly paranoiac. He is partly dead right. There is no conspiracy, but the Americans and the British join the Aussies and Kiwis in thinking that France is hindering their efforts to keep the Pacific states reasonably friendly to the West."[30] This quotation reflects a difference in appreciation of the international impact of the New Caledonia crisis. France clearly underestimated the impact, whereas Australia and New Zealand viewed French policy as a major risk in the context of the cold war and fear of Soviet infiltration in the area.

The animosity of the French government toward Australia was not shared by all its members. Mr. Giraud, the minister of defense, would not take part in it. He retained the presidency of the French committee for the preparation of the Australian bicentenary, to which he was appointed before entering the government. He represented France at the bicentenary ceremonies in February 1988. His visit helped restore senior official visits.[31]

France's relations with New Zealand were also overshadowed by the risk of regional destabilization as perceived by New Zealand. But New Zealand didn't wish to chase France out of the region. On the contrary, it strongly advocated dialogue with France. At the time New Zealand was mostly preoccupied with the settlement of the ***Rainbow Warrior*** affair.[32] This affair provides a most interesting case study of the French presence in the South Pacific, revealing many of its flaws and inadequacies.

The settlement of the ***Rainbow Warrior*** affair became the task of a government that had not been responsible for it, because the bombing took place under the last socialist government before the conservatives came to power. It was an example of the continuity of state policy ***(continuité de l'Etat)*** in this region in everything relating to the defense policy of France. The ***Rainbow Warrior*** question was one of the first issues dealt with by the ministers of defense and foreign affairs after they took office in March 1986. There were in fact three distinct cases: (1) compensation owed by the French Republic to the family of the photographer Fernando Pereira, who was killed in the explosion; it was decided that US$800,000 would be appropriate, and the sum was accepted by the family in November 1985; (2) compensation to Greenpeace for the destruction of its flagship; and (3) the case of the two French officers who were arrested and jailed in New Zealand in July 1985.[33]

The third case was the most difficult since David Lange, the New Zealand prime minister, firmly opposed the release of the officers, and the French ministers made it an absolute condition to the settlement of the whole affair. The prime minister of the Netherlands was then president of the European Council. He took the initiative to call for the mediation of the U.N. secretary-general. The settlement was thus speeded up, and an agreement took the form of an exchange of letters dated 11 July 1986.[34] The agreement included three essential points: (1) apologies from the French government to the New Zealand government and damage money of US$7 million; (2) the release of the French officers involved in the bombing who had been held prisoner in New Zealand since July 1985, under the condition that they would be posted for at least three years in Hao, an atoll in French Polynesia; and (3) commercial concessions by France during the negotiations between the European Economic Community and New Zealand on the importation of New Zealand butter.

In France this agreement was welcomed with relief. It nevertheless raised several questions. Why should France give apologies ***and*** compensation money? Why had officers to pay for having accomplished their duty? Why had France to concede New Zealand some advantages in commercial negotiations involving the European Economic Community? It also showed the weakness of France's policy in the region, since its embassies were not involved in the negotiations.[35]

Mitterrand did not take part in the settlement of this affair.[36] He was kept informed by the prime minister of the evolution of the negotiations. The ***Rainbow Warrior*** affair remains a very sensitive element in the history of the socialist government of Mr. Fabius, since it revealed many dysfunctionings of the state machinery that could not be analyzed and remedied. Mystery still surrounds the origins of this operation by French Intelligence, and there are strong doubts on whether it will be cleared up. Whatever his share of responsibility in the affair, in New Zealand's perspective, Mitterrand appeared more trustworthy than Chirac. Minister of Foreign Affairs Marshall welcomed his reelection with relief: "The French vote brings new expectations for the beginning of new relations [between our two countries]."[37]

Relations between the Paris government and the island country governments were extremely strained during the cohabitation years. These relations illustrate the split image of France with regard to self-determination in the region, since several of the island states entertained excellent relations with the secretary of state for South Pacific problems (see below).

France's relations were most strained with the Melanesian governments, because they held the greatest sympathy for the Kanaks as fellow Melanesians. But the Melanesian governments did not go so far as to break off all relations with France. In October 1987 Vanuatu expelled the French ambassador and the head of the cooperation mission. The Solomon Islands always refused the credentials of the French ambassador (residing in Port-Vila), but it never turned down any development aid from France. None of the South Pacific Forum members would have accepted a breaking of their relations with France. Thus the hostility toward France was in part a way of "lobbying" it to influence a settlement of New Caledonian affairs in a less conservative way.

On the French side, there was a large misunderstanding on the part of the government--with the exception of the secretary of state for South Pacific problems--toward the island states. These states were considered to be of negligible importance to both the president and the prime minister compared to other foreign policy issues: disarmament, East-West relations, Middle East terrorism, the hostages in Lebanon. The government would not permit tiny, remote islands in a faraway ocean to impinge on its policy in

New Caledonia, which was a card in the game it played against the president. The government was anxious to achieve there what its socialist predecessors could not do: to bring peace back to the territory and to lay the basis for a durable settlement of the crisis.

The major flaw of the government's approach was not to listen to those who knew the South Pacific reality. The government cut itself off from the experience of the secretary of state for South Pacific problems, who was hardly regarded as a member of the government. There was little coordination between his activities and the government's diplomacy--or lack of diplomatic skill--in the South Pacific. For example, Gaston Flosse was very active in trying to improve the image of France in the region at the very time (1987) when the government was most repressive in New Caledonia.

The Secretary of State for South Pacific Problems

The post of secretary of state for South Pacific problems (SSSPP) could be set up in March 1986 because the Council for the South Pacific had been established a few weeks before the change of the majority in the National Assembly.[38] Prime Minister Chirac and Secretary of State for South Pacific Problems Gaston Flosse expected that the latter could hold the secretariat of the council, which had been created by Mr. Mitterrand. Flosse would have favored the continuity of the council if he could have been his own master, with Regis Debray (the original secretary of the Council for the South Pacific, who kept this position throughout the cohabitation period) having no decision-making power.[39] Nothing of the kind happened. The SSSPP was hampered both by the place of the post in the government and by other circumstances.

The SSSPP was under the formal authority of the minister for overseas departments and territories. Even before his official designation, the members of Gaston Flosses staff perceived the limits of such a situation. They made the prime minister sign a statement of mission ***(lettre de mission).*** This statement's intentions were broader than the nomination decree. It clarified Flosses mission within the government and stated that he "should be closely associated with France's policy toward the island and coastal states of the region. This association could mean participating in negotiations related to fisheries, air traffic, or broadcasting rights in the South Pacific."[40]

The statement of mission also authorized the SSSPP to establish any relations he thought necessary to fulfill his task with the states of the region. He could also mobilize all the French forces in favor of the development of the territories and cooperation with the neighboring states. Flosse thus became a kind of junior foreign secretary for South Pacific affairs, with an extraordi-

nary liberty of movement. The discrepancy between the original idea of the SSSPP as an assistant to Mr. Pons and the understanding of his mission as interpreted by Flosse himself was thus obvious from the first weeks of the government. In addition, the shifting balance of power between the president and the prime minister reinforced the ambiguity of the SSSPP

The government's policy in New Caledonia was to stress French sover, eignty in the territory. Neither the president nor the SSSPP approved this policy. But the deterioration of relations between François Mitterrand and Jacques Chirac did not help to bring the president and the SSSPP closer. Mitterrand considered Flosse as part of Jacques Chirac's government and not as an independent minister. The twofold split between Flosse and Pons, between Mitterrrand and Chirac, each being opposed on New Caledonian affairs, led to a slumbering of the Council for the South Pacific, which had been created by the preceding socialist government in order to bring conciliation between the different French political entities acting in the South Pacific. This council remained inactive but was never dissolved. It met for only the second time in May 1990.

The SSSPP was based in both Paris and Papeete (Tahiti). The logistics were particularly difficult to manage, as were relations with other ministries. The fact that the SSSPP was dependent on the Ministry for Overseas Departments and Territories was fatal. The SSSPP budget was included in the ministry's, although in practice it was to act outside the ministry's area of competence. This was difficult to accept for civil servants used to the rigidity of public finance accountability. The Quai d'Orsay (the French Foreign Affairs Ministry) considered the SSSPP a rival ministry but this did not have any consequences in fact.

Relations between the minister of defense in Paris and Tahiti-based Admiral Thireault were far from cloudless. Admiral Thireault was commander-in-chief of all French forces in the Pacific (known as ALPACI). He was also COMSUP/Polynésie, that is, responsible for the forces based in Polynesia. He was also COMCEP and as such at the head of the nuclear test program in Mururoa.[41] This laid huge responsibilities on his shoulders. Admiral Thireault fully supported Gaston Flosse when his minister, André Giraud, was rather reluctant to assist the secretary of state and could not understand Admiral Thireault's support.

Moreover, the ALPACI's role was not assessed in the same way in Paris and in Papeete. Admiral Thireault thought it part of his role to accompany Flosse in his visits to South Pacific and Pacific Rim countries and to provide him with the support of the French military forces. He thought that if he made himself more conspicuous in the region, he would dissolve the mystery surrounding the nuclear test program and would become more familiar

to the officials and leaders of the regional states. This approach was not shared at all by the minister of defense, who wanted to maintain a secretiveness about the French defense system in the region.[42]

The difficulty for the secretary of state for South Pacific problems to find a place in the French administrative architecture was not eased by Flosse's complex personality. A "demi," that is, half-Polynesian, half-European, he was fifty-five when appointed. He had been taking part in the politics of Polynesia for almost thirty years. He had been elected mayor of Pirae (a town in the suburbs of Papeete) since 1965. He had also been chairman of the Territorial Assembly from 1973 until 1984. He then became president of the territorial government. He was elected representative for French Polynesia at the National Assembly in 1978 and 1981 as a member of his own Polynesian party, the Tahoeraa Huiraatira (People's Meeting), which was associated with the RPR. Furthermore, he was elected in 1984 as a French deputy to the European Parliament. In the 1980s he tried to promote a peaceful settlement of the New Caledonia conflict. He "seized any opportunity to convince his interlocutors of the efficiency of the government's policy in New Caledonia."[43] This effort immediately set him at odds with his minister.

Flosse was rarely present in Paris. He was trying to juggle the responsibilities of two important positions: secretary of state and president of the territorial government. He dropped the presidency of the French Polynesian government only in February 1987. He also traveled extensively in the South Pacific. His team of collaborators was based in Papeete. This explains why several issues, particularly matters at the border of foreign affairs and national defense, were dealt with in Paris without his opinion being asked. His being left out of decisions reveals that the coordination of French policy in the South Pacific was not yet considered a necessity.

The settlement of the ***Rainbow Warrior*** affair was dealt with between Paris and Wellington, with no involvement of the SSSPP. The reorganization of the military command in the South Pacific was also managed exclusively by the Ministry of Defense. This is not surprising when one understands the administration of a large country, but it shows the limits of Flosse's importance in the French government.

The reorganization originated in a decision taken by Andre Giraud in April 1986. He wanted to dissociate as much as possible the functioning of the nuclear testing program from the stationing of French military forces in Polynesia and the South Pacific. This reorganization was organized step by step and was completed in July 1988. It resulted in a reduction of 750 military men between 1986 and 1989. In August 1987 the territorial government and the French state signed a toll convention that was to take effect in July

1989. The Ministry of Defense would pay a yearly sum of CFPF 100 million (French Pacific francs) for the imports of the nuclear center instead of paying toll rights varying with the actual imports.

Flosse "caused strong irritation in the Foreign Office in Paris insofar as he encroached on their 'reserved area.' "[44] The jealousy of the Quai d'Orsay with regard to its diplomatic prerogatives is well known. This observation was reinforced during these years of strained relations with the South Pacific states.

Flosse's position in the government was also hampered by his difficulties in managing Polynesia. In October 1986 two Polynesians, Emile Vernaudon (mayor of Mahina) and Quito Braun-Ortega, both leaders of the Amuitahiraa Mo Porinesia (Party for the Union of French Polynesia, the principal opponent to the local government led by Flosse), came to Paris. They met with Bernard Pons, Jacques Focart, the prime minister's special adviser for African and overseas affairs, and André Giraud. They wanted to lodge an official charge against Flosse. They stressed "his grip on Polynesia, his affairism, interference, and corruption, and his misuse of his powers."[45] The changes were not entirely new to the two ministers and Mr. Focart. But they could do nothing since no judiciary inquiry had been launched. They were also bound by the prime minister's full support for Flosse. A few months earlier, during a stopover in Papeete, the prime minister had declared: "Gaston Flosse is more than a minister, more than a government's president. He is a brother."[46] It was obvious that Flosse had been given a free hand in the handling of local affairs.

It required several months of local protest before Flosse resigned from his post of president of the Polynesian territorial government, which he did in February 1987. His successor, Jacques Teuira, was his close collaborator. He too had to resign after violent riots erupted in Papeete in October 1987, which led to an unprecedented devastation of the downtown area. Finally, Alexandre Leontieff, the leader of the defectors from Flosses Tahoeraa Party, was elected president of the government in December, two days after Teuira's resignation.

Despite the hostile environment in the French administration, the secretary of state for South Pacific problems contributed to changing France's image in the South Pacific. Flosse was very active in the diplomatic field. He traveled widely: between Paris and Papeete, in the South Pacific, and in the Pacific Rim countries (the United States, Japan, Singapore). He was a skillful orator, able to speak Tahitian and to address Polynesian audiences without an interpreter.[47] This was a considerable asset in his diplomatic tours in the region. He developed his regional policy along several lines.[48]

The first was to accept dialogue with the South Pacific states, which involved information on the Mururoa tests, cooperation with France's Western partners in the region (the United States, Great Britain, Japan), and a permanent dialogue with the island states that he frequently visited. Then there was the granting of aid to the South Pacific states and territories. He set up an aid fund (familiarly called the Flosse Fund), which amounted to several million French francs in 1986, and 59 million francs in 1987. The SSSPP could also give some US$10 million as aid money from the Ministry of Finance. Flosse increased France's contribution to the South Pacific Commission and made France a member of the Pacific Islands Development Program. The third policy line was to emphasize the French presence in the South Pacific in developing two arguments: that the French territories contributed to the development of the region and that the French presence contributed to regional stability.

Gaston Flosse particularly succceeded with respect to Fiji. Fiji was isolated in the Pacific area at large after Colonel Rabuka's coups d'état in May and September 1987. The purpose of these coups was to restore to the Melanesians political power that they allegedly lost after the April general elections gave a legislative majority to a coalition of two Indian-dominated parties. The South Pacific Forum and Commonwealth countries were critical that this was undemocratic and contrary to the Pacific way of living and of resolving conflicts in a consensual way. Australia and New Zealand cut several aid programs to Fiji; they were later greatly irritated to see themselves supplanted by France.

Flosse visited Fiji in August 1987. He was accompanied by Admiral Thireault. He met Colonel Rabuka, President Sir Peter Ganilau, and Prime Minister Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara. He decorated a Fijian soldier from the FINUL (International United Nations Force in Lebanon) with the Legion of Honor and visited the University of the South Pacific and the CCOP/SOPAC (coordinating committee for mineral prospecting in coastal areas of the South Pacific). The least one can say is that his visit did not go unnoticed. Flosse convinced the French prime minister to define a new policy toward Fiji. An interministerial council was devoted to this issue on 22 October 1987. The sum of F 80 million was allocated to Fiji, and SSSPP experts were sent to decide how they would be used.

The Chirac government gave new impetus to the idea of a yearly coordinating meeting of the high military and civil servants acting in the South Pacific. The idea was first voiced by the president in September 1985. The SSSPP organized three meetings, in 1986, 1987, and 1988. These meetings were routine, and nothing came out of them, except the habit of meeting.

This was important, though, for the framework was ready for Mr. Rocard, Chirac's successor, when he decided in 1988-1989 to increase the coordination of French politics in the region.

The SSSPP also oversaw the project of a French University of the South Pacific, created by a decree in May 1987. But its implementation was not easy, as two concepts were opposed: the SSSPP and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs favored a university opened toward the region, whereas the Ministry of Research and Technology and the three territories wanted a more typically French university.[49] This difference lay in the definition of the syllabuses, in the choice of the professors, and in the academic links with other universities. The scientific council of the university could not meet before the 1988 presidential elections, and it was up to Rocard's government to organize its implementation.

Flosse and his team had a clear conception of what French policy in the South Pacific could be. They were the first to try to implement a regional strategy in the Pacific as a whole to make of France a true regional power, accepted as such by its regional partners. This was too ambitious a policy, raising only fears and defiance in Paris because it implied too many changes from the habit of ignorance toward South Pacific affairs.

Few comments are available on Mitterrand's attitude to Flosse. The president never spoke about the SSSPP in public. According to a senior Elysée official, the president kept as low a profile on South Pacific affairs as possible in order not to be considered as condoning the policy in New Caledonia. The president was much more preoccupied with New Caledonia than with Flosse's policy toward the island countries.

Was Flosse a puppet minister? His scope of action was limited in his apparent area of competence because of the involvement of the prime minister and the minister for overseas departments and territories in New Caledonia. He enjoyed, however, much greater freedom of action everywhere else in the South Pacific. He was like a proconsul of the nineteenth century, at which time whole areas of the policy in the South Seas were outside the close control of the government in Paris. He innovated greatly, attracted much criticism, and made some errors (for example, in allowing corruption to develop on a new scale in Tahiti during his term of office).[50] He nonetheless broke the shackles in which French policy in the South Pacific had been confined since the creation of the Mururoa nuclear testing center.

Cohabitation, 1993 Version

The second cohabitation period, which lasted from March 1993 until May 1995, under the Balladur government, has not yet led to the same errors and

passionate debates about the policies and activities of France in the South Pacific. It was unlikely that it will, for both international and national reasons.

The global context has changed greatly since 1986-1988. In particular, East-west relations are fundamentally different. The cold war is over and, with it, the global competition between the two superpowers to gain allies in any part of the world. The emergence of several new independent countries in what was formerly the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe has increased the demand for development aid. The small South Pacific island countries have lost much of their strategic value. Former modest interest in them by the great powers has been replaced by general indifference as many countries are requesting the Western countries' attention and diplomatic skill. The Bosnian crisis arose and worsened during 1992. It has been on the top of Western, and especially European, leaders' priorities for more than a year now. What weight do small and remote islands carry against the possibility of a general war in Europe?

The French national context was also very different in 1993-1995 from that in the late 1980s. The politicians were not the same, nor were their main preoccupations. The nuclear test issue has also taken a new turn in the last two years with the moratorium on nuclear tests agreed on in 1992 by the United States, France, and Russia.

The best one can say of the relations between Mitterrand and Chirac is that they were not excellent. Chirac accepted the prime ministership in 1986 without renouncing his presidential ambitions for 1988. He was thus more a rival for Mitterrand than an ally and a supporter as prime ministers are supposed to be. In contrast, the relations between Mitterrand and Balladur are quite serene. Balladur, who was minister for the economy and finance in Chirac's government, had been unofficially considered the next prime minister for many weeks before the general elections in March 1993. Of a temperate character, he was not deemed to pretend to the presidential mandate in 1995, although some of his ministers have advocated his candidacy. He is bent on conciliation and dialogue, and has shown it in his handling of domestic affairs in his first months in office. He is not in competition with Mitterrand, nor could he be in 1995, since Mitterrand will not be a candidate for the third time because of his age (he will be eighty in 1996). Moreover, Balladur's main concern is to revive economic growth and to prevent unemployment from rising.

There is no secretary of state for the South Pacific in Balladur's government. But the president has made it clear that he will personally see to it that the policy undertaken in 1988 in New Caledonia will continue during the second cohabitation.[51] This policy was initiated by Rocard and his team of close collaborators in their first weeks of office, in May and June 1988. It

is not possible for any government now to ignore what was done in the Rocard era.

Rocard became prime minister in May 1988, in the aftermath of the Ouvea tragedy, and he immediately gave a new impetus to French policy in the South Pacific. The major innovation was to postpone for ten years, until 1998, the ultimate decision concerning the future of New Caledonia. The Matignon Agreements, so-called from the name of the official residence of the prime minister, where they were signed in June 1988, initiated a reconciliation process between the loyalists under Deputy Jacques Lafleur's banner and the independentists, led by Jean-Marie Tjibaou. A referendum is to be organized in 1998 in New Caledonia to decide on whether it stays in the French Republic. The electoral body for the 1998 referendum will be limited to the electors voting in 1988 and their descendants. This framework of action was approved by a nationwide referendum in November 1988.

A flow of investments and experts from the metropole to Nouméa ensued under the Rocard government, and the trend was maintained by his two socialist successors as prime minister, Edith Cresson and Pierre Beregovoy. The objective was to help the Melanesian population share in the modern economy of the territory. A program of training young Melanesians for jobs in the secondary and tertiary sectors (industry and services) was launched in 1988 and 1989. Two succcessive high commissioners were personally involved in the implementation of this program.

Rocard not only maintained the yearly meeting of high-ranking military and civil servants acting in the South Pacific, but also increased its responsibilities in defining the framework of French policy in the region. More people were involved in these meetings, and their participation was aimed at reiterating France's commitment to its regional status. Rocard also set up a Permanent Secretariat for the South Pacific, which supports the Council for the South Pacific and coordinates the government's action in the region.

Balladur has as yet shown little inclination to modify these arrangements. The bodies set up by Rocard provide a convenient framework for the follow-up of the Matignon process. There is no need today to pull apart a whole process that is, if not fully accepted, at least tolerated by all parties. Although much criticized, it has, however, helped to bring peace to the minds of both loyalists and independentists. South Pacific affairs are no longer a priority or a sore point among the government's concerns. In the near future, the main uncertainty with regard to the French presence in the region concerns the nuclear tests.

Nuclear tests were suspended for a year in April 1992. France also agreed then to sign the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty, which it had always refused to do. A year later, the moratorium was prolonged, initially until July

1993 and then indefinitely. In July 1993, the president set up an inquiry commission on the moratorium's impact on the French nuclear weapons program. According to leaks from the report of the commission that was handed to the president on 4 October 1993,[52] supplementary tests may be necessary to modernize several existing weapon systems as well as to validate a surrogate laboratory testing system. France could refrain from testing until at least mid-1995, but would have to resume after that time in order to maintain a viable nuclear deterrent.[53]

A large controversy arose in France following the Chinese nuclear test on 5 October 1993. This explosion interrupted the moratorium observed by the five nuclear powers for a year, even though China's was only a de facto moratorium. Politicians in France were divided on this issue.[54] In general, conservatives supported the resuming of tests, whereas socialists were in favor of the moratorium.[55] The controversy lingers on. On 5 May 1994, the president strongly reaffirmed his commitment to the moratorium, which he considers an important step toward global nuclear disarmament and a major element in the international struggle against nuclear proliferation.[56] The prime minister did not wait long before stating that he did not exclude the possibility of resuming testing.[57]

However, uncertainty about the future of French Polynesia, which is heavily dependent on money spent by the state, remains. French sovereignty in the territory could come under question. The debate will focus on whether it is in France's interests to keep an expensive territorial possession in the region. If the answer is yes, France will be faced with the difficult task of implementing or maintaining development policies it has postponed for thirty years. If the answer is no, it will be equally difficult to achieve a peaceful transition to independence. The debate on France's responsibilities toward the population of the territory may be intense.

Now, at least, it seems that the link between the French presence in French Polynesia and in New Caledonia is no firmer than before. The main argument waged by opponents to the granting of independence to New Caledonia has long been the fear of the chain independences it might trigger among French TOMs. New Caledonia's future is likely to be decided through the Matignon Accord process. There is a widely shared silence on this issue among French officials, except for the minister for overseas departments and territories.

Conclusion

The cohabitation years of 1986-1988 reveal clearly that the French government is by no means a monolithic actor in the South Pacific. This finding is

not unique to the South Pacific, but it has not previously been appreciated with relation to that region. During the period in question, tensions were inevitable between the different actors in the making of French policy in the region. They were due to overlapping responsibilities as well as to the actors' own somewhat diverging political aims, both at a national level and in their dealings with New Caledonia.

These years are also a benchmark in the history of French presence in the South Pacific. From 1988 onward, French policy has been strongly dependent on individual involvement at the highest level of state responsibility.[58] The Rocard era is clear evidence of this policy The prime minister's strong commitment to reestablish law and order in New Caledonia and the personal dedication of the two high commissioners he designated for the territory made it possible to create a climate of confidence beween the Paris government and politicians in Nouméa.

French Polynesia became a somewhat less thorny issue, until the moratorium on nuclear tests brought it back to the fore. The minister for overseas departments and territories had thus to step in and initiate a long-term policy for the territory.

On a more general level, the second cohabitation indicates that cohabitation is not necessarily a recipe for conflict between a prime minister and a president, not even in the South Pacific. It depends on the personalities involved and their ambitions as well as on the global context. Cohabitation was a recipe for conflict in 1986-1988 with respect to the South Pacific because of rival personalities in the two posts and because of a fundamental conflict in the approach of the two main parties to the New Caledonian issue. The 1993 cohabitation is quite different in this respect: the conflict on South Pacific issues has abated, and the Matignon Accord process has the broad endorsement of both major parties. There has been no open conflict between the president and the prime minister. On the contrary, Balladur has benefited from the lessons of the first cohabitation and is not at all keen on repeating the major error of that time, that is, to be in permanent and open conflict with the president. The global context has changed too: the major preoccupation is no more a potential destabilization by the Soviet Union but world economic depression.

NOTES

The author wishes to thank S. Henningham for his invaluable help in rendering this article according to American standards of publication.

1. The constitution of the Fifth Republic provides that the president is the guarantor of national independence, territorial integrity, and the application of Community agree-

ments and treaties (art. 5); the prime minister leads the action of the government, is responsible for national defense, and is in charge of the administration of the law (art. 21). The government determines and applies the policy of the nation (art. 20).

2. Samy Cohen, "La politique étrangère entre l'Elysée et Matignon," *Politique Étrangère* 3 (1989): 489.

3. Ibid.

4. Jean-Bernard Raimond, *Le Quai d'Orsay à l'épreuve de la cohabitation* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989), 25.

5. This is why the author does not refer much to existing writings by S. Henningham, S. Bates, R. Aldrich, J. Connell, or J. Chesneaux, which are well known and easily available to anyone interested in the wider topic of French presence in the South Pacific.

6. *Journal officiel, Débats à l'Assemblée nationale,* 3d séance, 14 Jan. 1982, 129. This was the first debate at the National Assembly on New Caledonian affairs and provided socialists and conservatives the opportunity to air their respective positions.

7. Law 86-844, 17 July 1986.

8. Curiously enough, this restriction was already present in the Fabius Statute and had at the time raised the anger of the conservative opposition. We should note that the French Constitution stresses the unity of the French electorate and makes it difficult to restrict it. The preamble of the constitution of the Fifth Republic reads as follows: "The national sovereignty belongs to the people, which exercises it through its representatives or by means of a referendum. No section of the people nor any individual can boast of its exercise."

9. J. Lafleur is the leader of the conservative RPCR (Rally for Caledonia in the Republic) and is a staunch advocate of maintaining French rule over New Caledonia.

10. In A. Rollat, *Tjibaou le Kanak* (Lyon: La Manufacture, 1990), 206

11. Source: Ministry of Defense.

12. A. Raluy, *La Nouvelle-Calédonie* (Paris: Karthala, 1990), 204-205.

13. Ibid.

14. Law 83-82, 22 Jan. 1988.

15. *Le Monde,* 19 Feb. 1987.

16. This was a setback for French diplomacy, since France has always objected to the interference of the United Nations in its policy toward its colonies and overseas *territories* (as some colonies were renamed after they received a new legal status in 1958 with the advent of the Fifth Republic).

17. Document UNO A 41/PV 92 (2 Dec. 1986), 21.

18. Ibid., 30.

19. Document UNO/l/C.4./42/S.R. 17 (21 Oct. 1987), 1011.

20. See French daily newspapers in May and June, 1988. The results of the military inquiries were never made public.

21. In Rollat, *Tjibaou le Kanak,* 221.

22. *Le Monde,* 22 Apr. 1988.

23. *Le Monde,* 25 Feb. 1988.

24. See P. Legorjus, *La morale et l'action* (Paris: Fixot, 1990), 245. Legorjus was the head of the GIGN (the group in the French gendarmerie specializing in freeing hostages).

25. I. Cordonnier, "La France dans le Pacifique sud, 1962-1988" (Ph.D. diss., Paris, 1991), 199.

26. Interview, *Le Monde,* 23 Apr. 1988.

27. *Le Monde,* 7 Jan. 1987.

28. *International Herald Tribune,* 26 Nov. 1987.

29. *International Herald Tribune,* 6 Apr. 1987.

30. "Tactless Tricolor," *The Economist,* 6 Sept. 1987.

31. *Le Monde,* 5 Mar. 1988.

32. On 10 July 1985, French secret service (DGSE) agents had bombed the Greenpeace flagship in Auckland harbor in order to prevent its imminent departure on a voyage to Mururoa to protest nuclear tests. An unprecedented crisis in French political circles followed the government's initial denial of involvement. It took several months of public and journalistic inquiry before the government acknowledged its responsibility in the bombing. There have been a large number of publications in both French and English on this topic. In particular refer to M. King, *Death of the Rainbow Warrior* (Auckland: Penguin, 1986); R. Shears and I. Gidley, *The Rainbow Warrior Affair* (London: Unwin, 1987); C. Lecomte, *Coulez le Rainbow Warrior* (Paris: Messidor Editions Sociales, 1989).

33. J. Charpentier, *L'Affaire du Rainbow Warrior: Le règlement interétatique* (Paris: Annuaire Français de Droit International, 1986), 873.

34. Decree 85-833, 11 July 1986.

35. The South Pacific states judged that France made out pretty well, essentially by using

its leverage on European Community imports, which were essential to New Zealand. It was also wondered why international terrorists were being released.

36. Raimond, *Le Quai d'Orsay,* 67.

37. *Le Monde,* 11 May 1988.

38. The South Pacific Council was created in December 1985, by a national decree (85-1410, 30 Dec. 1985). The *Rainbow Warrior* affair and the following political crisis led politicians in Paris to realize the danger of the lack of coordination of the French policy in the South Pacific. The South Pacific Council was to be responsible for this coordination.

39. Interview, 20 Nov. 1989.

40. Prime Minister, letter 173/SG, 23 Apr. 1986.

41. ALPACI means *amiral pour le Pacifique* (admiral for the Pacific); COMSUP/Polynésie means *commandant supérieur des forces de Polynésie* (commander-in-chief of the French forces in Polynesia); COMCEP means *commandant du Centre d'expérimentation du pacififique* (commander of the nuclear test center in the Pacific).

42. Private conversations with officers.

43. Answer to a parliamentary question, National Assembly, 15 June 1987.

44. P. De Deckker, "Au sujet de la perception de la France dans le pacifique insulaire: Pour une contribution à l'histoire des temps mal conjugués," *Revue Française d'Histoire de l'Outre Mer,* 76 (284-285): 558.

45. *Le Monde,* 25 Oct. 1986.

46. Ibid.

47. S. Henningham, "France and the South Pacific in the 1980s: An Australian Perspective," *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 92-93:33.

48. *For France, in the Pacific* (SSSPP document, Sept. 1987), 45-58.

49. Private conversations with university scholars.

50. S. Henningham, *France and the South Pacific: A Contemporary History* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992), 153.

51. President Mitterrand, in *Le Monde,* 6 Feb. 1993.

52. *L'Express,* 7 Oct. 1993, 52-53.

53. *Arms Control Today,* Nov. 1993, 20.

54. See French daily newspapers in October 1993.

55. Pierre Lellouche, Jacques Chirac's diplomatic adviser, voiced particularly strong support for the nuclear tests (see *Le Figaro,* 12 and 13 Oct. 1993).

56. *Le Monde,* 7 May 1994.

57. *Le Monde,* 11 May 1994.

58. For the years 1988-1991, see I. Cordonnier, "La France dans le Pacifique sud: Perspectives pour les années 1990," *Politique Étrangère* 3 (1993): 733-746.