

## Unit 23: New Caledonia and the Noumea Agreement of 1998: To Be or not to Be?

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### Facts

Location:	Southwest Pacific; South of Vanuatu.
Capital:	Noumea
Current Population:	227,436 inhabitants (July 2009 estimate)
Main Languages:	French and Kanak (28 Melanesian dialects)



Figure 23.1. Map of New Caledonia

The late 1960s and early 1970s in New Caledonia were characterised by the rise of Kanak nationalism. During this period there was intensive political activity and popular protests. These events shaped the national identity of indigenous tribes of New Caledonians as 'Kanak people'. This chapter examines the role of the Kanak people in the debate on New Caledonia independence.

**After reading this chapter, you will be able to:**

- understand the meaning of Kanak nationalism
- understand the factors that led to the rise of Kanak nationalism
- explain the meaning and implications of the 1988 Matignon Accord
- explain the meaning and implications of the 1998 Noumea Agreement

**How did Kanak nationalism emerge in New Caledonia?**

New Caledonia has been inhabited for 3000 years, and has a number of different ethnic communities. The island was populated by two main waves of migration. The first one brought the Austronesians, the ancestors of the Melanesians and Polynesians. They arrived in 1200 BC, from Southeast Asia via Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. The second wave of migration took place in the thirteenth century, and originated from Polynesian islands such as Wallis, Samoa and Tonga.

English Captain James Cook and his crew were the first Europeans to visit New Caledonia, in 1774. They gave the island its current name. New Caledonia was later visited by whalers, sandalwood traders, merchants and Protestant and Catholic missionaries in the 1840s. On 24 September 1853, New Caledonia became a French colony, when Napoleon III claimed it in order to create a penal colony.

At the end of the nineteenth century, New Caledonia's population further diversified, when Japanese, Indonesians and Vietnamese arrived as contract workers. Later, Polynesians - from Futuna and Tahiti - came to New Caledonia.

In 1967, the 'nickel boom' attracted people from Metropolitan France and French overseas territories such as Martinique, Guadeloupe and Reunion. The nickel boom can also be said to have triggered the first manifestations of Kanak nationalism. 'Kanak' is the name of the native people of New Caledonia. The term is charged with political meaning and cultural identity

**Political activity in the 1960s and 1970s**

From 1969 to 1972, there was a considerable increase in nickel prices in New Caledonia. The Europeans benefited more from the nickel boom than native New Caledonians. This created tensions in the island between these two groups. The intense dissatisfaction of the Melanesians with the colonial Government led to the creation in 1969 of the 'Red Scarves' movement [*les foulard*

rouges]. The Melanesian people called for a land reform to reclaim their lands, taken away for nickel mining by French colonialism.

The nickel boom, and other land seizures meant that Kanak nationalism began to emerge. It led Melanesians to use dramatic demonstrations to draw attention to their dissatisfaction with the economic problems and racist attitudes affecting local communities.

Kanak nationalism was reaffirmed in 1975, when Kanak culture was publicised through the 'Melanesia 2000' festival, organised by Jean-Marie Tjibaou. Tjibaou was a former Catholic priest who, in the 1970s became involved in promoting the idea of independence for the native people of New Caledonia.

In 1977, the congress of the political party *Caledonian Union (UC)* declared itself in favour of independence from France. Those who were against independence joined the *Coalition for New Caledonia Within the French Republic (RPCR)*. The *RPCR* was founded by Jacques Lafleur, a prosperous businessman and French Caledonian deputy. Lafleur was an anti-independence leader.

By 1979, parties in favour of independence had gained a significant voice in the political system of New Caledonia. At that time, the number of people in favour of independence grew considerably. The *UC* party, along with other political parties fighting for independence, represented one third of all voters.

### Questions and Activities

1. What were the two main waves of migration that began to populate New Caledonia?
2. When did New Caledonia become a French colony?
3. From the table above, showing the population distribution in New Caledonia, create a bar graph, showing the numbers of people from different ethnic backgrounds.
4. Paragraph Writing: In 100-200 words, explain how Kanak nationalism emerged in Noumea.

## What happened in New Caledonia during the 1980's?

### 1981-1988: '*Les Evenements*'

New Caledonia's push for independence continued throughout the 1980s, following the election of Francois Mitterrand as the President of France in 1981. One item of his platform was independence for New Caledonia, which offered great support for those minority groups struggling for independence.

A positive development took place in 1983 at a meeting in Nainville-les-Roches (France): when the Kanak people were recognised by the French Government as the island's native inhabitants.

Between 1984 and 1985, political struggles were taken into the streets. This widened the gap between those in favour and those against independence for New Caledonia.

In 1984, the *National Kanak Socialist Liberation Front (FLNKS)* party was created in New Caledonia. It called for an immediate boycott of existing institutions. In tribal areas where Kanaks formed the majority, Kanaks were unfairly banned from participating in the elections.

The elections of 18 November 1984 opened a period of social disorder and violence. The northern and eastern parts of New Caledonia became hot beds of instability. People opposed to independence were attacked and forced out; houses were burnt, and road blocks put up. These incidents became known as '*Les Evenements*' (The Events).

In 1987, a referendum on self-determination took place. Many refused to vote. To the disappointment of those who favoured independence, the result of this referendum was a vote in favour of keeping New Caledonia within the French Republic.

In April and May 1988, a series of violent incidents then took place on Ouvea island. On 22 April, a group of young Kanaks attacked the *gendarmerie* (French national police force), killing four officers and taking twenty-seven hostages into a cave. On 5 May, the French army retaliated, and nineteen Kanak were killed in the attack. However, with the passage of time, the opposing parties forgave

each other. This was symbolised by the exchange of customary gifts on the tenth anniversary of this sad event.

**Questions and Activities:**

5. Create a time-line of the events that took place during the 1960s and 1970s.
6. What were the issues at stake during the above period?
7. What was the '*Red Scarves*' movement?
8. Fill in the blanks:
  - The members of the '*Red Scarves*' movement called for \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - The *UC* party was \_\_\_\_\_ independence, and the *RPCR* was \_\_\_\_\_ independence.
  - In 1983, at a meeting in Nainville-les-Roches (France) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**What is the meaning of the *Matignon Accords* for the people of New Caledonia?**

After four years of violent struggle between 1984 and 1988, , the opposing parties came to understand the need to come to a compromise. On 28 June 1988, negotiations, both in New Caledonia and Paris, led to the signing of the *Matignon Accords*, between the Prime Minister Michel Rocard and New Caledonian Political Leaders. The *Matignon Accords* were designed to promote Kanak political, economic and cultural development. It was decided that after ten years another referendum on self-determination would occur.

**Areas covered by the *Matignon Accords***

*1. Institutional:*

The three provinces (Northern, Southern and Loyalty Islands) were to play a vital role in economic development and act mainly in the areas of health care, housing programs, town planning and building, customary and land rights. Special funding was given to the Northern and Loyalty Islands Provinces, which are less developed and mostly inhabited by Kanaks.

*2. Economic:*

Economic activities are to bring isolated communities into the mainstream of society. These communities are expected to promote agricultural activities, livestock farming, aquaculture and tourism. Young people must be integrated into these activities.

*3. Education and Training:*

Education and training initiatives were planned to ensure success at school, the promotion of work opportunities, and entry into the job market. For example, the *Tjibaou Cultural Center*, opened on 4 May 1998, to develop and promote Kanak culture (see *Fig 23.1*).

*4. Living Conditions:*

In order to improve housing, access to local services and facilities (eg: sanitation, water supply, electrification, telecommunications), health and social welfare were improved. A hospital was built in Poindimie on the East Coast. Free *Medicare* covers some 40,000 beneficiaries

*5. Regional Cooperation:*

Kanaks were also to take part in international conferences in the South Pacific, the *Secretariat for the Pacific Community* (SPC, formerly the *South Pacific Commission*); the *South Pacific Applied Geoscience Commission* (SOPAC); the *South Pacific Regional Environmental Program* (SPREP), and the *Pacific Island Development Program*.

**Questions and Activities:**

9. Link the areas covered by the *Matignon Accords* in the first column with the

corresponding key words in the second column:

(a) Economic activities	(i) International conferences
(b) Institutional issues	(ii) Access to sanitation and water supply
(c) Living Conditions	(iii) Economic development
(d) Education and Training	(iv) Agricultural activities and livestock farming
(e) Regional cooperation	(v) <i>Tjibaou Cultural Centre</i>

### **The *Noumea Agreement* of 1988**

Ten years later, following the terms of the Matignon Accords, the 1998 *Noumea Agreement* was the next step. It was to expand on the negotiations of the *Matignon Accord*. This was an agreement between the *FLNKS* party, *RPCR* party and the French Government to organise the transfer of a part of political powers from France (in Europe) to new Caledonia (in the Pacific), , along with measures to ensure social and economic development.

The *Noumea Agreement* was signed by the French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, on 5 May 1998 in Noumea, the capital of New Caledonia. The 1988 *Noumea Agreement* proposed a 15-20 year period for the transfer of power to take place. This meant a referendum on independence should be held around 2013 or later.

### **Areas covered by the 1988 *Noumea Agreement***

#### *1. Kanak Identity*

- The Kanak identity was recognised and developed in the areas of customary status, land transfer, and language and arts
- A Custom Senate was created
- Custom Lands was extended

#### *2. Institutions*

- New Caledonian citizenship was recognised
- Provincial Assemblies were formed
- The term of office was five years
- Draft laws for the country were submitted to the Customary Senate when they involve Kanak identity issues
- The *communes* (municipal governments) were given broader responsibilities.

#### *3. Devolution of Powers*

Some powers held by the French State were transferred to New Caledonia. Other powers were shared between the State and New Caledonia. 'Reserved powers' (such as, justice, law and order, defence and currency) as well as external affairs remained under the responsibility of the State until the new political organisation was introduced.

#### 4. Economic and Social Development

This concerned training with the objective of preparing Kanaks for responsibilities in all sectors of activity.

- A development plan was drawn up for the Territory's mineral resources.
- Various measures were taken to develop New Caledonia economically.

#### 5. Evolution of New Caledonia's Political Organisation

A new poll will be organised in fifteen to twenty years' time. Through this poll, all New Caledonian people will indicate their choice on independence.

#### Questions and Activities

10. Write a time-line with events that took place in the 1980s and 1990s.
11. Paragraph writing: In 100-200 words, explain the meaning of the *Noumea Agreement*.
12. Link the areas covered by the *Noumean Agreement* in the first column with the corresponding words in the second column:

(a) Institutions	(i) A new poll
(b) Devolution of Powers	(ii) Custom Senate
(c) Kanak Identity	(iii) New political organisation
(d) New Caledonia's political organisation	(iv) Territory's mineral resources
(e) economic and social development	(v) Provincial Assemblies

#### The New Organic Law

On 8 November 1998, the referendum accepting the new Agreement obtained 71 per cent in favour; only 29 per cent voted against.

The *Noumea Agreement* is now the most important document in the history of New Caledonia. The Agreement has 260 articles which set out the principles for all decisions on social, economic, political and cultural matters during a 15-20 year period,

New Caledonia's status within France was also changed – it became a *Pays Outré Mer* (an overseas country)

#### Questions and Activities

13. Read the text below and write a paragraph (100-200 words) on the future

of New Caledonia.

***Preamble of the Noumea Agreement (Extract)***

*Throughout the period of implementation of the new arrangements, New Caledonia will enjoy the support of the State in terms of technical assistance, training and the funding necessary to exercise the transferred powers and for economic and social development. Commitments will be applied to multi-annual programmes. New Caledonia will participate in the capital and operation of the main development institutions in which the State is a partner. At the end of a period of twenty years, the transfer to New Caledonia of the reserved powers, its achievement of full international responsibility status and the conversion of citizenship into nationality, will be voted upon by the people concerned. Their approval would mean full sovereignty for New Caledonia.*