

MODERN IMPERIALISM IN NEW CALEDONIA.

‘FOR US, INDEPENDENCE IS A QUESTION OF DIGNITY AND
DIGNITY IS NON-NEGOTIABLE’

- YEIWÉNÉ YEIWÉNÉ



The process of independence is long. New Caledonia is a unique example of the consequences of modern imperialism and the nature of imperial power. Modern imperialism, characterised by soft power, for the commercial gain of the power. It is different from traditional imperialism as it is not entirely dependent on military oppression (Suerez 2020). Violence of the 1980s accelerated the 'inevitable' journey to independence. Recent referendums show the complexities of independence and issues of modern imperialism.

New Caledonia is a dependent contingency of the French Republic. Colonised by the French in 1853, it shares a similar history to that of other colonised states. Its position and structure today sits in political difference from most other nations. The journey towards independence began in 1998 ("Land And Independence In New Caledonia" 1991). Violent conflicts broke out in the 1980s, killing many Kanak activists and loyalists. This resulted in a 10-year peace program, supported by the French government. This system intended to restructure the administration systems to re-equalise the region (Maclellan 2019). There is a clear social and economic divide between the North, South and Island regions. The division defined by the majority population. The South, the economic capital, is majority European descendants (Maclellan 2019). The North and Island regions are largely Kanak and are economically disadvantaged. The 1998 agreements resulted in around 75% of the budget being redistributed ("New Caledonia Rejects Independence From France For Second Time" 2018). Thus promoting the necessary social infrastructure in areas inhabited by majority Indigenous Kanak people. Indigenous, Kanak, people make up 40% of the New Caledonian population today (Srinivasan 2020). The policy ended in a series of referendums on independence. The intention was to convince New Caledonians of the benefits of French dependency (Srinivasan 2020). New Caledonia's independence process intentionally appears to be sponsored by its colonial oppressor.

The loyalist ideology suggests that New Caledonia cannot develop without France. 'Who could be unaware that only France could support real reforms both by her will and by her means?' (BBC, 2020). This is not shared by Kanak leaders highlighting the polarisation in New Caledonia. Jean-Marie Tijaou led independence movements through the 1980's civil conflicts. He declared that 'Kanak can only count on themselves for decolonisation' (Quoted in Maclellan, 2019). This ideological division highlights the importance of the referendum.

The movement towards independence began with the gradual shift of administration processes. New Caledonia would control all its administration, other than military and national identity (Maclellan 2019). This saw a reduction in the need of French public servants. The first referendum was in 2014, the second in October 2020 and the final expected for 2022 (The Guardian, 2020). The October 2020 vote saw 85% of the country vote on fundamental changes for New Caledonia (The Guardian, 2020; BBC, 2020). It resulted in a slight win for loyalist parties. The no to independence voted 53.3%, to yes's 46.7% which is up from the 2018 vote in which no was 43% (BBC 2020; ABC, 2020). This highlights a greater voter turn out. 2022 will likely see a simple majority, beginning the process of independence.

The era of settler colonialism that dictated the history of New Caledonia has ended. An era of modern imperialism has begun and it shows New Caledonia dependent on France (Sueres 2020). Approximately one-fifth of New Caledonia's GDP is from France's bilateral aid (The Guardian, 2020). The French Republic utilises financial 'soft power' to develop the New Caledonian state. This appears an altruistic act; its an act of saviorism for the benefit of the great global community (Sueres 2020). It is clear that development aids global stability. This presumes that western-style government systems are a sign of development. This global homogeneity perpetuates imperialist ideas. Critics of this form of aid note that it is often given under manipulative presumptions (Sueres 2020). An assumption that the recipient will develop to mimic the donor. It assumes that Kanak should adhere to French norms. France's use of economic aid discourages New Caledonian innovation. It promotes economic dependency; propping itself on the finances of France. A popular New Caledonian song declares "Who's the one to pay? The French government pays!" New Caledonia is in a position where it is unlikely to develop whilst under the paternal care of France.

Emmanuel Macron said in response to the referendum that he sees a 'sign of confidence in the Republic' (BBC, 2020) in the result. Humbled by the increase in those supporting independence, he notes that if voters support independence, France will support (Guardian, 2020; BBC, 2020). New Caledonia is a unique example of the use of soft power to promote modern imperialism.



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