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New Caledonia: Pragmatism 3, Nationalism 0

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With the sole exception of the 50 people on Pitcairn Island, the United Kingdom (once known as the British Empire) liquidated its holdings in the Pacific Ocean long ago. France, by contrast, has a half million citizens in the Pacific (and another two million living in other bits of its former empire on islands in all the world's major oceans).

This gives rise to much performative outrage in post-colonial countries that need grievances to bring pressure on the world's richest countries. That's only fair: the post-colonial countries are mostly poor, whereas the old imperial powers are very rich but not very generous. The ex-colonies need leverage, and colonial guilt is a good lever.

For this tactic to work well, however, the people in these remaining European overseas possessions should be groaning under foreign repression and fiercely demanding their independence. The problem is that most of them are pragmatists who are quite happy to remain colonies if the money is good.

The latest example is New Caledonia, a Belgium-sized island in the South Pacific about 1,500 km northwest of the top end of New Zealand. The population was mostly ?Kanak' (native-born Melanesians) until around 50 years ago, when various mining enterprises caused a surge in immigration from other Pacific islands and even from France.

This is a potential grievance well worth exploiting. As a result of that immigration, the Kanak share of the population has dropped to just over one-third of the total (112,000 of the island's 300,000 people).

No doubt many Kanaks want independence ? especially young, rural Kanaks who see it as a possible source of protected jobs for these true sons of the soil. However, the other, now more numerous ethnicities will oppose it for the same reason. Independence would effectively make them second-class citizens.

Do not despair. Justice will be done. Under the 1998 Nouméa Accord, France agreed to hold three referendums on independence, and to restrict the vote only to those who were already resident (still a Kanak majority at that time).

Why three referendums? Because it was already obvious that a lot of the Kanaks (call them pragmatists, if you like) didn't want independence. So to get the pro-independence Kanaks to buy into the process, they were given three chances to persuade the rest to vote yes. Win a majority in just one of those referendums, and New Caledonia becomes independent.

In the first referendum, in 2018, with all the Kanaks but only long-established residents of other ethnicities eligible to vote, 56 per cent of the voters supported remaining part of France.

In the second referendum in 2020, with the same electorate (all the Kanaks but only about half of the total adult population), that dropped to 53 per cent in favour of staying French.

And the pro-independence party boycotted the third referendum, in 2021, ostensibly because Covid made voting difficult but really because their own soundings revealed that they would lose again. Better to walk out and keep the issue alive than to lose a third consecutive vote even though the dice are loaded in favour of the pro-independence faction.

France now regards the independence issue as closed, and last northern spring the French National Assembly moved to restore the vote to most of the people who had been excluded from the referendums. All those who have been in New Caledonia for at least ten years (i.e. 2014) will be able vote in future elections.

So what was the pro-independence Kanak faction to do? Launch a national liberation war, obviously, or at least a plausible facsimile

thereof.

Last May Kanak militants put up roadblocks and made sweeping demands for independence with none of that voting nonsense. Nine people were killed, a state of emergency was declared, French President Emmanuel Macron paid an emergency visit ? and nothing much happened.

It's over, really, for the same reason that other French possessions around the world ? French Polynesia in the South Pacific, Mayotte and Réunion in the Indian Ocean, Martinique and Guadeloupe in the Caribbean, and French Guiana in South America ? all choose to remain French. The bribe for doing so is irresistible.

If you live in an overseas department of France, then you get a good, free education and a French level of public and social services. Per capita income in New Caledonia is ten times that in other nearby island nations like Fiji, Vanuatu, Samoa, and the Solomon Islands.

It's the same in the Caribbean, where the French islands have three times the per capita GDP of nearby ex-British islands that chose independence. Likewise in the Indian Ocean, where French Réunion has twice the per capita GDP of nearby ex-British Mauritius, and in French Guiana, which has the highest per capita GDP in South America.

Call it bribery if you like, but the more polite word is pragmatism. And if you don't have to live with the choice, don't criticize those who do.