

FRENCH-AUSTRALIAN RELATIONS IN THE PACIFIC DURING BILL HAYDEN'S TERM AS MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS, 1983-1988¹

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Introduction

When Bill Hayden, Minister for Foreign Affairs from March 1983 to August 1988 and subsequently Governor-General of Australia, was asked why in his 610-page autobiography he had glossed over French-Australian relations,² his answer was that the various facets of Australia's interaction with the French during his term (nuclear testing in the Pacific, the "Rainbow Warrior" incident, decolonization of New Caledonia, etc.) were passing problems that paled into insignificance compared with the core issues in Australia's foreign policy such as the American alliance, the relationship with Indonesia and general nuclear policy:

[Nuclear testing in the Pacific] was a problem that came and went, [...] as far as I was concerned. And although [...] it got a lot of attention I didn't really think it was as big as the Department tended to think it was, and the media would of course respond to anything with bite in it. [...] Unfortunately in politics having devils about is very handy [and] the French nuclear testing was tailor-made for the Left. So they demonized the French [...] At the same time, to be quite frank, we had far bigger issues on our plate, with pressures from the Left in those areas, and our relationship with France, nuclear ships, general nuclear policy, our position internationally, strategic arrangements.³

The present study aims to describe the development of French-Australian relations in the Pacific during Bill Hayden's term as Head of Australian diplomacy, with special emphasis on the reasons why the Australian Labor Government persisted with its protests against French nuclear testing when the Minister himself was satisfied that it "wasn't a serious environmental problem at all".⁴ The paper is based on Bill Hayden's recollections of his dealings with French officials in Paris, Noumea and Canberra and his retrospective appraisal of the policies of the government to which he belonged. The information and insights gained from the interview he generously

granted me in 2002 have been verified against and complemented by a reading of the *Australian Foreign Affairs Records (AFAR)* for the period under scrutiny and the valuable unclassified and declassified material released by the Australian Foreign Affairs and Trade Department for the purpose of this project.⁵

Background

Throughout the nineteenth century non-indigenous Australians were apprehensive about all forms of foreign (i.e. non-British) presence in the South Pacific. They viewed American, German, Japanese and Russian incursions into this “British lake” with nervousness, but it was French settlement in Tahiti, New Caledonia and the New Hebrides that alarmed them most.⁶

French–Australian relations took a new turn in the early twentieth century, at the time of the *Entente Cordiale* (1904), after France had stopped sending convicts to New Caledonia (1896) and when the New Hebrides became a French–British Condominium (1906). There were no longer any serious grounds for dissension—on the contrary. During the First World War Australian and French soldiers fought side by side, and if in the Second World War the collaboration of the Vichy *régime* with Nazi Germany left a bitter aftertaste, in the Pacific the Free French Movement worked in close cooperation with the Australian Government. For most of the first two-thirds of the twentieth century the French presence in the Pacific went unchallenged. Commercial contact between the two countries had been substantial for over a hundred years (since the 1860s), the balance being very much in Australia’s favour. This was to be reversed in the last decades of the twentieth century, with a substantial decline in the export of primary produce from Australia to France and a spectacular increase in French investments in Australia.

This status quo of friendly relations was upset by the establishment in 1962 of the “Centre d’expérimentation du Pacifique” (CEP) in French Polynesia, designed to prepare and supervise nuclear tests in the region when the French were forced to withdraw from the Sahara. The first of many such tests took place in 1966, so that the last third of the century came to be dominated by serious tensions between Australia and France. After six decades of harmonious relations, the most vocal sections of Australian public opinion promptly rediscovered the historical antecedents of its anti-French sentiment, however irrelevant to contemporary multicultural Australia this

may have been. Agincourt and Waterloo were evoked... Even the brotherhood of the Diggers and the *Poilus* in World War One was turned against the French.⁷

Apart from the nuclear tests, there were two further grounds for dispute between Australia and France during the last three or four decades of the twentieth century, namely France's agricultural policies,⁸ and the question of New Caledonia and decolonization.

Australia's hostility towards French nuclear testing in the Pacific reached its first climax⁹ between 1973 and 1975, a period partly coinciding with the two short but nation-defining terms of the Whitlam Government in Canberra, when Lionel Murphy, Whitlam's Attorney-General, successfully took the French Government to The Hague International Court. Coincidence or consequence, France gave up atmospheric testing shortly afterwards. The Fraser Government, elected at the end of 1975, maintained Australia's opposition to nuclear tests in the Pacific even after these had gone underground.

When in May 1981 François Mitterrand won the presidential election, the Fraser Government expressed the hope that France might phase out the nuclear testing programme altogether. There was a very brief suspension of activities, but then France resumed testing and by the end of 1981 seven more underground explosions had taken place at Moruroa Atoll.

There were also expectations that the new French Government would grant independence to the French territories in the Pacific:

[...] Mr Anthony, who was Deputy Prime Minister, said with apparent approval that he expected independence within the coming ten years. In the same year [1981], Mr Street, who was then Minister for Foreign Affairs, went much further in answer to a question in the House of Representatives. He said that he hoped for movement on the part of the new French Government towards what we all regard as a desirable objective, that is, independence for the French Territories in the Pacific.¹⁰

Although Tony Street found his French counterpart, Claude Cheysón, "a most able, reasonable and pleasant colleague",¹¹ there was no substantive change in the relationship between the two countries during his term as Minister for Foreign Affairs. Tony Street saw Australian opposition to nuclear testing in the Pacific as a "genuine bi-partisan policy",¹² but the tests and the government-to-government protests had become so much part

of everyday life that they no longer made the headlines. The Fraser Government supported the general principle of Nuclear Non-Proliferation, but as far as its application to the Asia-Pacific region was concerned, it expressed strong reservations insofar as "proposals for a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Pacific would have implications for ANZUS, by inhibiting the operations of the U.S. Navy in the South Pacific, thus affecting the capacity of the United States to fulfil obligations under that treaty".¹³

On this same question the Labor opposition was deeply divided, and, when it came to power in March 1983, reconciling its commitment to ANZUS with the anti-nuclear pressures from the Left was one of the most daunting challenges facing Prime Minister Bob Hawke and his new government.

Looking at the whole period of French nuclear testing in the Pacific, and more specifically at the 1980s, it is interesting to observe that the French and Australian governments of both persuasions (Left and Right) were anxious to preserve the effectiveness of their bilateral relations in commercial, cultural, scientific and technical matters. Their cooperation in these fields, and sometimes even in sensitive political areas, was not affected by their public disagreements on topics of more obvious interest to the media and general populace. In January 1981 the two governments signed the Australia-France Nuclear Transfers Agreement, which was designed to incorporate Canberra's 1977 nuclear safeguards policy,¹⁴ whilst a year later, in January 1982, France and Australia signed an agreement on maritime boundaries in the South West Pacific and the Southern Ocean.¹⁵ Throughout the period of Bill Hayden's term in Foreign Affairs the Department's briefing notes, memoranda and minutes show its commitment to the preservation of normal bilateral relations with the Quai d'Orsay on matters which were of mediocre or no interest to the public (e.g. the implementation of the cultural agreement between the two countries) so that at times the impartial observer gains the impression that French-Australian exchanges were played out at two separate levels, in two contrasting moods—one, maximizing polemics in a populist vein for the consumption of the media, and the other, between professional administrators and career diplomats, virtually ignoring public disputes.¹⁶

The continuity of Australian diplomatic representation in France was to be provided by Peter Curtis's appointment in 1982 by the Fraser Government as Australian Ambassador in Paris. Curtis, a senior career diplomat, spent an unusually long period in this posting (from mid-1982 to mid-1987). For the first four years of Bill Hayden's five-year term as Minister for

Foreign Affairs Peter Curtis was his Ambassador in Paris, and he proved to be a most effective representative for Australia's interests. His rational, dispassionate analyses were very much appreciated by French officials during a singularly difficult and sensitive period in French-Australian relations.¹⁷

Bill Hayden and the French Socialist Government: the first 19 months (March 1983 to December 1984)

From March 1983 Australia's foreign policy was to reflect the dynamics of the inner tensions in the Labor Party and beyond. The Hawke-Hayden tandem, anxious to preserve ANZUS and the American alliance, had to manage pressures from the Left, the Greens and, more generally, the anti-nuclear lobby. In contrast to Hawke, Hayden was by no means an unconditional supporter of the American alliance, nor was he Eurocentric. He adopted a generally positive but nonetheless critical attitude towards the US and was sensitive to the complexities of the Asia-Pacific region. Despite and beyond some differences, Hawke and Hayden succeeded in adopting a consistent position in foreign policy and pursued their common goals with determination and persistence. Subsequent changes to this policy were tactical rather than strategic, and were motivated by fluctuations in party factional pressures rather than new directions.

The first 19 months (March 1983 to December 1984) were a period of comparatively harmonious relations between the Australian and French governments. Probably the main reason for the moderation on both sides was the excellent personal rapport between Bill Hayden and Claude Cheysson (already warmly appreciated by Hayden's predecessor, Tony Street, as we have seen). Of all the French officials (including Mitterrand, Chirac, and Claude Cheysson and his successors Roland Dumas and Jean-Bernard Raimond), Cheysson was by far his favourite:

He was marvellous, he really was good. He went out of his way to come here a couple of times. And if you don't mind the French style, to be spoken to imperially, with gestures, he was very good. And he did want to get on an even keel, he did realize that things [had] unnecessarily gone off-course. I think he had a fair bit to do with Australians over the years, at the Socialist Internationale or some sort of [body] like that.¹⁸

The contrast with most of his other compatriots was striking. Cheysson believed in dialogue and knew how to listen, a quality clearly lacking in President Mitterrand, in Bill Hayden's experience:

I met him once personally. And it was quite extraordinary. I couldn't work out who was a greater [...] bore, him or Mme Thatcher. I met her once and she spoke to me as [if] I was a hall full of people, with no right of questions. Mitterrand was exactly the same except that he [was] doing it in French, and had a splendid, I think probably brilliant interpreter, his English was just flawless and accentless. [Mitterrand] was quite imperious like a Roman emperor, the way he said things. And if he said this and this and this, and this is what would happen. And of course political life is not like that and I said again "what about...?", and he turned around as if I had not spoken, and gave me a full blast, and not unpleasant, but I was a lesser mortal, I suspect, a foreign Foreign Minister.

For the first three years after coming to power (March 1983 to March 1986) the Hawke Labor Government was dealing with Socialist governments in France. At the beginning of this period Bill Hayden was confident that the ideological bond between them would facilitate a smooth working relationship. This illusion did not last long:

The French were intensely nationally French and there were some of us who thought that the international brotherhood might get some sort of response and sentiment. I think Cheysson had that very genuinely, but first came France, that's understandable. But I remember the Ambassador, [Jean-Bernard Mérimée], who was a very nice man and his wife was a New Zealander, and he got on well out here, but I had to say to him one day something about we belong to the [...] Socialist Internationale, we should try to invoke that sense of international brotherhood, and he went "ha! ha! ha!", as if it was hilarious.¹⁹

After the comparative reserve of Tony Street, Bill Hayden's style gave an impression of feverish activity during the opening months of his term. Between March and December 1983 he met three times with Claude Cheysson who, incidentally, was the very first Head of French diplomacy to visit Australia—and not just once but twice.

In June 1983 President Mitterrand sent his personal envoy, Régis Debray, to Canberra, to explain France's position on nuclear tests in the region and to invite a delegation of Australian, New Zealand and other Pacific experts to visit Moruroa.²⁰ The Australian Government accepted Debray's invitation and the team of experts inspected the Moruroa facilities in October and November 1983, although the report of the delegation (which included two respected Australian scientists) was not published until July 1984.²¹ The experts concluded that whilst "radiation doses [...] are lower than world average levels and do not lead to any expectation that radiation-induced diseases would be detectable" and there was "no geological evidence of short-term leakage to date", it was nonetheless true that "leakage could occur from the detonation chambers in a time period of 500 to 1000 years".²²

Whilst these conclusions allowed the French to claim victory, the reservations it contained, especially on the possible long-term effects of testing, were sufficient for the Australian Government to reassert its opposition to the tests. Personally Bill Hayden no longer believed that they posed a serious threat to Australia, but he had no choice but to yield to internal pressures from the Left and to the media and public opinion.

You have to seem to be concerned and I was nowhere as much as I sometimes made out. I had to handle things at home. You know, you have got to handle things at home to be able to handle them successfully abroad. [...] The Department used to say to me: "Oh, don't worry about it at home—foreign policy is foreign policy and should be handled overseas." You won't have a [...] foreign policy if you try that. You see I was satisfied from what I had read that the [...] French nuclear testing wasn't a serious environmental problem at all, but, gee, you had to be very careful on that.²³

It would seem that in order to salvage the causes he most passionately believed in (against the views of many in the Party: "I was really out on a limb by myself"²⁴)—such as the export of uranium, developing Australia's nuclear technological know-how and facilitating the free passage of US nuclear ships in the Pacific, including visits to Australian ports—, Hayden had to make tactical concessions on matters which in his opinion mattered little. The reason for making these concessions was that for the first time since the Vietnam War the Left "had a big leadership issue through which it had been able to drag the Australian public along".²⁵ Hayden was made

aware that “those emotional views hostile to uranium and various manifestations of uranium policy were much broader than just the Left”.²⁶

For the same reason the Government was forced to suspend uranium sales to France, a decision very much against Bill Hayden’s wishes: “I was totally opposed to the uranium export prohibition policy”.²⁷ Suspending uranium sales to France and condemning French nuclear testing in the Pacific as a concession to public opinion in order to protect the American alliance was to be a long-term exercise in brinkmanship:

I don’t know whether it was in my mind but I’ve got an awful suspicion that unconsciously at least the thought might have been there that it was easier to handle the French than the Americans [*laughter*] . . . but I was more worried, I was really seriously worried that this whole damn thing could get out of our hands as it did in New Zealand. We had to get it controlled. Hawke came around to that view after a while but it took a while to get him there. We had a lot of issues up in the air, you know, keeping them going. It was very tricky and so you can’t just look at the French in the Pacific by itself. There was the East Timor issue and the Left were running hard on that, the Catholic Church was too, as were other groups in the community [. . .]. So, you know, there are a lot of things being pushed and pulled, levers and pulleys and goodness knows what, and the French thing was only one of many and frankly from my point of view it was nowhere near as big as most of the others.²⁸

In other words, French–Australian relations were sacrificed on the altar of the Government’s somewhat selective nuclear policy. No doubt the sacrifice was facilitated by what Bill Hayden later perceived as “a degree of arrogance on the part of the French . . . there was no subtlety when they made statements”,²⁹ but that was not a substantive reason, merely mitigating circumstances.³⁰ Furthermore, the Minister felt that the Department itself “was very keen we shouldn’t be dumped on by the French—for some reason there is a bit of [. . .] tension or strain there”.³¹

Whilst French nuclear testing in the Pacific provided a continuing if occasionally fluctuating background to French–Australian relations for three decades (from 1966 to 1996), it was no longer the sole or main focus of that relationship. The Kanaks’ push for independence in New Caledonia and the resulting unrest in a territory only two hours’ flying time from the Australian continent became the most burning issue both in France and in

her overseas territories, as well as in her relationship with the Australian government. Australia was legitimately concerned by the risk of a potential destabilization of the region as a consequence of the unrest in Noumea.

Bill Hayden defined the Australian Government's position on New Caledonia on numerous occasions from 1983 onwards. The principles of this position were invariably the same, namely:

- the need to engage in a process of negotiated self-determination that did not *a priori* exclude the option of independence
- the imperative of taking into account not only the legitimate interests of the native Kanak population but also those of the various ethnic components of New Caledonia's multi-racial society
- the importance of preserving in some form the links of the Territory with Metropolitan France
- the overriding requirement that violence be avoided.

The Australian Labor Government followed with sympathy and understanding the French Socialist Governments' initial efforts and successive attempts at finding a negotiated settlement of the New Caledonian problem. As early as May 1983 Bill Hayden expressed his support for Georges Lemoine's initiatives in Noumea,³² and even in 1985, when the relationship between the two countries had deteriorated, he endorsed the two successive Pisani Plans³³ for New Caledonia. During this whole period, even when using increasingly impatient language, Australia played a moderating role in the region, and more particularly at meetings of the South Pacific Forum, using its influence to persuade the Pacific States to give France time to work out a mutually acceptable solution.

In fact, the gradual deterioration of French-Australian relations began in the second half of 1984, and more specifically in November 1984 with the New Caledonian elections (boycotted by the majority of the Kanak population) when Bill Hayden declared that "Australia supports the peaceful political evolution of New Caledonia towards independence" and "calls on all the involved parties to maintain dialogue to ensure that the transition to an independent multi-racial New Caledonia is achieved speedily and peacefully within a shorter time scale than presently envisaged by the French Government".³⁴ No doubt the Australian Foreign Minister recognized that "New Caledonia poses special problems of decolonization because of the special character of its society" and condemned "the use or threat of violence or terrorism from whatever source"; nonetheless his declaration

unambiguously indicated that Australia could not accept the results of the elections insofar as they did not represent "the views of one of the Territory's most significant political groups", the FLNKS.³⁵

Bill Hayden's statement of 27 November 1984 clearly irritated President Mitterrand and incensed the French establishment in Noumea. A few days later, in the first days of December 1984, Claude Cheysson was replaced by Roland Dumas³⁶ as Head of French diplomacy, and the escalation of a war of words between the two countries began in earnest.

Bill Hayden and the French Socialist Government: the 15 months from December 1984 to March 1986

On 16 December 1984, six days after Cheysson's replacement by Roland Dumas, President Mitterrand went on French national television to condemn Australia's treatment of its Aboriginal population. Whilst many Australians might have agreed with some of the substance of President Mitterrand's criticisms, it was unclear how such a statement helped to resolve the crisis in New Caledonia. What it indicated, however, was that the President and his government were under a great deal of domestic pressure and were facing an increasingly hostile public. No doubt the statement was also intended as a ploy to put Australia on the defensive.

Mitterrand's further suggestion that Australia had "designs" on New Caledonia, however absurd it may have appeared to Australians, was widely accepted by substantial sectors of French society. Bill Hayden was surprised that even the leader of the Kanak independentist movement, Jean-Marie Tjibaou, gave it some credence:

I met him at Noumea on one occasion when I went over there. And I said, "The French authorities here and in Paris seem to think that our purpose is to get rid of them so we can bring our influence in [...] You believe that?" He said: "oui".

Because it certainly wasn't, in my view. I did continue to genuinely dislike the idea of colonialism. [...] I had written an article [...] that the French were extraordinarily generous to New Caledonia in their policies. It was costing them more than they were getting out of the place.³⁷

Mitterrand's statement must be read as a concession to public opinion in both Metropolitan France and New Caledonia. Despite substantial differ-

ences, the mechanism is reminiscent of the condemnation of French nuclear testing in the Pacific by the Hawke Government: in both cases the need to conciliate pressure groups at home prevailed over the best interests of diplomacy.

The following year (the year of the "Rainbow Warrior" incident) was going to be the most disastrous for French international relations in the Pacific. As French journalist Roland Paringaux concluded in the influential daily newspaper *Le Monde*, 1985 "did as much for the misfortunes of France in the Antipodes as all of the preceding hundred years".³⁸ Some would claim that the following year, 1986, was equally if not more catastrophic.

On 20 January 1985 President Mitterrand made an unannounced 24-hour visit to New Caledonia in an attempt to placate the French settlers in the Territory and gain their acceptance of the first Pisani Plan for "independence-association".³⁹ The visit concluded with the announcement of the reinforcement of the Noumea naval base, a measure designed to please the local French population as well as the nationalists at home.

Although the Australian Government supported the Pisani Plan, the French resented the apparent subordination of this support to its prior endorsement by the Kanak independentist movement. The Australian support was forthcoming only after Bill Hayden's consultations with Jean-Marie Tjibaou.⁴⁰ Subsequently the French Government was forced to revise or rather water down the plan: the second Pisani Plan, sometimes referred to as the Fabius Plan,⁴¹ was again supported by an admittedly less enthusiastic Australian Government, and the latter continued to use its influence on its Pacific neighbours to delay the reinscription of New Caledonia on the United Nations' list of territories to be decolonized.

In the early hours of 11 July, three days before Bastille Day 1985, French intelligence officers sank the Greenpeace ship "Rainbow Warrior" in Auckland Harbour. The repercussions of this act of State terrorism—the Americans described it as merely sabotage and the *Wall Street Journal* even applauded this operation against a bunch of hippies⁴²—were immense. The event dominated the media and international public opinion. It claimed one life and eventually the career of the French Minister for Defence (Charles Hernu). This lamentable incident—for which France originally denied but subsequently admitted responsibility—was often evoked in the Australian Parliament, especially in the context of claims that the Australian Federal Police had failed to investigate and/or arrest the culprits when they were in Australian waters. The Government itself, however, after a vigorous initial

reaction, chose to adopt a singularly discreet attitude to the whole episode. The reason for its silence was an explicit request by the New Zealand Government that it be allowed to handle the matter on its own, without its neighbours' support or interference.⁴³

At its annual meeting in August 1985 the South Pacific Forum adopted the "South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty" (Treaty of Rarotonga), whose carefully worded provisions allowed American nuclear ships to operate freely in the South Pacific whilst it came down heavily on nuclear testing in French Polynesia. Australia signed the treaty in 1986, the Soviet Union and China in 1987 and 1988 respectively; the United States, Britain and France refused to have anything to do with it.⁴⁴ France eventually signed it twenty years later, in 1997, only after President Chirac had ended the nuclear testing programme in the Pacific.

In the mid-1980s its selective targeting of some nuclear activities but not others was a good example of the brinkmanship practised by the Australian Government. In a recent study of the Rarotonga Treaty a French political scientist was able to say that

France and France alone was targeted by this treaty whose weaknesses are so many and its silences so glaring that in the final analysis it appears that it had nothing anti-nuclear except its name and that it was a masterpiece of anti-French hypocrisy.⁴⁵

A few weeks after the endorsement of the Rarotonga Treaty by the South Pacific Forum, and almost certainly in direct response to it, President Mitterrand visited the region again—the second time in the one year. When on 13 September 1985 he inspected the nuclear facilities in French Polynesia, the trip was interpreted in the South Pacific as deliberate provocation.⁴⁶

Dealing with the Chirac Government: March 1986–May 1988

During Roland Dumas's term as French *Ministre des Relations extérieures*, French–Australian relations had deteriorated considerably, but much worse was to come when the Socialist Government lost power in the March 1986 legislative elections and Jacques Chirac became Prime Minister. The following two years and two months were what the French refer to as a period of "cohabitation", insofar as power was shared—uneasily—between a Conservative Government and a Socialist president.

After the elections, and especially after the statements made in Noumea on 30 April 1986 by the newly appointed Minister for Overseas Departments and Territories, Bernard Pons, it rapidly became obvious that the Chirac Government would ditch the concept of "independence-association" and go back on the concessions made to New Caledonia's indigenous population by its Socialist predecessor.

At the end of a South Pacific tour, which originally was not going to include the region's French territories, Bill Hayden made an unexpected stopover in Noumea to make contact with the representatives of the new administration and open dialogue with them. His discussions there generated a brief moment of hope, but this was not to last very long. As Paris showed itself to be quite uncompromising, the Australian Government in its turn hardened its position. Canberra's consultations with the FLNKS and its warnings to the French Government exasperated the new right-wing majority in France and enraged the French settlers in New Caledonia.

Given the Chirac Government's hardline proposals for a referendum in New Caledonia,⁴⁷ Canberra decided to lend its active support to the Pacific States' long-standing wish to have New Caledonia reinscribed by the United Nations' Committee on Decolonization (or "Committee of 24") on the list of non-self-governing territories. Consensus on this question was finally reached at the 1986 meeting of the South Pacific Forum in Suva (8–11 August).⁴⁸ Australia's role in this development, rightly seen by the French as instrumental, was deeply resented by Paris: without Australian support the South Pacific Forum would not have proceeded with the recommendation, and without Australia's intense diplomatic activity and forceful lobbying in the United Nations the recommendation would not have been adopted by the Committee of 24.

On 29 August 1986 Jacques Chirac, arriving in Noumea from Paris after a long flight, described his Australian counterpart, Bob Hawke, as "stupid", and expressed the wish that there be a rapid change of government in Australia.⁴⁹ This extraordinary outburst marked the beginning of an escalating eight-month crisis in French-Australian relations.

Bill Hayden was shocked by Chirac's lack of self-control, an impression reinforced on more than one occasion over the following two decades (and beyond):

Chirac in particular didn't like us because he had been [...] Agriculture Minister at some point, and Australia had complained about French agricultural policy and he had become very personally [...]

impassioned and embittered. I met him a couple of times. I found him extraordinarily erratic. Surprised he is President of such a big and important country. [...] When I was Governor-General there was the [50th] Anniversary of the United Nations where the Heads of State came in. [...] Milling around in the crowd I saw this French interpreter whom I recognized.⁵⁰ He was unlikely to remember me, after all I didn't have that much person-to-person contact with the French authorities, and didn't have reason to go to France all that much, regrettably. And I went over and introduced myself and started chatting, and he said: "Ah, Australia, Mr Hayden, of course—one minute, one minute, I must get the President." "No, no, I wanted to say good-day to you", and before I moved away [he] had Chirac over. And of course Chirac [...] just went on and on about the ills that Australia had caused and how we didn't understand them. [...] I thought he was quite extraordinary, he was extremely emotional and erratic, and I thought "what an extraordinary man, this man, he doesn't have self-control".⁵¹

In response to Jacques Chirac's outburst, Bob Hawke released a press statement on 31 August, in which he expressed his surprise "that, in recent comments made in Noumea, Prime Minister Chirac of France has permitted himself to depart from the normal manner of discourse between Heads of Government of friendly countries": the Australian Government would "not respond in a similar fashion". Canberra diplomatically ascribed the Chirac statement to the effects of jetlag.

Notwithstanding these public disagreements, bilateral cooperation between the two countries continued:

- in the 1986 Budget the Australian Government lifted the ban on uranium sales to France⁵²
- the French-Australian Mixed Commission for Cultural and Scientific Cooperation held its fifth session in Paris on 1 and 2 October 1986 to review the state of bilateral cooperation in these areas and to outline plans for the following years⁵³
- Australia continued to provide logistic support to EPF ("Expéditions Polaires Françaises"), a French government agency in Antarctica, under the Antarctic Treaty System⁵⁴
- both France and Australia participated in the 26th South Pacific Conference held at Papeete in French Polynesia (3–5 November)

- on 25 November the countries of the South Pacific, including France, Australia and the United States, agreed to adopt the text of a convention for the protection and development of the region's natural resources and environment, cooperation in pollution emergencies and the prevention of sea dumping of nuclear wastes⁵⁵
- negotiations continued between Paris and Canberra on matters connected with French participation in the Australian Bicentenary celebrations.

Simultaneously, however, the public conflict between the two countries continued to claim the attention of the French Government. The success on 2 December 1986 of the reinscription move at the United Nations was undoubtedly one of the major reasons for French retaliation. Another was the continuing contact in both Noumea and Canberra between the FLNKS and Australian officials, in particular the Australian Consul-General in Noumea. The French Government therefore decided

- to defer all visits at ministerial level to and from Australia (19 December 1986)
- to declare John Dauth, the Australian Consul-General in Noumea, *persona non grata* (9 January 1987) and to expel him from the Territory within a calendar month.

While these reprisals were being given maximum publicity, once again a more subtle game was being played out in the wings. After confidential diplomatic consultations the Australian side came to the conclusion that the conflict should not be over-dramatized: the embargo on ministerial visits was deliberately vague and ill-defined in time, lending itself to a process of gradual erosion, and did not apply to parliamentarians not holding ministerial posts; bilateral relations affecting commercial interests and technical or cultural cooperation would not be affected; and most significantly, the measures taken should be appraised in contrast to those ruled out (e.g. the recall of ambassadors). In other words, the measures adopted appeared to be more mischievous than truly damaging and were the result of a compromise designed to satisfy the most vocal members of the government and some sections of public opinion in France and New Caledonia.

On the surface, however, after President Mitterrand's television interview on 16 December 1985 and especially after Chirac's appointment as Prime Minister in March of the following year, there could be little doubt

that France had adopted a systematically accusatory stance towards Australia, thus altering the dynamics of the relationship, at least in the eyes of the public. Australia was now on the defensive. Reviewing their policy towards the French in these changed circumstances, Bill Hayden and the Department resolved to refrain from emotional responses or damaging retaliation on contentious issues and to keep the discussion at a detached policy level. More particularly they decided to avoid public statements that could give gratuitous offence. This policy directive goes back to July 1986,⁵⁶ before Prime Minister Chirac's undiplomatic outburst in Noumea (August), the UN re-inscription episode (December) or the expulsion of John Dauth from New Caledonia (January–February 1987). Over the following troublesome months Australia carefully adhered to these guidelines.

France's grievances against Australia during the twenty-six months of the Chirac–Mitterrand cohabitation can be summarized as follows:⁵⁷

- *Australia was the instigator of the re-inscription of New Caledonia on the list of non-self-governing nations by the UN's Committee on Decolonization (second half of 1986): its lobbying against France was a hostile gesture.⁵⁸ France's displeasure was conveyed to Australia, both formally and informally, at all levels of diplomatic interaction.*

The New Caledonian crisis allowed Australia to clarify its own diplomatic priorities: whilst every effort would be made to promote good relations with France in the Pacific, in cases of irreconcilable conflict Australia's solidarity with its Pacific neighbours must have precedence.⁵⁹ Canberra did not deny its role in the re-inscription, but insisted on having acted not in its own name but on behalf of the whole of the South Pacific Forum, since of all the members of the Forum it alone commanded a broad international network. It also observed that for several years it had used its influence on members of the Forum to delay the re-inscription, but in view of the hardening of the French position after the Conservative victory at the March 1986 elections it was no longer prepared to argue that the Forum should grant more time to France to work out a peaceful and orderly transition to multi-racial independence in New Caledonia.

- *Australian officials, and more specifically the Australian Consul-General in Noumea, maintained regular contact with the pro-independentist Kanak leaders, who also frequently visited Australia and*

consulted with the Australian Government. The French claimed that John Dauth⁶⁰ went too far: he had subsidized various groups in the Territory and overall his activities were inadmissible.

Although prior to François Mitterrand's election to the presidency in 1981 the French authorities had disapproved of Australian consular officials maintaining contact with the local opposition, this embargo was lifted by the Socialist administration, and Australia's Consul-General and his staff were allowed to consult with leaders of the Kanak pro-independence movement. Canberra was able to point out that John Dauth's activities in New Caledonia were consistent with consular functions as defined in the Vienna Convention and similar to the privileges granted to French consular representatives in Sydney and Melbourne. Furthermore, all of his activities, including any disbursement of monies, were carried out in an open manner and with the utmost propriety, always taking care to keep the French authorities fully informed. Australia could also claim that at all times and in all contact with the Kanak leaders it had exerted a moderating influence on the FLNKS, cautioning it against the use of violence, as well as against any contact with States or groups which advocated or sponsored terrorism, and recommending that it seek to achieve its objectives through peaceful negotiations with France.⁶¹

- *The French Government and substantial sections of French and New Caledonian public opinion accused Australia of trying to get rid of the French presence in New Caledonia in order to take their place.*

This concept, which is one of the oldest and most stubborn myths affecting French–Australian relations in the Pacific,⁶² might have had some justification in the nineteenth century but its survival is an example of a misunderstanding between two countries. Both public statements by successive Australian Prime Ministers and Ministers for Foreign Affairs and confidential briefing and policy documents in the archives of the Department of Foreign Affairs make it abundantly clear that Australia had accepted the French presence in the Pacific, provided that it took a form "the people of the region find acceptable and constructive".⁶³ "We have neither the ambition nor the capacity to take the place of France in the region", declared Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke.⁶⁴ Thanks no doubt to the perseverance of Australian diplomacy, in the last weeks before its defeat in 1988 the Chirac Government finally admitted that Australia was not seeking

to get rid of the French influence in the Pacific. Speaking at an Anzac Day Ceremony at Villers-Bretonneux on 26 April 1988, the French Minister for Defence, André Giraud, who had the benefit of several visits to Australia in the context of the Bicentenary Celebrations, declared that "Australians don't contest the French presence in the region: rather they recognize the chance it provides for stability."⁶⁵

- *The Chirac Government and some of the French media claimed that Australia's stance in the Pacific was hypocritical, on not just one but several issues affecting French-Australian relations, namely its selective anti-nuclear policies, targeted exclusively against the French, and its support for New Caledonia's indigenous population, whilst treating ruthlessly its own Aborigines.*⁶⁶

Counter-arguments produced to rebut this French claim were probably the weakest of all those formulated by Australia.

It was comparatively easy to demonstrate that the British nuclear tests carried out on Australian soil between 1952 and 1963 took place in a radically different political context and without a proper understanding of potential ecological consequences, and that furthermore in 1984 the Hawke Government instituted a Royal Commission on the British tests, resulting in substantial reparations being demanded of Britain. French journalist Roland Paringaux, in one of the most lucid analyses of the stereotypes undermining French-Australian relations, pointed out in 1986 that since the British tests "there has been a change of generations and a change in dependence on London as well".⁶⁷

The claim that the Rarotonga Treaty's special provisions to allow American nuclear activities in the Pacific whilst prohibiting French nuclear testing in the region were an instance of selective policy-making and therefore an example of hypocrisy was harder to refute, although it could be pointed out that there was a difference between ships with nuclear weaponry visiting friendly ports and a colonial power exploding nuclear bombs in the region. It could also be shown that whilst the primary purpose of the French "force de frappe" was to protect the security of Metropolitan France thousands of kilometres away, the ANZUS Treaty and the American alliance targeted regional security.

Regarding the comparison between the treatment of Kanaks in New Caledonia and Aborigines in Australia, many Australians would probably have subscribed to French criticisms of the latter. Bill Hayden himself,

speaking on ABC Television, admitted that Australia's record in this area was unsatisfactory: "We freely acknowledge historical shortcomings, including quite recent historical shortcomings, of our treatment of the Aboriginal population of this country."⁶⁸

- *Finally, the Chirac Government, as some of its predecessors and successors had done, would accuse Australia of being part of an "Anglo-Saxon" plot against French influence in the Pacific.*

Apart from the many public statements by Australian governments of both persuasions, and their reassertion in internal policy documents and confidential briefings, that Australia welcomed and supported the French presence in the region, it would be obvious even to the most superficial observer that during the whole period of the French-Australian conflict on nuclear issues, i.e. throughout the three decades from 1966 to 1996, the United States and Great Britain showed complete solidarity with the French against Australia and the other nations of the Pacific. It could also have been pointed out that throughout the period under scrutiny the Australian Government's attitude to the American alliance was by no means uncritical,⁶⁹ although in more recent times the theory of an unquestioning and unconditional association between the governments of the English-speaking nations under the hegemonic leadership of the United States, with the honourable exception of Canada and New Zealand, could be more easily sustained.

Whilst the contentious issues causing opposition between France and Australia remained identical during the whole of the Chirac Government's term, some variations occurred as a result of changing external circumstances, of which Australia's Bicentenary Celebrations were the most notable and the least movable. The Bicentenary timetable and the demands of bilateral relations, especially in the commercial field, restrained the players' freedom to indulge in dramatics. Whilst December 1986 and January 1987 marked the lowest point in the relationship,⁷⁰ by Easter 1987 the need to restore a level of normality could no longer be postponed, even though the most crucial area of dissent, namely the situation in New Caledonia, was far from showing signs of improvement. Against this highly explosive background, French-Australian relations followed a gradual pattern of improvement.

Prime Minister Chirac gave the first indication of a "thaw" in the relationship in a statement issued in April 1987.⁷¹ On 7 June Bill Hayden announced the appointment of David O'Leary as Australian Consul-General

in Noumea, succeeding the expelled John Dauth, even though the High Commissioner, Jean Monpezat, would refuse to grant him an audience.⁷² A few months later, in September, an informal meeting of the French and Australian Ministers for Foreign Affairs at the United Nations in New York provided another occasion for some limited *rapprochement*. By the time of the Bicentenary Celebrations in January 1988 French-Australian relations were almost back to normal, thanks in large measure to the contribution of the French Minister for Defence, André Giraud.

Notwithstanding this partial Franco-Australian reconciliation, the Chirac Government's policies in the South Pacific were leading to increasing violence and instability. These culminated in the tragic events of Ouvéa (April 1988), and the French Government's divisive tactics, instead of earning the Prime Minister victory in the presidential elections, precipitated his defeat.

Epilogue

The months preceding and following the May 1988 presidential elections constituted a period of transition in French-Australian relations. Michel Rocard succeeded Jacques Chirac as Prime Minister. His appointment marked the beginning of dialogue and negotiation with the indigenous Kanak population, which eventually led to the so-called "Matignon Agreements" ("Accords de Matignon"). This process began whilst Bill Hayden was still Minister for Foreign Affairs⁷³ but was only completed after his resignation to take up the position of Governor-General in the following year, when Gareth Evans was appointed Minister for Foreign Affairs in Canberra.

On all points the "Rocard approach" was consistent with Australia's wishes for a settlement of the New Caledonian crisis as formulated by Bill Hayden in 1983, so that by the end of 1988 not only did New Caledonia cease to be a contentious issue between the two countries, but France and Australia and their prime ministers had begun to build a close and warm relationship.

There still remained the question of the nuclear testing programme in the Pacific, which appeared to find a solution on 2 April 1992 when President Mitterrand suspended it "indefinitely"—or at least for as long as he was at the helm of the French State.

Before the end of the twentieth century there was to be another brief conflict between France and Australia when in 1995 Jacques Chirac succeeded François Mitterrand as President of the Republic. One of his first decisions was to order the resumption of nuclear testing in the Pacific. Gareth Evans duly protested against this decision but the media, sections of the Left and mainly an opportunistic Opposition found the Government's moderate and rational stance far too lukewarm. Between them they roused Australian public opinion to an unprecedented state of hysteria against further tests. Australian protests spread to other parts of the world, including—and this was a first in the history of the French nuclear programme—to Metropolitan France. Faced with such extensive opposition, President Chirac announced an early end to the programme in January 1996.⁷⁴

It was exactly 100 years after the French had ceased to send convicts to New Caledonia, a major bone of contention between France and the then Australian colonies at the end of the nineteenth century.

This is how, three decades after the first nuclear explosion in French Polynesia, this turbulent stage in the history of French-Australian relations at last came to an end.

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Notes

1. This paper is partly based on the Author's chapter, "L'Australie face à la politique française dans le Pacifique de 1981 à 1988", in Jean-Marc Regnault, ed., *François Mitterrand et les territoires français du Pacifique (1981–1988)*, Paris, Les Indes savantes, 2003, pp. 507–517.
2. Bill Hayden, *Hayden, an Autobiography*, Pymble, N.S.W., Angus & Robertson, 1996.
3. Interview with the Author recorded in Sydney on 10 April 2002.
4. *Ibid.*
5. I am particularly grateful to Ms Elizabeth Nathan, Director of the Historical Research and Access Section, for the help she provided during my work on the first version of this paper.
6. The anti-French sentiment was less pronounced in the Colony of New South Wales where the Irish-Catholic influence was strongest. It is also worth noting that when the Australian colonies sought a reinforcement of the British presence in the Pacific, London generally refused or ignored such requests.
7. See numerous examples in the "Letters to the Editor" column in the *Sydney Morning Herald* during each of the crises in French-Australian relations (1973–1974, 1985–1987, 1995).

8. Disagreements on agricultural policy, which were supposed to be the reason for the alleged longstanding anti-Australian stance of Jacques Chirac, a former Minister for Agriculture, were very much on the backburner during the 1980s.
9. There were two more, the second occurring during the 1985–1987 crisis (the “Rainbow Warrior” incident, nuclear testing and the explosive situation in New Caledonia) and the third in 1995 when, on Jacques Chirac’s election to the presidency, nuclear testing resumed in the Pacific for a short but highly controversial period.
10. John Wheeldon, “New Caledonia”, *Quadrant*, 27, August 1983, p. 8.
11. Personal letter from Mr Street to the Author, dated 18 March 2002.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Australian Foreign Affairs Record* (henceforth AFAR), October 1982, p. 600.
14. AFAR, January 1981, pp. 41–42.
15. AFAR, January 1982, pp. 28–29.
16. The same will to protect bilateral cooperation and exchanges despite public disagreements on politically explosive issues is evident in French Government sources during the period.
17. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 September 1987, p. 23.
18. Interview 10 April 2002.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 June 1983, p. 13.
21. AFAR, July 1984, pp. 738–741.
22. AFAR, July 1984, p. 741.
23. Interview 10 April 2002.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.* Already in June 1982, nine months before the change of government, an opinion poll revealed that three Australians out of four opposed the use any form of nuclear weaponry (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 June 1982, p. 2).
27. Interview 10 April 2002.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*
30. When referring to the arrogance of the French and the directness of their language, it is likely that Bill Hayden was thinking not so much of the 1983–1984 period when Claude Cheysson was Minister for Foreign Affairs, but of the following two periods during his term of office, when Roland Dumas was his counterpart at the Quai d’Orsay, i.e. December 1984 to March 1986, and under Jacques Chirac’s prime ministership, from March 1986 to May 1988.
31. Interview 10 April 2002.
32. AFAR, May 1983, p. 186.
33. Edgar Pisani was French High Commissioner in New Caledonia.
34. AFAR, November 1984, pp. 1259–1260.
35. “Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste”. *Ibid.*

36. Bill Hayden on Roland Dumas: "I only met Dumas once and he was a cold aloof person who spoke down to me as a colonial, I suppose, which wasn't a clever way of going about things. Gave me a lecture about how we disliked the French, and it wasn't a way to run a relationship." (Interview 10 April 2002)
37. Ibid.
38. "[L'année 1985] aura autant fait pour l'infortune de la France aux antipodes que les cent précédentes." *Le Monde*, 3 April 1986, p. 1.
39. The first Pisani Plan foreshadowed New Caledonian independence in association with France for January 1986.
40. The meeting with the leader of the FLNKS, who was also Vice-President of the Council of Government in New Caledonia, took place in Canberra on 21 January 1985. The question was raised with force by French journalists during the press conference Bill Hayden gave in Paris on 29 January 1985.
41. After the name of the then Prime Minister, Laurent Fabius, another Socialist.
42. See Randy Willoughby, "Paradoxe dans le Pacifique", in Jean-Marc Regnault, ed., *François Mitterrand et les territoires français du Pacifique (1981-1988)*, Paris, Les Indes savantes, 2003, p. 551.
43. See "Four Corners" interview of Bill Hayden, ABC Television, 1 December 1986.
44. Australia claimed that this double refusal weakened Western influence in the region (*AFAR*, March 1987, p. 145).
45. "C'est bien la France, et elle seule, qui est visée par ce traité dont les faiblesses sont si nombreuses et les silences si criants, qu'au bout du compte il n'a plus d'antinucléaire que le nom, et qu'il apparaît comme un chef-d'œuvre d'hypocrisie francophobe." Michel Pérez, "Les Organisations internationales et les TOM", in Regnault, ed., *François Mitterrand et les territoires français du Pacifique*, p. 529.
46. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 September 1985, p. 13.
47. These offered a choice between independence and the status quo.
48. *AFAR*, August 1986, pp. 650-654.
49. Quoted in the *Herald* (Melbourne), 12 January 1987. It is worth noting that Jacques Chirac was out of office less than two years later, whilst the Australian Labor Party stayed in power for another decade.
50. Bill Hayden had met this interpreter when received by President Mitterrand. Cf. above: "[he had a] brilliant interpreter, his English was just flawless and accentless".
51. Interview 10 April 2002.
52. *AFAR*, September 1986, p. 823.
53. *AFAR*, October 1986, pp. 911-915.
54. *AFAR*, October 1986, p. 963. This support was criticized by the Greens.
55. *AFAR*, November 1986, pp. 1041-1042.
56. Based on a confidential diplomatic source.

57. Based on statements by Jacques Chirac, Prime Minister, and Bernard Pons, Minister for Overseas Departments and Territories, and on confidential Australian policy documents.
58. Described as a "punch in the stomach" by one high French official. (Confidential diplomatic source)
59. This principle was explicitly formulated in July 1986. (Confidential diplomatic source)
60. He was a "very bad man", according to one of the highest French office holders. (Confidential diplomatic source)
61. This would prove to be true again during the bloody incidents in Ouvéa in April 1988 when the Australian Prime Minister called on the Kanaks "to cease their attacks, to release their hostages unharmed and to refrain from taking further hostages". (See *AFAR*, April 1988, p. 163)
62. As we have seen above, Bill Hayden was surprised to find that even Kanak leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou accepted this stereotype.
63. Speech by Bill Hayden, Minister for Foreign Affairs, to the Foreign Correspondents' Association of Australia on 30 April 1987, in *AFAR*, April 1987, p. 178.
64. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 February 1987, p. 5.
65. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 April 1988, p. 14.
66. On the latter, see Jacques Chirac's statements quoted in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 August 1987, p. 11, reminiscent of President Mitterrand's comments in his television interview of 16 December 1984.
67. *Le Monde*, 3 April 1986, p. 6.
68. "Four Corners", ABC Television, 1 December 1986.
69. See "Mr Street quietly spells out differences with US", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 October 1982, p. 6; F. Rawdon Dalrymple, "The Pacific Basin: alliances, trade and bases", *AFAR*, March 1987, pp. 142-146; "Hayden anti-US, congressmen told", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 June 1987, p. 2.
70. Owing to the re-inscription of New Caledonia on the list of territories to be decolonized and the expulsion of the Australian Consul-General from New Caledonia, respectively.
71. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 April 1987, p. 2.
72. Despite nine written requests by the appointee. (Based on a confidential diplomatic source)
73. By this time Bill Hayden showed a more relaxed attitude to the French. Here is his recollection of a French naval visit to Sydney:

Some of the incidents [were a bit] petty, on both sides. The French Navy brought at least one warship into Sydney and were welcome, but they demanded so many gun salutes, and the Department came charging in and they were all uptight saying, "Well, we don't do this for any other country, this sort of practice is long gone". [...] Anyway there wasn't an X gun salute, but it seemed childish. And then, I think this is right, they said, "The French will be firmly told that their sailors are to go around

town as civilians", and I said, "Why?" The girls will like them in their pom-pom caps and they've been at sea for a while, so it won't do any harm if they find friendly females in Australia, probably it would improve the relationship. And so I happened to be in town, in Sydney, when the ship came in, and there were French sailors wandering around in their uniforms and they were being well received everywhere, I think the French authorities got a bit of a surprise. They were expecting noise and the hard lines out of the newspapers, the noise from the politicians like me [...] would be a reflection of the trouble they had. They might even have been presuming that a bit of trouble wouldn't go astray because then they could lodge protests and so on. It didn't work that way at all.

74. Although since 1996 French-Australian relations have generally been harmonious, it is worth noting that President Chirac's foreshadowed visit to Canberra in the middle of 2003 did not eventuate.