

FRENCH NUCLEAR TESTING IN THE PACIFIC, 1995–96, AND ITS FALLOUT FOR FRENCH AUSTRALIANS¹

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Demoralised by the reverses of World War II, France in post-war years sought renewed self-respect and military independence through the development of a nuclear capability. Its atomic tests conducted in French Polynesia from 1966 aroused strong opposition in Pacific Rim countries, which applauded an indefinite moratorium declared in 1992. With the Cold War over, nuclear proliferation seemed to have been curbed. But on 13 June 1995 a newly elected French president, Jacques Chirac, announced that a further eight tests would take place before his government signed the projected Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1996. Australians protested vociferously, and even Paris heard the furore.

This paper highlights two aspects of the controversy whose importance has been underestimated in other accounts. They are the precedent formed by Australian anti-French sentiment in the 1970s and 1980s, and the personally damaging and long-lasting effects of public acrimony on French Australians in 1995–1996. It is argued here that over-reactions in the Australian community to the renewal of French nuclear testing in the 1990s were understandable given increasing provocation by the French government over a period of thirty years or so. It is also claimed that although a supposedly democratic people might have been expected to treat fellow Australians of French descent more generously, such an outcome was unlikely in the circumstances.

In the first part of the paper an inexorable deterioration in once-friendly relations between France and Australia is shown to have resulted from events in the latter part of the twentieth century—in particular the atmospheric testing of nuclear devices at Mururoa Atoll in the early 1970s and the bombing of the *Rainbow Warrior* in 1985. The second part examines how and why Australians protested against the 1995–1996 tests. The third section provides examples of the alienation suffered by French Australians during the period, and questions

the attitudes of other Australians towards them. The paper finishes with a brief survey of French–Australian relations since the beginning of 1996.

An oral history component in the examination of such a relatively recent episode was clearly desirable, and in 2006 a notice seeking anecdotes and memories of the 1995–1996 confrontations was sent to eleven newspapers Australia-wide. Although there were only fourteen replies, most were useful and one—from the French Australian Danièle Caraty—was invaluable. Her collection of files on the events of 1995–1996 documented her unsuccessful campaign for unbiased treatment of the situation by New South Wales newspapers. Moreover, correspondence she received from other French Australians at the time included many first-hand accounts of fear and dismay.

A second, broader project comprised interviews, most of them conducted via email or letter. However, French Australians other than Caraty proved difficult to recruit, a problem similar to one Anny Stuer experienced around 1980. She was not seeking sensitive information for her demographic survey of French immigration to Australia, but there were few responses to the 830 short questionnaires she circulated.² In the present case a flyer written in French, suitable for pinning on notice-boards, went out to three specialist French schools and twenty-seven branches of the Alliance Française organisation. Only one contact, made via the Hobart branch, was fruitful. French Australians are not usually regarded as a community so much as a disparate set of groups and individuals, and the comparatively reserved temperament of many French people is thought to have discouraged participation.

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It is not intended to detail interactions between France and Australia in the period of intensive French exploration of the Australian coastline during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, nor to describe further forays into the Pacific that led to more than a hundred islands coming under French jurisdiction later in the 1800s. There was always an element of rivalry over the Pacific, but it did not necessarily predicate the French–Australian clashes of the late twentieth century.

Little of the early history of French–Australian relations would have loomed large in the minds of protesters against nuclear testing. For many Australian families, however, emotional links with France dating from 1917 or 1918 persisted. About 295,000 Australian soldiers fought on the Western Front

during World War I, suffering 180,000 casualties including many thousands of deaths.³ Australians have not forgotten their war dead buried in France; the francophile J. F. Archibald even bequeathed funds for a lavish fountain in Sydney's Hyde Park to honour that connection.⁴

When in 1962 France moved its nuclear program from newly independent Algeria to the French Polynesian atolls Mururoa and Fangataufa—some 1,250 kilometres from Tahiti and 6,900 from Sydney—that friendly relationship cooled. In defiance of the Partial Test Ban Treaty outlawing atmospheric tests, signed by Britain, Russia and the United States in 1963, these experiments were to be conducted in the atmosphere and had potential for fallout over a wide area. Forty-six atmospheric tests were held between 2 July 1966 and late 1974, though there were none in 1969; another 145 underground tests followed.⁵ The descendants of Australians who fought in the World War I battlefields of France might well have wondered, as the tests continued, whether French nuclear ambitions had evaporated French gratitude for that support. And while many Australians revered the French artists, musicians, writers and film-makers who had made Paris the cultural centre of the world for much of the twentieth century, the understandable Gallic pride inseparable from that achievement could easily look like arrogance when cumulative antagonisms came to outweigh admiration.

Disenchantment in the 1970s

By 1972 anti-French feeling in Australia had increased noticeably. The government and the community began to voice varying degrees of criticism over the French transferral of testing into the Pacific, and trade unions quickly became involved.

For most of the year the Liberal–Country Party coalition headed by William McMahon was in power. Though often derided as a prime minister, McMahon deserves credit for having earlier, while Minister for External Affairs, persuaded John Gorton's government to sign the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.⁶ Among other things this called on signatories possessing nuclear arms to refrain from passing them on to countries that lacked them.⁷ It was in McMahon's time too that Australia became a foundation member of the South Pacific Forum, which issued a communiqué in August 1971 criticising the French nuclear program.⁸

In 1972, together with New Zealand, Australia put to the United Nations General Assembly the first of a series of annual resolutions in favour of a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty,⁹ an action that would have been more impressive had not the Australian Atomic Energy Commission been discussing nuclear enrichment technology with France since 1969, with a joint feasibility study for an Australian enrichment plant expected to begin in March 1972.¹⁰ A few months later McMahon and his team were voted out, and Gough Whitlam's Labor government took office.

While Whitlam ratified the Non-Proliferation Treaty early in 1973, and during his time Australia is considered to have become a world leader in the campaign against nuclear weaponry, policy on the matter was hardly single-minded. Whitlam's opposition to nuclear arms testing, production and proliferation was genuine, but he was not against uranium mining or research.¹¹ However, the Minister for Minerals and Energy, Rex Connor, was adamant that development should wait until prices rose, and that sales should be restricted to the more lucrative enriched uranium rather than the naturally occurring substance.¹² Jacques Hymans has claimed that these two government policies—the high-minded and the essentially commercial—were compatible but, as other authorities have pointed out, uranium intended for domestic purposes could easily end up as military fuel.¹³

Nevertheless the Whitlam government flagged its strong opposition to French tests in the Pacific soon after gaining power. From January 1973 onwards diplomatic exchanges between Australia and France grew increasingly tense until on 9 May, after face-to-face discussions had failed, the prime minister announced that Australia would ask the International Court of Justice at The Hague to adjudicate in the matter. The French government under President Georges Pompidou declined to be represented at Australia's hearing and ignored the majority vote urging abandonment of the tests. A French White Paper in June tried to refute Australia's arguments, on environmental and legal grounds, and made France's standpoint clear: 'given the present state of world armaments, the development of a nuclear armament is essential for French security and independence'.¹⁴ The tests continued.

In December 1974, after another series, the Court announced that the Australian case against the French government had been invalidated by France's mid-year decision to cease atmospheric (though not underground) testing. Acting Prime Minister Dr Jim Cairns responded by saying that 'the real

value of Australia's challenge to the tests was the pressure it exerted on France to promise to end them'.¹⁵ However, as is noted later, government leaders were not the only Australians attributing the French change of heart to their own intervention.

In 2003 Andrew Denton described Dr Helen Caldicott as 'Australia's best-known voice of protest, taking the case for nuclear disarmament to the world stage'.¹⁶ Living in Adelaide thirty years or so earlier she had become disturbed about the French tests taking place above Mururoa. As she tells the story in her autobiography, 'a leaked government document' alerted her to fallout contamination of water collected in the domestic tanks commonly used by Adelaide residents.¹⁷ The medical implications of this news for a doctor who was also the mother of three young children moved her to describe, in a letter to the Adelaide *Advertiser*, the hazards of radioactive isotopes for breast-fed babies. The rapid response to the letter from a television station, and Rupert Murdoch's personal support—transmitted through his *Australian* and (Adelaide) *News*—drew widespread attention to the matter.¹⁸

Around the same time there was a spate of anti-French activism in the community. The Australian champion runner Herb Elliott made known his objections to the Pacific nuclear tests by handing back to France a prize its government had given him in 1968.¹⁹ In Perth someone threw a smoke bomb emblazoned with the words *Liberté, égalité, fraternité* into a branch of the Banque Nationale de Paris.²⁰ A Queensland Liberal MP, Clive Hughes, collected signatures for a petition against the tests outside a Brisbane cinema that was showing an American film called *The French Connection*.²¹

A few letters to *The Australian* in June 1972 attacked Prime Minister McMahon for his alleged apathy, expressed worries over health risks, or flagellated the French for their arrogance.²² Letters to the Adelaide *Advertiser* around the same time tended either to attack the government for its inaction against France or to express concern over the hazards of fallout.²³

In Sydney the biochemist Dr Jan Gebicki used his expertise to good effect.²⁴ Like Helen Caldicott he wrote a letter to a newspaper, then found that other media picked up the issue and disseminated it widely. The focus of his attention was the commercial milk supply, which his investigations showed was being contaminated by fallout on parts of Australia's east coast. In June 1973, with the next round of tests looming, he wrote to Gough Whitlam urging prompt publication of milk radioactivity levels;²⁵ a month later the prime

minister promised that 'short-lived radioactive fallout, particularly in fresh milk' would receive special attention.²⁶

Environmental and peace organisations might have been expected to lead protest action, but when the president of the Australian Conservation Foundation, Prince Philip, was asked at a Melbourne press conference in 1973 how he regarded France's nuclear testing in the Pacific, he dodged the political question with a non-committal joke and, as a Queensland politician later remarked, 'suddenly the ACF stood revealed as a paper pussy cat. It was never exactly a tiger'.²⁷ In fact many anti-nuclear activists were preoccupied at the time with issues such as uranium mining in the Northern Territory, and it was 1976 or 1977 before environmental organisations and peace movements began to influence opinion in Australia.²⁸ By the late 1970s they were very active, but their work was broadly anti-nuclear rather than specifically directed at the French. Early in the decade Australian trade unions, by contrast, were very much in evidence.

A few weeks before France's sixth campaign of above-ground nuclear testing at Mururoa Atoll started, on 25 June 1972, the New Zealand Federation of Labour and the Australian Council of Trade Unions had called on the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions to urge the French government not to carry out its stated intentions.²⁹ At the beginning of June the general secretary of the Waterside Workers' Federation of Australia identified French neglect of islander wellbeing as an intolerable aspect of the nuclear program—something that was not always a conspicuous public concern.³⁰ He also criticised the governments of both Australia and New Zealand for their 'insignificant protests'; the unions, he said, must act instead.³¹ They immediately banned the servicing of French shipping and aircraft and then placed boycotts on all French goods.³²

In May of the next year Bob Hawke, president of the ACTU, wrote to the United Nations secretary-general asking him to forestall nuclear testing by the French or any other government, and to put the matter on the agenda of the General Assembly.³³ He also raised the issue personally with the International Labour Organization.³⁴

After the French government announced the abandonment of its atmospheric tests in 1974, union members congratulated themselves: 'The viewpoint expressed by the ACTU Officers was that the effective campaign waged in 1973 was no doubt in large measure responsible for the French

Government's recent pronouncement'.³⁵ The Australian government had also claimed that its work was a catalyst for the decision to take the tests underground, but neither the unions nor the government entertained the possibility that the French had made a totally independent decision, untouched by the views of anyone else. While the nuclear program was to continue for another twenty-two years, at least the particularly damaging above-ground tests were no more.

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Before the final series in 1995–96, however, there was another outburst of Australian antipathy towards France. This arose from a fellow feeling with New Zealanders when in July 1985 French secret agents sank the Greenpeace protest vessel *Rainbow Warrior* in Auckland Harbour and a Greenpeace photographer was drowned.³⁶ A New Zealand court sentenced two of the agents to ten years' gaol, but economic–political pressure from the French government cut short their terms.³⁷ Particularly provocative was the awareness that, as Jean Chesneaux remarked, 'hardly anyone in France contested the legitimacy or morality of the operation'.³⁸

Soon after this Australia and New Zealand joined other Pacific nations to form the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone, which specifically banned nuclear testing and associated activities in the region. This move did not please France, which was not only conducting nuclear tests in the 1980s but was also being criticised by Australia and other countries for its suppression of pro-independence agitation in New Caledonia.³⁹ This was an attitude that nations like Australia, imperfect though their treatment of their own native peoples might have been, considered to be out of step with enlightened post-colonial thinking. For their part, the French saw Australia as a 'malign force behind the stirrings of indigenous populations',⁴⁰ and believed that it was 'intent on detaching New Caledonia from France, in order to draw it into Australia's own sphere of influence'.⁴¹ Mutual misunderstanding in the 1980s thus compounded the resentments of the 1970s.

Confrontation in the 1990s

There is no question that the intensity of the 1995–1996 Australian protests against French nuclear testing in the Pacific dwarfed those of the early 1970s,

though people questioned about their recollections have often confused the two eras. It is ironical that in the first case Australia did have real cause for complaint, given the nuclear fallout recorded. In fact there were different grounds for protest in the 1990s. Though less substantial in one sense, they were much more powerful for having symbolic importance, much of it revolving around the value Australians place on the backyard of their detached houses, and by extension their wider environment the Pacific Ocean. As the historian Adrian Carton has pointed out, 'notions of domestic and imperial space' were bound up together by this time.⁴²

When the French government restarted its nuclear program in 1995, the phrases 'in our backyard' and, more bitterly, in '*their own* backyard' were recurrent themes in featured articles and letters to the press. A backyard has symbolic meaning for Australians because of their predilection for houses rather than apartments. In Australia, whether the land behind your home is a muddy patch littered with empty bottles or the manicured setting for a swimming pool, it is your private space. More importantly still, it belongs to you—even if temporarily. Western Australians generally looked, as they always had, to the Indian Ocean,⁴³ but 'Eastern staters' once again extended their proprietorial claims to the Pacific during the French nuclear tests. The former Australian Rules footballer Ron Barassi bungee-jumped from a 60-metre tower to draw attention to what he called French stupidity over the tests: 'If they want to do this kind of thing,' he said, 'let them do it in their own backyard'.⁴⁴ A Sydney woman wanted readers to 'let the French know that you don't create environmental disasters in other people's backyards'.⁴⁵ A resident of Sandy Bay, Tasmania, was less restrained: 'I urge every able Australian to do something, however small, to actively voice his/her objection to the French nuclear defecation in our backyard—the Pacific Ocean'.⁴⁶

Although they were guilty of various misapprehensions in this matter, including a failure to recognise French Polynesia as a legal part of France (and therefore in a sense part of its backyard), other Australians seemed to know that underground nuclear tests thousands of kilometres away were unlikely to pollute the waters lapping their playgrounds on the Gold Coast or at Manly. In fact, because Australia's backyard had become a metaphor for undisputed security, the Pacific meant something even more visceral than its beach culture.

However, while the backyard of Australian perceptions extended to French Polynesia, nearly 7,000 kilometres from Sydney, it did not include China, a similar distance away, where concurrent atomic testing was in progress and future cooperation was unlikely. But China's position was unusual. Unlike France, wrote Ramesh Thakur, it had not halted its testing, so there was no sense of letdown; its database of tests was much smaller than that of France and its computer know-how vastly inferior; the tests were conducted in its own region; and China had genuine security problems.⁴⁷ Most Australians were probably unaware of this rational argument, but in any case it was primarily a mountain of anti-French sentiment, built up over many years, that hid China and its nuclear program from their consciousness.

While Australians believed, rightly or wrongly, that a cherished symbol was under threat in 1995, the French government can be said to have had symbolic as well as strategic reasons for its nuclear testing. Adrian Carton has pointed out that losing Algeria in 1962 and leaving the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1966 created an interface for the French between decolonisation and the desire to escape from America's defence umbrella. Thus they suffered 'a crisis of identity that was directly linked to both their imperial past *and* to Cold War politics'.⁴⁸

Much of this situation would have been apparent to the better informed ministers and public servants under Paul Keating's Labor government in the mid-1990s; it may have helped to account, in fact, for the notable contrast between restrained official responses to Chirac's announcement of resumed testing, early in the piece, and furious outbursts from the public. The Foreign Minister, Senator Gareth Evans, speaking from Tokyo, said that the French decision was merely 'very deeply disappointing'. He did, however, try to explain the differences between the present series of projected tests and previous ones:

There are some very clear assurances that they will be limited in number, limited in duration, and they have been accompanied by a very clear statement of commitment by President Chirac to conclude the negotiations of a full-scale Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty by next year.

What got him into trouble was his agreement with the interviewer that the French decision was 'not as bad as it could have been'.⁴⁹ Politically prudent

reasons for ‘tip-toe diplomacy’ did not impress members of the public at that time.

The Opposition under John Howard was also relatively slow at picking up on community outrage. In Stewart Firth’s view, both leaders misjudged the depth of feeling apparent very early in the Australian community, but Howard recovered first and was soon lambasting the government for its inertia.⁵⁰ Commercial and diplomatic action soon followed, and some of it seemed to get through to the French authorities. When Australia excluded the French company Dassault Aviation from consideration for a \$740 million contract put out to tender by the Department of Defence, the news made headlines in France and its ambassador, Dominique Girard, was promptly recalled to Paris for consultations.⁵¹ The Defence Minister, Senator Robert Ray, considered his veto of the tender to have had more impact on French thinking than any other government initiative.⁵²

Arguably more damaging still to the French government was the opposition Chirac was receiving at home. A poll published in *Le Parisien* on the same day as the Dassault announcement showed that 60 per cent of the French people believed the president should change his mind about the tests; a 10 per cent drop in his popularity had been recorded in the previous week.⁵³ Comments made by French Australians at the time make it clear that many of them also condemned Chirac’s action.

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It is undeniable that media exaggeration helped to generate and perpetuate public anger, as other commentators have claimed.⁵⁴ Much research has been done on the concept of crowd psychology since Gustave Le Bon’s *La Psychologie des Foules* appeared in 1895. But the sociologist Robert Park, who produced a thesis on the topic in 1908, could have been writing of the Australian media in 1995 when he said:

Modern journalism, which is supposed to instruct and direct public opinion by reporting and discussing events, usually turns out to be simply a mechanism for controlling collective attention. The ‘opinion’ formed in this manner is logically similar to the judgment derived from unreflective perception.⁵⁵

The *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Daily Telegraph Mirror* gave their writers full satirical rein initially, and newspapers all over the country were immediately inundated with protest letters in largely unreflective mode: for some weeks it was a case of out-of-control crowd psychology in action.

From a French point of view the press exacerbated Australian hostility, though the difficulty of separating cause from effect was acknowledged.⁵⁶ For Martine Piquet the damage was done through ‘a succession of juicy, simplistic, and often grossly unprofessional one-sided reports’—of which she gives just one example.⁵⁷ Elizabeth Rechniewski analysed newspaper reporting at much greater depth and came to a similar conclusion after studying early Australian press outpourings. She noted the common strategies of prominent headlining and positioning of stories that indicated to readers the *actualité* of the matter; she also pointed out that headings such as ‘Chirac shatters rapport’ could be seen as inviting equally violent reactions from readers.⁵⁸

The electronic media quickly joined in. As soon as the French news broke, the Melbourne radio presenter Neil Mitchell was exhorting his listeners to fax and ring the local French consulate in order to jam its lines, and it was not long before ‘all the talkback shows [...] rode the wave of public anger’.⁵⁹ Television news transmissions broadcast the story at unusual length, its drama heightened by images of mushroom clouds that symbolised nuclear cataclysms—irrelevant though they were to underground tests. It was an electronic bombardment that played a significant part in intensifying public condemnation of the tests.

Meanwhile an anti-French campaign by cartoonists barely faltered. Forceful as newspaper headlines often were, some of the cartoons upstaged them. The *Australian* cartoonist Bill Leak in fact maintained that ‘he wouldn’t have had a hope’ of getting into print some of his material that the paper accepted in cartoon form.⁶⁰ All the major papers and many periodicals carried cartoons that ranged from droll to distasteful, sending up symbols of Frenchness such as the effete poodle, the tricolour and even Joan of Arc. Symbolism was in fact often at the heart of the nuclear testing controversy. For the French government the rugged profile of Charles de Gaulle, progenitor and ongoing muse of the whole nuclear enterprise, was a fundamental stimulant of its nuclear decisions. For Australians it was the image of the mushroom cloud, echoes of Anzac hubris, and the concept of the Australian backyard that fuelled the protests.

As already noted, the word *arrogant* was a favourite with letter-writers and other critics of the French. Editorialists used the word freely, one describing the French plan as ‘self-serving, pig-headed and arrogant’.⁶¹ Politicians were more cautious, perhaps because talk of arrogance by politicians was too close to the bone.⁶² It has been claimed that Australians caught their notion of French arrogance from Britain’s attitude towards its traditional enemy.⁶³ But Australians have also resented British upper-crust arrogance, possibly because of what Maurice Blackman has called ‘a lingering sense of Australian inferiority to a perceived French *and British* [italics added] cultural sophistication’.⁶⁴ A degree of the Australian failing known as ‘big-noting’ may also have been at play here: castigating others is a well-recognised way of exaggerating one’s own importance.

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In addition to indiscriminate accusations of arrogance and other sins they regarded as characteristically French, Australians found a multitude of ways to express their strong feelings. Many were bizarre but some arose from principled disagreement. Among the former were the changing by vandals of the French restaurant name ‘Les Amis’ in Upwey, Victoria, to ‘Les EnAmis’,⁶⁵ the attaching of bumper stickers reading ‘My Renault is ashamed of being French’,⁶⁶ and the decision of a Sydney woman to call her dog Chirac since ‘it does its dirty business in other people’s backyards’.⁶⁷ Performers at a recital of French music in Brisbane translated the words of their songs into Italian.⁶⁸ In Perth a bakery changed the shape and name of its French sticks, quadrupling sales of what it now called Boomerang Bread,⁶⁹ while a billboard in Melbourne displayed one of those symbols of French greatness, its flag, painted across a woman’s bare buttocks.⁷⁰ While these actions may have seemed to trivialise the issue, they did not necessarily reflect trivial assessments of it. A Sydney architect made a habit in 1995 of saying ‘I blame the French’ whenever anything went wrong. His widow wrote: ‘Everyone would laugh, we never had to explain it, which is just one indication of how widespread the bad feelings towards France were at the time’.⁷¹

In 1995 the Canberra folk/jazz group Straight Ahead revived and updated a piece first written in response to the *Rainbow Warrior* sinking in 1985. It is sung in *faux* French accents to the tune of the French song ‘Alouette’, and the chorus says it all: *Mururoa, joli Mururoa, Mururoa, a lovely place to stay/*

*Mururoa, let's blow it away.*⁷² This was mere parody, but there was conviction behind the naming of a serious orchestral work written in 1995: the Australian composer George Ellis called the piece *Lament for Mururoa Atoll* because of its sad cadences.⁷³

A Newspoll survey in late June of 1995 showed that 95 per cent of Australians were against French nuclear testing in the Pacific, with 89 per cent *strongly* opposed.⁷⁴ They represent an astonishing range of people across the political and racial spectrum and at all levels of education, income and class. For example, Maurice Blackman believes that the staff of most university French departments backed the Australian Society for French Studies in its public statements of criticism.⁷⁵ Church leaders publicly condemned the tests,⁷⁶ and community organisations including the Country Women's Association lobbied the government on the matter.⁷⁷

It seems likely that the rural sector, hitherto ignored in studies of this crisis, already had an anti-French bias. For years Australian trade officials had been trying to obtain access to European Union agricultural markets, which France in particular opposed.⁷⁸ Thus an article on this problem in the influential Australian farming journal the *Weekly Times* opened with a familiar phrase: 'The French are an arrogant mob . . .'⁷⁹

Large crowds joined in mass protest on key dates such as the notably emblematic French national day, 14 July, when there were 25,000 marchers in Sydney alone.⁸⁰ Hiroshima Day, 6 August 1995, inspired mass action around the world over both the horrors of the nuclear explosions in Japan fifty years earlier and the concurrent French tests. More than 30,000 people took part in demonstrations across Australia.⁸¹ Stewart Firth has remarked on the political catholicity of the people's protests: 'members of the Liberal Party [...] found themselves marching in common cause alongside Spartacists and International Socialists. As much as any issue can, the threat of French nuclear tests united the community'.⁸² This was indeed a time of rare solidarity in Australian society, but the unifying factor was not fear of the tests. Rather, it was overwhelming indignation that the French government could defy international anti-nuclear sentiment and regional sensitivities once again by conducting another seemingly unnecessary series.

Environmental and peace organisations had campaigned against uranium sales and nuclear proliferation in the late 1970s and early 1980s but were only marginally involved in 1995–96. The peace activist Keith Suter

claims that following a key Reagan–Gorbachev nuclear disarmament initiative in 1987, ‘peace had become middle-class, middle-aged and middle-of-the road’,⁸³ and many people who did not belong to organisations could agitate without feeling marginalised.

Trade unionists were again prominent activists at this time. A day or so after Chirac’s announcement on 13 June 1995, state labour organisations and major unions were already responding to calls from the Australian Council of Trade Unions for a campaign against the tests. By the 25th, mail deliveries to French consulates had been suspended, the Maritime Union had announced rolling bans against French ships, and the Amalgamated Metal Workers’ Union was threatening action against French companies that supported their government’s stand.⁸⁴

On Bastille Day the Transport Workers Union banned the refuelling of Air France and Air Calédonie planes; waterside workers held up ships carrying French flags; and the Communication Workers Union stopped delivering and repairing telephone equipment in French government buildings.⁸⁵ One of the activities of the Australian Education Union was to sponsor a visit to France by three secondary school students who hoped to convey a strong message of protest to President Chirac.⁸⁶ Australian unions were undoubtedly a vital part of anti-tests activism, but a shrewd comment from specialists in this field puts their position into context:

In the case of opposition to French nuclear testing, bans were relatively easy to effect. Employment was not seriously endangered by such action, so many union leaders were easily persuaded that bans were desirable.⁸⁷

Had unionists felt their own interests were at risk, they might well have kept their heads down.

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The nature of this period of protest was distinctly unusual in Australian history. Controversy had brought Australians into the streets and newspaper correspondence columns many times—to assert workers’ rights and women’s independence, over conscription in wartime, against the whims of dictatorial premiers, for and against ethical issues like abortion, and on behalf of

threatened forests and waterways. In many cases the causes were factional, and governments had been opposed or neutral. This was an internationally significant issue with overwhelming support from not just the populace but also the media and the country's leaders. It is indisputable that, in their strength and ubiquity, the protests of Australians against French nuclear testing in 1995–1996 were extraordinary.

But were they justifiable? Strong criticism of a French decision that seemed to threaten world peace was rational and fully justified. Many Australians, conscious of previous provocations, were genuinely upset by what they felt was a cynical move by the French government. Others clearly followed the herd, whipped on as it was by the media. For these people berating the French had become the thing to do and, as Kim Richard Nossal and Carolyn Vivian have suggested, they could get away with it because they felt they had little to lose.⁸⁸

The build-up of irritants that brought the protests of 1995–96 to boiling point included the notion of French intrusion into a region Australians regarded as their own; disappointment that wartime comradeship seemed to have been forgotten; the feeling that arrogance was as much a part of French culture as it was of French atomic ambitions; and disgust over the unrepentant terrorism of the *Rainbow Warrior* affair. The growing tension among the Australian people might have eased if Jacques Chirac had decided against further nuclear testing in the Pacific. But notwithstanding any of these factors, including the validity of protest action against the French government, there was no justification for Australians taking out their spleen on French residents who deserved better and could in fact have been valuable fellow protesters.

The fallout for French Australians

In 2005 a French-born Australian public servant of some distinction told the writer that he felt quite threatened by the ambient hostility and its intensification in the press as anti-French agitation swept the country soon after Chirac's announcement. This experience was so intimidating that ten years later he was still unable to describe it calmly. A French woman from a family of political activists had a similarly long-lasting emotional reaction, but it was mixed with indignation that developed into a crusade.

Danièle Caraty was born in France but educated at the University of New South Wales, and she runs a little French school in Bondi. Because she had been a supporter of the Socialist president François Mitterrand, who ordered the suspension of nuclear testing in the Pacific in 1992, she was opposed to both the politics and the pro-nuclear policies of his right-wing successor. The announcement that the tests would be resumed dismayed her, but she found the subsequent ridiculing of French people and practices in Sydney newspapers profoundly shocking. On 15 June 1995 the *Sydney Morning Herald* published a ‘Stay in Touch’ piece by David Dale and Malcolm Knox headed ‘Pourquoi les français sont des connards’.⁸⁹ Claiming that the reinstated testing series reflected ‘a fundamental malaise of the soul’, the authors proceeded to satirise everything from French problems in the two world wars (‘they rolled belly-up and waited for the Australians to save them’) to the mistreatment of creatures including geese and frogs. Though Caraty was aware that Dale and Knox were not entirely serious, she considered the piece incendiary in an already tinder-dry situation. That headline was particularly offensive, for the meaning of *connard* ranges from mildly insulting to obscene. Caraty took considerable exception to its use.

Then, the day after the *Herald* article appeared, the Sydney *Daily Telegraph Mirror* published two anti-French pieces.⁹⁰ Mike Gibson poked fun at the French diet (‘they eat horses, don’t they?’), the famous Metro (it ‘smells of Gitanes and garlic and Charles Aznavour’s old socks’) and another French institution, the ubiquitous actor Gérard Depardieu. Gibson wrote banteringly, but the tone of Bob Ellis’s article was vitriolic. He categorised ‘the perfidious Frogs’ as ‘a dense and arrogant people [...] soused on rough red wine from the age of three’ and addicted to ‘snails, adultery and academic fashion’.

Danièle Caraty cited these three pieces in a letter to Chris Puplick of the Anti-Discrimination Board of New South Wales on 21 June 1995:

Dear Sir,

I am a French Australian who has been living in Australia for twenty one years. I have raised children here and created a life in a country that I love.

Alongside other Australians I was outraged by French President Chirac’s decision to resume nuclear testing in the South Pacific. I was also appalled and disgusted at the way some of the media handled the crisis, especially on Thursday 15th June and Friday

16th June 1995. I personally felt vilified [. . . details of the above articles followed].

I therefore and hereby wish to register a formal complaint with the Anti-Discrimination Board.

Yours faithfully,
Danièle Caraty

In the following weeks the Board proceeded to inform the respective newspaper editors of Caraty's grievance and invite their comments. Meanwhile she had organised a modest demonstration in front of the French consulate general in Market Street, Sydney. Its aim was both to publicise French–Australian opposition to Chirac's decision and to protest against what participants regarded as racist rabble-rousing by the media. Caraty was soon sending out dozens of faxes: indignant letters to newspapers and bodies including the Australian Press Council, and supportive letters to French–Australian friends. A petition urging Jacques Chirac to change his mind attracted two hundred signatures. Caraty also asked Sydney's French consul general, Thierry Viteau, to help with publicity. He agreed—provided she was willing to first remove from her document its anti-Chirac preamble.

A powerful supporter was the freelance writer Sophie Masson, another French Australian, who sent off a heated letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* as soon as she saw the Dale and Knox article. Later the paper published a thoughtful essay she wrote about her personal tug-of-war between 'the country of the blood and the country of the heart'—France and Australia.⁹¹

There was encouragement from a few journalists including the late Padraic McGuinness, who called attacks on the French community 'disgraceful',⁹² and Peter Robinson, who identified 'an unpleasant whiff of racism, even fascism' in early reactions.⁹³ Some members of the public wrote to the press pointing out the injustice of targeting French people when condemning the French administration, as did the Foreign Minister, Gareth Evans, after reading Masson's essay. But Caraty's official complaint was getting nowhere, for the editors of both the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Daily Telegraph Mirror* vigorously defended their columnists. At separate conciliation conferences held in October 1995, both papers refused Caraty's request for an apology, and in March of 1996 a law firm gave her little hope of success if she tried to take her complaint further. Under the existing legislation,

inciting racial hatred in others was unlawful; causing anguish directly was not necessarily so. At that point she gave up, and in an interview a few months later admitted that her feelings towards Australia and its media had changed: ‘I don’t trust so easily. I’ve lost something’.⁹⁴

Caraty’s was not the only French racial vilification case to be examined under the *Anti-Discrimination Act 1977* (NSW), Section 20C. She learnt that the Equal Opportunity Tribunal had earlier heard accusations against the maverick broadcaster Clive Robertson for criticising the personal hygiene of French people during a Channel 9 television program. This case too was unsuccessful, the Tribunal declaring the statement trivial and incapable of arousing the racist sentiments alleged. Ironically, actions brought under amendments to the Commonwealth’s Racial Discrimination Act in October 1995—too late for either plaintiff—might have brought different results. From then on the racially motivated public humiliation of a person or group was much more likely to be declared unlawful, although invoking the ‘public interest’ or the defendant’s ‘genuine belief’ could still overturn a claim.

Marie-Paule Leroux, a French Australian living in Richmond, Tasmania, had better luck in that regard. She tells the story in her book *A Frog in the Billabong*:

The *Mercury*, the Tasmanian newspaper, published a series of jokes in bad taste, some even rather salacious, having nothing whatsoever to do with the matter [nuclear testing] but making fun of the French. It was all too much. We [. . .] lodged a formal complaint of racial discrimination with the Tasmanian Minister for [Multicultural and] Ethnic Affairs, Dr Frank Madill. The *Mercury* was forced to publish an apology the following day.⁹⁵

Though Danièle Caraty would have welcomed such a result, the boycotts imposed by Australians seriously affected Leroux’s previously successful food distribution business, whose stock included many French products. Worse still were the snubs of clients with whom she had developed warm relations over the years. At the height of the unpleasantness she and her husband Alain even considered returning to France. One small incident did cheer them, however. A sign reading ‘French suck!’, provoked a neat response from a friend in Hobart: he added one word in bright pink spray paint: *beautifully*.⁹⁶ It was a moment of hilarity in a generally miserable time.

Echoes of the same sentiment are recorded in press reports and private letters from the period. A French Australian living in Hunters Hill, New South Wales, where French immigrants had become prominent citizens in the nineteenth century, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that, opposed as they were to Chirac, he and others of French origin were ‘shocked and frightened’ at being blamed for the president’s announcement of renewed testing.⁹⁷ A former New Zealander of French ancestry wrote an open letter in response to a request by Danièle Caraty. She too had lodged racial vilification complaints, but withdrew them in order to throw her weight behind Caraty’s campaign.

The outpouring of anti-French racism *led* by these articles was shocking, most particularly as it served to divert the reaction away from the French government to the local French population. As someone not identifiably French to the casual observer even I felt a real fear of physical violence against some French facility or French-named business. This fear has been widely expressed throughout the French–Australian community.⁹⁸

A French woman living in Melbourne, who shared Australian anti-test attitudes, found dog droppings smeared on her doorstep and rubbish littering her lawn; she cancelled a French film and cultural festival she had arranged.⁹⁹

There were problems too for the Alliance Française of Sydney, which in 1995 was celebrating its centenary.¹⁰⁰ Unsurprisingly the testing furore had put a pall on celebrations. The director, Yves Corbel, reported that enrolments in Alliance courses were down. ‘The protests are now starting to bite seriously on cultural matters, and on the personal level I feel French people are starting to suffer.’¹⁰¹

A lecturer in French, Michelle Royer, felt ‘personally and professionally attacked’ when she read the ‘xenophobic diatribe’ so stoutly defended by the *Sydney Morning Herald*. In addition to being ‘profoundly shocked’ by it, she argued that vilifying cultural traits contradicted the spirit of the Australian official policy of multiculturalism.¹⁰²

A number of French restaurants had their windows smashed, and owners reported extreme anxiety. The distress of the South Hobart restaurateur Jean-Claude Rival was typical. His establishment had lost 20 to 25 per cent of its usual custom, but more damaging was the fact that some Australians were treating French people ‘as if they were walking around with atomic bombs in

their pockets'.¹⁰³ The French owners of La Guillotine, an Adelaide restaurant, were so completely opposed to the testing program that they prepared an anti-tests petition for diners to sign; they nevertheless remained apprehensive of reduced patronage and damage to their premises.¹⁰⁴ Two Perth restaurateurs described unpleasant experiences just before news broke of the destruction by arson of the French consulate there, and the head waiter at Melbourne's France-Soir feared that such incidents might also occur in Victorian restaurants.¹⁰⁵

An official at the French embassy in Canberra told the writer that the displays of antagonism in 1995 had not touched her, but she became quite emotional when speaking of the general *animosité* and the broken windows of cafés owned by her family. There was much more personal anguish evident, however, in an outburst by the French ambassador, Dominique Girard, whose responses to all the heat had until then been diplomatically impeccable: 'If he had his way [. . .] he would take his two young children away from the Canberra school where they are constantly harassed and back to the school in the village near Béziers which they call home'.¹⁰⁶ A woman who had been a member of canteen staff at Canberra's Telopea Park French–Australian school when the nuclear tests controversy was raging recalled a 'flood of anti-French sentiment' there. In one incident, several students turned their backs as the French national anthem was played during an assembly. Student excursions to Tahiti were cancelled, and French cars owned by teachers were vandalised: 'sadly some of this pent-up steam was vented at some of the French students'.¹⁰⁷

The hostility felt so deeply by these representatives of the 16,000 French Australians resident at the time raises questions about racist attitudes in modern Australia. Perhaps *jingoistic* might be a more appropriate term in the case of the 1995 protests. There was a good deal of metaphorical flag-waving going on, but by the mid-1990s the excesses typical of the bicentennial celebrations in 1988 had faded, and rabid Australian xenophobia had been somewhat diluted by multiculturalism. Furthermore even the comparatively healthy nationalism intrinsic in the push for an Australian republic was too weak to carry off the referendum of 1999 that offered the people that choice.

On the other hand there was more than a tinge of racism in some of the published stereotypes of the French, where *arrogant* was an epithet repeatedly used. Such is the misleading nature of stereotyping, however: it is bigoted, easily intensified emotionally, and deliberately blind to subtle distinctions. Few of those whose criticisms wounded French Australians would have met

many of them, and racism has often flourished when its victims' faces have been indistinct. Moreover the number of French Australians was small and they lacked the solidarity of a closely knit community.

Did Australians regard the French as 'the Other' in 1995, as some have suggested?¹⁰⁸ An ambivalent attitude towards France has been common in Australia—an attitude often critical but also generally appreciative of French culture and in realistic moments deeply envious of it. Such positive recognition has no place in Edward Said's concept of the Other as articulated in his famous work *Orientalism*. In 1995 Australians frequently mocked French people but they did not dismiss them as social inferiors or nonentities. Nevertheless Australia's national consciousness could only be enhanced by its consigning of the French to the status of outsider.

Did multiculturalism let them down? Perhaps: the academic and journalist Don Anderson considered that its much-vaunted harmony was just 'a thin veneer, as fragile and frangible as the *brûlée* surface of your *crème*'.¹⁰⁹ Yet the French Tasmanian Marie-Paule Leroux, who had felt the sting of ostracism during the nuclear testing period, regards Australians as normally being 'among the least racist and the most tolerant people on earth, [...] the best proof worldwide that multiculturalism is possible'.¹¹⁰

While the most spiteful caricatures promulgated by the press probably constituted racial vilification,¹¹¹ regardless of the legal view, the anti-French sentiment widespread among the public was more likely to have been a matter of ignorance or thoughtlessness—unedifying though that was. Whatever the motivation, it is a regrettable fact that those who indulged in derogatory characterisations of the French people because of the actions of the government of France in 1995–1996 brought undeserved distress to many fellow citizens. The tradition of a fair go claimed by Australians might have curbed such behaviour in less emotionally charged circumstances. But by 1995, incrementally built resentments over French nuclear testing had released social forces so powerful that French Australians had little hope of resisting them.

Aftermath

It might well be asked whether French–Australian relations were permanently damaged by the confrontations of the time. Commentators agree that they were not. As promised, the French government signed the Comprehensive Test Ban

Treaty in 1996. Trade and tourism rapidly recovered, regional cooperation in both the Pacific and the Antarctic resumed, and participants in a commission on nuclear disarmament set up by Paul Keating included a former French prime minister.

Individuals have possibly been slower to forgive than governments, but this recovery fits a pattern Ivan Barko has repeatedly observed: that even strong disagreements between Australia and France are quickly resolved, but may be just as quickly revived.¹¹²

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Notes

- 1 This article is a much-reduced and refocused version of my 2007 Macquarie University honours history thesis entitled 'Australians and French nuclear testing in the Pacific, 1995–96'. It has been necessary to omit most of its international, historiographical and historical backdrop including some of the reasons for France's attachment to its nuclear cause, Australia's own atomic past, and political problems in the 1990s for both countries. The full paper also explored French–Australian cultural and trading links, examined aspects of the situation in French Polynesia, and reproduced more than a dozen telling cartoons from the period.
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- 3 Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War*, Canberra, ANU Press, 1974, p. 283. The figures were assembled from an array of sometimes conflicting official sources.
- 4 Sylvia Lawson, *The Archibald Paradox: A Strange Case of Authorship*, Ringwood, Vic., Penguin, 1983, pp. 253–254.
- 5 Derek Woolner, *Raison d'État and Popular Response: The Resumption of French Nuclear Testing in the South Pacific*, Current Issues Brief n° 47, 1994/95, Canberra, Parliamentary Research Service, 1995, pp. 2–3. The figures vary a little, but this seems the most reliable source as it uses data released by the French themselves.
- 6 Desmond J. Ball, *Australia and Nuclear Non-Proliferation*, Working Paper n° 4, Canberra, Strategic and Defence Centre, Australian National University, 1979, pp. 5–6.

- 7 *Australian Treaty Series 1973* n° 3, Canberra, AGPS, 1995, online at <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/dfat/treaties/1973/3.html>.
- 8 *Briefing Papers on Australia's Response to France's Decision to Resume Nuclear Testing in the South Pacific*, Canberra, Parliamentary and Media Branch, Dept of Foreign Affairs and Trade, August 1995, p. 2. Initial members of the Forum were Nauru, Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, the Cook Islands, Australia and New Zealand: see J. A. Camilleri, *An Introduction to Australian Foreign Policy*, Brisbane, Jacaranda, 3rd edition, 1976, p. 63.
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- 11 Hymans, 'Isotopes and Identity', p. 14.
- 12 Alice Cawte, *Atomic Australia, 1944–1990*, Sydney, NSW University Press, 1992, pp. 142–143.
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- 14 *White Paper on French Nuclear Tests*, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Paris, Service d'Information et de Presse, June 1973, p. 1.
- 15 'We've won the N-test case, says Cairns', *The Age*, 23 December 1974, p. 4.
- 16 Andrew Denton, introduction to his interview with Helen Caldicott on 'Enough Rope', ABC TV, 23 June 2003.
- 17 Helen Caldicott, *A Passionate Life*, Sydney, Random House, 1996, p. 129.
- 18 Caldicott, *A Passionate Life*, pp. 129–130. Information re Murdoch, Helen Caldicott, personal communication.
- 19 John Ross, ed., *Chronicle of Australia*, Ringwood, Vic., Chronicle, 1993, p. 682.
- 20 'A bomb for the French', *The Australian*, 14 June 1972, p. 1.
- 21 'France resumes tests', *The Australian*, 20 June 1972, p. 6.
- 22 *The Australian*, 15 June 1972, p. 6.
- 23 See for example *Adelaide Advertiser*, 13 June 1972, p. 5, 14 June 1972, p. 5.
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- 25 J. M. Gebicki to the Right Honourable G. Whitlam, 20 June 1973.
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- collection/1973/19730722_French_test_fallout/.
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- 31 Fitzgibbon, 2 June 1972, WWF Peace files, NBAC, N114/996.
- 32 N. Docker to WWF branches and councillors, 30 June 1972, WWF Peace files, NBAC, N114/996; NBAC, N114/998.
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- 40 Nic Maclellan & Jean Chesneaux, *After Moruroa: France in the South Pacific*, Melbourne, Ocean Press, 1998, p. 13.
- 41 Bell, *Dependent Ally*, p. 165.
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- 45 Letters to the editor, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 June 1995, p. 12.
- 46 Letters to the editor, *Mercury*, 20 June 1995, p. 19.

- 47 Ramesh Thakur, 'Mururoa: why Canberra must take the high ground', *Australian Financial Review*, 26 July 1995, p. 16.
- 48 Adrian Carton to M. Barrett, November 2007.
- 49 Gareth Evans, transcript of news conference, Tokyo, 14 June 1995, pp. 2–4.
- 50 Stewart Firth, 'The Road to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty: Responses to French Nuclear Testing during 1995', *Australian Quarterly*, vol. 68, n° 1, 1996, pp. 80–81.
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- 61 'Chirac's plan is Pacific madness', *West Australian*, 15 June 1995, p. 12.
- 62 See for example 'Evans denounces France before UN', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 October 1995, p. 15.
- 63 See for example Piquet, *Cold War in Warm Waters*, p. 29.
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- 82 Firth, 'The Road to the Comprehensive Test Ban', p. 87.
- 83 Keith Suter, interviewed by M. Barrett, May 2007. The initiative referred to was the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which called on both sides to destroy existing weapons.
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- 85 'Sydney voices fury at France', *Adelaide Advertiser*, 15 July 1995, p. 5.
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- 90 Mike Gibson, 'Why France is on the nose' and Bob Ellis, 'How the French bombed out on good manners', both in *Daily Telegraph Mirror*, 16 June 1995, pp. 10 and 11 respectively.
- 91 Sophie Masson, 'Country of my blood, country of my heart', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 August 1995, p. 15. A version of this article, much expanded, and sharper in its criticism of Australian vindictiveness, appeared as 'Chain reaction: Anti-French hysteria in Australia', in *Quadrant*, December 1995, pp. 26–90.
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- 93 Peter Robinson, 'Ugly whiff of racism', *Sun-Herald*, 16 July 1995, p. 30.
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- 106 Helen Pitt, 'Let me out of here: the man from Paris drops a bombshell', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 October 1995, p. 1.
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- 111 Bob Ellis's article is considered to be a case in point by Nossal & Vivian, *A Brief Madness*, pp. 25–26.
- 112 Ivan Barko, unpublished article, ' "Francophiles . . . aren't we all?" Towards a history of Australia's love-hate relationship with the French', pp. 8–9.