

SUPPORTING THE FREE FRENCH IN NEW CALEDONIA: FIRST STEPS IN AUSTRALIAN DIPLOMACY

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Through its role in installing the Free French Governor in New Caledonia, in the early days of World War II, the Australian government took some of its first independent foreign policy decisions, evaluating its own interests separately from those of Britain. It did so at a time of confusion and indecision in New Caledonia, and when de Gaulle was seeking to establish his credentials as France's resistance leader by rallying the French overseas empire to his cause. And it did so by relying on the judgment and professional behaviour of Australians on the ground, including its newly appointed Official Representative Bertram C. Ballard and Captain H.A. Showers of the Royal Australian Navy.

Australia's handling of events in New Caledonia was a first exercise in implementing its own processes to make diplomatic and military decisions necessary for its defence, in Canberra rather than in London, with the British perspective as one of a number of inputs. The episode has been overlooked in histories of Australia's early foreign policy, which have tended to see it as essentially subservient to that of Britain at the time.¹ Archival material from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs puts the installation of the Free French Governor in New Caledonia, and the early establishment of Australian representation in Noumea, in a new light.²

Early Australian Diplomatic Institutions

By late 1940, the institutions of Australian diplomacy were in a fledgling state. Australia's foreign policy, and most of its overseas representation, were controlled by Britain.³ An Australian Department of External Affairs had existed from the time of Federation in 1901 until the middle of World War I, when the Prime Minister's Department took over its functions (from 1916). The Department was re-formed in 1921 but operated still within the Prime Minister's Department until 1935, when it assumed a separate identity.

Prime Minister Menzies had signalled, in his first speech as Prime Minister in April 1939, that for Australia, 'in the Pacific we have primary responsibilities and primary risks'. Contrasting this with Australia's dependence

on guidance from Britain in its dealings with European affairs, Menzies stated that ‘the problems of the Pacific are different. What Great Britain calls the Far East is to us the near North [...]. In the Pacific Australia must regard herself as a principal providing her own information and maintaining her own diplomatic contacts with foreign powers’.⁴ Still, at the beginning of World War II, Australia had just three diplomatic missions overseas, none of them in the neighbouring South Pacific.⁵ It had had a High Commissioner in London from 1901. It opened a separate diplomatic mission in Washington only in February 1940, having posted an officer with the British Embassy there from 1937 to 1940. And Australia had established a diplomatic mission in Ottawa in March 1940.

French Pacific: Australian Perceptions

Australians’ perceptions of their French neighbours in New Caledonia and the New Hebrides in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were generally not warm. The declaration of French annexation of New Caledonia in 1853 had been coldly received in Australia. The *Sydney Morning Herald* of 2 November 1853 lamented that ‘by the laxity of the British government [...] the opportunity of colonizing that fine group [had] been lost’.⁶ Australia had consistently pressed London to colonise, with the more extreme advocates arguing for British hegemony in the southwest Pacific and the eviction of the Germans and French from the area.⁷ Australia was particularly opposed to calls for French annexation of the New Hebrides, which many saw as within Australia’s sphere.⁸ By the late nineteenth century, views on New Caledonia were shaped by the feeling, curious for a country itself built by convicts, that a loathsome penal settlement operated in the neighbourhood just as Australia had ridded itself of this curse, expressed in concerns that escaped convicts would make their way onto Australia’s fair shores.⁹

Australian perceptions of a menacing France were reciprocated. There was a French perception, fuelled by views such as that reported in the *Herald* above, that Australia wanted to displace the French in New Caledonia to protect its economic interests.¹⁰ Against their own value systems, some French people, even officials, had a disdain for Australians, typified in the report of one French diplomat who in 1936 described Australians as lacking taste, having never ‘seen a fine piece of furniture, a beautiful painting, a truly elegant woman,

[... nor] eaten a decent meal. In the things that interest us, the Australian public is uneducated and uneducable'.¹¹ But despite all the acrimony in the Australian press, as John Lawrey indicated, 'Australasian colonists [...] never seriously questioned the permanency of French sovereignty over New Caledonia'.¹² This belief was shaken temporarily when France fell to the Nazis in 1940.

Installing the Free French Governor

When Paris fell in June 1940, the uncertainties led to division and a degree of chaos in New Caledonia. To appreciate Australia's role, it is important to understand the situation on the ground in some detail.¹³

The French Governor in New Caledonia, Georges-Marc Pélicier, was a senior colonial civil servant who, like many of his peers, saw Noumea as a brief career stepping-stone, and had not engaged in the society he administered. New Caledonia had seen ten Governors in rapid succession between the two World Wars.¹⁴ When a collaborationist government was set up at Vichy, he was in a most difficult position as to whose interest he was to serve.

For their part, the local European residents, or 'Caldoches', who dominated life in the archipelago, had a love-hate relationship with the metropolitan power and the French officials Paris posted to administer them. The Caldoches referred to these metropolitan itinerants as '*zoreilles*', from '*les oreilles*', suggesting big ears constantly listening to what was going on. The Caldoches themselves were loosely divided into the *broussards*, or rural farmers and bush dwellers, and those who lived an urban lifestyle in Noumea. On the one hand, the Caldoches were proud French nationals, but on the other, they were suspicious and temperamental in dealing with officials from the Hexagon, seeing them as arrogant and not particularly attuned to their interests.¹⁵ Still, by 1940, there had been little recent push by the Caldoches for independence. There had been violent Melanesian uprisings in 1878 and 1917, but these had been firmly controlled. A tentative call for autonomy and dominion status had been made in 1932 by Edmond Cave, a Caldoche,¹⁶ but did not gather momentum. By 1940 the General Council, a body created in 1885, remained the main Caldoche point of pressure on the French Governor, but with consultative status only.

News of the Nazi occupation and the armistice was slow to reach the colony. An Australian radio announcement of 15 June was the first indication

of events, confirmed only on 23 June.¹⁷ The majority inclination of the Caldoches, *broussards* and city-dwellers alike, was to reject Vichy and support the British in fighting the German occupiers, although there was a small group of Vichy sympathisers in Noumea.¹⁸ Pélacier initially sought to respond to the general Caldoche view supporting continued resistance. The General Council meeting on 24 June proclaimed that New Caledonia would continue to fight at the side of Great Britain, a position Pélacier supported in a declaration to the Council.¹⁹ He was less forthcoming to a bid for greater autonomy by a local lawyer, Michel Vergès, who promulgated a manifesto, also on 24 June, seeking a sovereign assembly to take over the Governor's powers. Vergès was promptly arrested. Nonetheless, the General Council, on 26 June, drew up a four-point programme calling for a Popular Assembly, which Pélacier equally ignored when he addressed the Council on 27 June. Pélacier cancelled 14 July gatherings, and the locals took to the streets in a defiant demonstration.²⁰

Local councillors demanded a special meeting of the Council, and on 22 July, Pélacier addressed the reconvened Council and publicly reaffirmed his 24 June statement supporting solidarity with the British.²¹ The Council again considered Vergès' proposals for autonomy, calling for a representative assembly and related referendum, on 26 July.²² By this time, however, Pélacier had received a pressuring cable from Pétain; and on 29 July, he gazetted Vichy's constitutional laws, provoking an angry demonstration by Caldoches. To his credit, Pélacier had resisted Vichy's pressure to break all ties with Britain (and implicitly Australia) by advising Vichy of the colony's dependence on Australia for supplies, risking famine, unemployment, social unrest and dependence on Japan for nickel markets if links were to be severed.²³ The question of nickel markets was important, as New Caledonia had large deposits of nickel, and Japan was a customer, with the potential to on-sell to Germany.

But the horse had bolted, and on 29 July, following Pélacier's gazetting of Vichy's constitution without consultation, the General Council expressed its disapproval of the Governor, and resolved to contact General de Gaulle directly. In response, Pélacier belatedly sought to address the Council's earlier call for more autonomy by proposing a Consultative Committee, but met with mounting popular disapproval in a tour around New Caledonia.²⁴ In the meantime, individual Caldoches wrote directly to General de Gaulle, seeking his support in establishing a Gaullist government and in maintaining access to Australian markets. De Gaulle replied by urging them to form a Free

French Committee, and undertook to contact Britain and its dominions.²⁵ On Pélécier's return to Noumea from his unpopular tour around the main island, on 18 August, a bomb was thrown at his official residence.

In his declining days at the helm, Pélécier called for the Vichy government to send a warship to Noumea, and the *Dumont d'Urville* arrived from Papeete on 23 August, captained by a confirmed Vichy supporter, Commander Toussaint de Quièvecourt. Toussaint de Quièvecourt immediately reported to Vichy that the local agitators were subsidised by Australia, whose real aim was to annex New Caledonia.²⁶

Establishment of the Free France Movement

At this time, Charles de Gaulle was an exiled French military officer struggling to put together an alternative government in the wake of the German invasion and the collapse of French resistance. He perceived, early after the Nazi invasion of northern France, that the loyalty of the overseas possessions of France could help him consolidate his position, and made his famous *Appel*, or call, for the support of the Empire, on 18 June.²⁷ As Munholland noted,

Beginning as an improvised coalition of those who [...] chose to continue to fight at the side of Great Britain, the Free French under de Gaulle's leadership became a political movement devoted to a defense of the French Empire from its perceived enemies and served as a Gaullist instrument for the recovery of French grandeur, prestige and influence after the humiliation of 1940.²⁸

As such, the *ralliement*, or the rallying to the cause of the Free French, of the overseas territories, had great symbolic value. It also had real value, in the need, which de Gaulle also saw, to neutralise, early, potential Vichy colonial and naval power overseas.²⁹ Martin Thomas, in his military history of the *ralliement* in the empire, argued that 'control of the French empire was vital to the competing French leaderships of 1940-44, since the empire was a physical embodiment of what limited independence remained to the Vichy regime'.³⁰

The British supported de Gaulle in his mission to shore up colonial support in Africa, with mixed results. Chad, Cameroon and the Congo had all converted to Free France by September 1940, with Gabon following in

November.³¹ As Pélicier and the Caldoches grappled over New Caledonia's position, Churchill was preparing a joint venture with de Gaulle to retrieve Dakar in West Africa. The British fleet, with de Gaulle on board, attacked on 23 September, with disastrous results. Vichy forces fired on the British fleet forcing a humiliating retreat.

In the Pacific, Free French rallies had succeeded, in New Hebrides on 18 July, and French Polynesia on 3 September. De Gaulle sought the inclusion of a French representative in British, US and Australian discussions of the Pacific, a request which the British rejected.³²

Australia Takes its Decision to Act

To this point, at least from the armistice in June 1940, Australia had not been a disinterested bystander. On 18 June, the War Cabinet had discussed events in New Caledonia, marked by concern that the Japanese presence in New Caledonia, associated with its ongoing purchase of nickel, posed a threat to Australian security, particularly with the Australian navy having left for the Mediterranean. This appears to be the first discussion of events in New Caledonia by the Australian Cabinet.³³ There was a broader concern about Japanese intentions in the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia), Indo-China, and Hong Kong.³⁴ The Department of External Affairs identified early that, of all the French possessions overseas, including Indo-China, it was most concerned about New Caledonia. It counselled caution, and the continuing support for the Bordeaux (later Vichy) government, unless an effective resistance could be organised.³⁵ One of the early options Canberra considered, if only briefly, was an Australian takeover of New Caledonia (and then the New Hebrides), to forestall Japan, an option considered unattractive as it could provide a precedent for Japan to do the same in the Dutch East Indies.³⁶

Australia at this time drew its concerns about the vulnerabilities of the French Pacific islands to the attention of Britain and the United States. London responded by expressing concern at Japanese nickel purchases from New Caledonia, and suggesting Australia send a representative to Noumea.³⁷ Washington was not responsive.³⁸ On its own initiative, Australia negotiated with the director of France's nickel producer, the *Société le Nickel*, to purchase nickel matte, in July 1940, in order to encourage the colony to cease exporting to its major purchaser, Japan, with the primary aim of heading off on-shipment

to Germany. This act was described by Lawrey as ‘a matter of enlightened self-interest’, since Australia had no need of nickel supplies and was acting solely to maintain a market for New Caledonia and keep it in the ‘allied orbit’.³⁹ The British Government registered its appreciation for this action.⁴⁰

Immediately after the armistice, Australia (along with New Zealand) sent a message of sympathy to Governor Pélacier.⁴¹ Pélacier responded by stating ‘our firm resolve to co-operate with the French community throughout the whole world for the liberation of France, for which it has decided to continue the struggle by the side of the British Empire’, and seeking supplies from Australia.⁴²

Australia was very closely monitoring developments in New Caledonia. It was concerned at reports from an Australian, Oughton, sent to negotiate the purchase of chrome from New Caledonia, that the Governor was showing exaggerated respect for the Japanese Consul, granting a licence for the sale of nickel to Japan.⁴³

In July, the Australian Government decided to appoint an Official Representative to Noumea, posting Bertram C. Ballard in the position. Ballard was a French-speaking lawyer who had been based in Vila from 1934. He was instructed to keep the Australian Government ‘fully informed on political and economic conditions in New Caledonia’ and to assess the attitudes of ‘officials, the General Council, and Caledonians’ towards both Vichy and General de Gaulle’s movement. He was to avoid ‘any public activity which could be interpreted as political rather than commercial’, to prevent ‘an excuse being given to Japan for interference in the maintenance of the political status quo of other areas of the Pacific or of New Caledonia itself’.⁴⁴ In the event, Pélacier delayed the arrival of Ballard until 15 August, the end of the General Council’s session, in order to prevent the appearance of Ballard before it.⁴⁵ Ballard’s office in Noumea became Australia’s fourth diplomatic mission overseas (preceding our first mission in Paris by five years, the latter being established in June 1945).

On 9 August, the British High Commissioner in Fiji, responsible for the Western Pacific, Sir Harry Luke, had recommended that Britain send a warship with Free French officials on board to establish an administration in New Caledonia.⁴⁶ On 10 August, de Gaulle sent a message to Henri Sautot, the French Resident Commissioner in the New Hebrides, advising that he wanted him to replace Pélacier. At this time, the New Hebrides was a condominium

administered jointly by Britain and France, each of whom designated a Resident Commissioner. Henri Sautot had been the French Resident Commissioner from 1933. Much loved in the small Pacific community, Sautot was ‘small, fat and jovial, with an impressive ginger moustache which had earned him the nickname “*Pommes-paille*” [“Straw-potatoes”].’⁴⁷ While he worked well with the British in Vila, he was nonetheless a true French patriot, and had been instrumental in the early *ralliement* of the New Hebrides, on 18 July. He had also worked with Australia to build a strategically important flying-boat base at Vila.⁴⁸

But Canberra bided its time, until it received a report from Ballard, newly arrived in Noumea. Canberra described the recommended action as ‘precipitate’ and ‘inappropriate’, amounting to an act of war against the Vichy government. While noting some ambiguity about the attitude of officials, Canberra judged that the overwhelming majority of the people were wholeheartedly on the side of de Gaulle, and believed that the Governor desired to move in the same direction as the rest of the population.⁴⁹

On 28 August, de Gaulle asked the British to provide a warship to escort Sautot from Vila to Noumea to take up the post of Governor of New Caledonia. Because the area came under the auspices of the Australian Naval Station, the British in turn asked Australia to make available the cruiser *HMAS Adelaide* to install Sautot.⁵⁰ In New Caledonia, on the same day, 28 August, a few days after the arrival of the Vichy vessel, the *Dumont d’Urville*, and with Pélicier’s popularity in New Caledonia in tatters, the General Council passed a resolution asking for the recall of Pélicier by Vichy. At the same time, Toussaint de Quièvre court, commander of the *Dumont d’Urville*, concluded that the Governor had lost control of the situation, his officers referring to him as ‘a wet noodle’.⁵¹ A day later, Vichy appointed Lt Col Maurice Denis, commander of the local French garrison, as Acting Governor.

At this point Britain’s High Commissioner for the Western Pacific, Luke, arrived in Noumea on a scheduled visit to the archipelago, on 30 and 31 August. The complexities of the situation were manifest: Pélicier was still *in situ*, and Denis had been appointed to replace him. Ballard described a dinner party for Luke where both Pélicier and Denis were present, as characterised by ‘scarcely-restrained hysteria’.⁵² The next day, Luke received a delegation from the General Council pledging support for Great Britain and claiming the majority desire for more autonomy with only a nominal link to France during

the war. But Luke was obliged to leave hurriedly on his official vessel after receiving a threat by Toussaint de Quièvecourt to detain any British ships in the harbour.⁵³

The Australian government continued to reserve its position. Its instructions to Ballard on 29 August show that Canberra did not want the French administering power to be overwhelmed by protesting Caldoches, which might lead to Australia being asked to fill the breach, with potential for misinterpretation and consequences elsewhere (particularly in French Indo-China). Canberra thought the best solution at the time might be for ‘an administration owing nominal allegiance to Vichy only but sympathetically inclined to the wishes of the local populace in regard to continuing the war effort—in other words to co-operate with the Allies as far as possible’, and instructed Ballard to encourage this result.⁵⁴ It should be remembered that there was no Free French organisation in the colony at this time.⁵⁵ The armed *Durmont d’Urville* had been in Noumea’s port from 23 August, and it was by no means certain that a mission could peaceably install Sautot over the Vichy Governor’s head. And Ballard was reporting that there were rumours, he believed being spread officially, that Australia wanted to annex New Caledonia; and that the popular movement appeared to aim at establishing some kind of autonomy to enable cooperation with the allies until the end of the War, after which it would rejoin a French constitutional organisation.⁵⁶

Despite its caution, the Australian government, on 2 September, instructed Captain H.A. Showers, commander of the aged Australian naval vessel, *HMAS Adelaide*, to position the vessel in the port of Vila, till the situation clarified.⁵⁷ At this time, Ballard was still reporting that the prospect of local Caldoches working with Vichy’s Denis as Governor, and yet supporting the British allied effort, which he had been asked to encourage, was possible.⁵⁸

Meanwhile, on 3 September, Tahiti rallied to de Gaulle. And on 5 September, at 4.30 in the morning, Pélicier and his family left New Caledonia.⁵⁹

Australia continued to evaluate the position, relying on reports not only from London but from the region, notably on Luke’s report on 7 September of his visit to Noumea,⁶⁰ and from Australia’s own Representative, Ballard. The records show that there were various issues of concern. The overriding concern was the need to ensure a working French-administered allied authority in New Caledonia, precluding an excuse for Japanese intervention, which Canberra

strongly affirmed in a cable to London.⁶¹ A second concern was that there were signs in British reporting that the British were not fully aware of the difficulty of the situation on the ground in New Caledonia. One cable from London reported that up to one half of the crew of the *Dumont d'Urville* were pro-de Gaulle, and were in effect proposing that Australia pressure the Denis administration; and Luke reported that the Gaullists were planning to over-run the *Dumont*.⁶² London also referred positively to 'great and growing feeling' in favour of de Gaulle in other territories, citing 'French Equatorial Africa, Congo and Cameroon, New Hebrides and Tahiti'; and expressed confidence that other parts of West Africa would follow suit.⁶³ This assessment was to be proved fatally incorrect at Dakar only a week or so later.⁶⁴

On 8 September, Canberra sought a read-out from Ballard. It was only after he assessed that the hope of a 'complaisant Vichy Governor' was not realisable, and that the people would 'welcome and follow' a Governor appointed by de Gaulle,⁶⁵ that Canberra took its decision. Australia agreed, on 10 September, and on the basis of its own assessments,⁶⁶ to support the de Gaulle and British plan to install Sautot. In conveying that decision to Sautot, Prime Minister Menzies indicated his 'desire that the situation in New Caledonia should be urgently settled *in accordance with the wish of the population*' [my italics].⁶⁷

Australia's handling of subsequent events, through Canberra's decisions and the actions of Captain Showers, were similarly based on its own assessments of events on the ground, as distinct from those of the British. Picking up on a reference in Luke's reporting to his own pressuring of Sautot to embark, the Australian War Cabinet decided to underline to Captain Showers that it was for Sautot to be responsible for the decision to proceed, and that Showers was not to take Sautot against his wishes.⁶⁸

Showers drew up a plan of action which responded to Sautot's strong advice that the Free French forces should have prior knowledge of his arrival and 'make the necessary preparations for his disembarkation'.⁶⁹ The local British Resident Commissioner in the New Hebrides, R.D. Blandy, who had recently returned from Noumea, had emphasized, to both Luke in Suva and the British in London, the need for securing the active cooperation of the New Caledonian de Gaulle supporters in advance of the operation. Neither Luke nor London 'thought to take any action on his recommendation'.⁷⁰

On 16 September, Captain Showers and the *Adelaide* duly left Vila for Noumea, accompanying Sautot who was aboard a Norwegian ship, the *Norden*, consistent with de Gaulle's instructions that the operation was to be conducted as a French operation, with merely contingent support from the *Adelaide*.⁷¹ In the early hours of the morning of 19 September 1940, the *Adelaide* and the *Norden* approached the southern passage through the reef near Noumea. They were awaiting the agreed signal that the Free French were in control, and that it was safe to transfer Sautot to Noumea. A Gaullist boat was to throw two kerosene tins into waters off the Anse Vata beach at various intervals.⁷²

Meanwhile, despite all attempts at secrecy, Sautot's planned arrival was well known in New Caledonia. Sautot himself explained that one of the Free French Committee had confided the information to his mistress who, although a loyal Gaullist herself, could not restrain herself from spreading it.⁷³ Ashore, the French *broussards* had descended on the capital, from their stations and towns in the bush, to prepare the way for the new Governor. Denis, after a pitiful show of indecision during which he twice dissolved into uncontrolled sobbing, finally escaped the crowd through a back window at Government House, ultimately to be detained under house arrest in the village of La Foa.⁷⁴

In the event, the two vessels lumbered into Noumea harbour, to see the *Dumont d'Urville* moored with guns trained fore and aft. It was later discovered that shore batteries had been given orders to open fire on the *Adelaide*, orders which were not carried out.⁷⁵ Toussaint de Quièvre court did send a launch to approach the two ships, but without engaging with them. In response, the *Adelaide*'s commander, Captain Showers, diverted from his instructions and transferred Sautot from the *Norden* onto his vessel for his own safety, and the *Norden* set sail back out through the harbour. Having heard from the Free French Committee that the Vichy Governor was still in place, Showers decided to stay in the area beyond the agreed deadline. His patience was rewarded. By the end of the afternoon, a Gaullist boat approached, and took delivery of Governor Sautot, accompanying him to the Governor's Residence amidst crowds singing the Marseillaise.

Australian diplomacy again was tested. The *Adelaide* continued to patrol, wary of the *Dumont d'Urville*, whose captain showed prudent restraint, especially since some of the *broussards* in the capital were fully enjoying their victory in the streets. There were reports that a second Vichy vessel, the *Amiral Charner*, was on its way from Indo-China to Noumea.⁷⁶ On 20 September,

Toussaint de Quièvecourt formally protested the *Adelaide's* presence and threatened a showdown. With both Showers and the Vichy captain referring to their capitals, tensions persisted for several days. Canberra instructed Showers to detain and deport Vichy supporters and to tell Sautot that if he were to ask for 'protection against any attempt to interfere with the internal control or administration of the territory or against any vessel hostile to Free France', that protection would be provided.⁷⁷ Both Canberra and London were conscious of the Dakar operation under way at the time, which led to the instruction to use force if necessary.⁷⁸ Assurances were given of fuel and supplies if the *Dumont* proceeded to Indo-China.

Showers succeeded in deflecting suggestions of military protection for Sautot, instead counselling against the use of force. Despite Toussaint de Quièvecourt initially declining to receive him, Showers managed to have the latter call on him and conveyed the proposal, discreetly moving the *Adelaide* to a more distant position.⁷⁹ In his discussions, Showers was also able to negotiate the departure of Vichy-sympathising officials on a merchant vessel, the *Pierre Loti*. On 25 September the *Dumont d'Urville* left Noumea, and Vichy's vessel *Amiral Charner*, sent from Saigon, never arrived in Noumea.

On 2 October, in order to preserve stability once the *Adelaide* departed, Canberra sent further instructions to Ballard that the detained pro-Vichy elements be deported from New Caledonia before the *Adelaide* departed, agreeing that they be taken initially to Sydney for safe passage to Indo-China.⁸⁰ This was done.

In subsequent days, Showers also smoothed over differences between Sautot and the local Gaullist leaders over the latter's energetic rounding-up of alleged Vichy supporters, bordering on the forcible in the case of a senior French civil servant, Secretary-General André Bayardelle. Concerned that such tensions could undermine his agreement with Toussaint de Quièvecourt, Showers addressed the Free French Committee himself to explain the terms of the deal he had struck.⁸¹

Before he left Noumea, Showers toured the defences of Noumea, which he concluded were 'deplorable' and 'useless',⁸² a question which the Australian government was to take up in coming months, initiating a military reconnaissance mission visit in February 1941,⁸³ and a subsequent programme to improve New Caledonian defence. The increasing independence and confidence of Australia's policy was not lost on de Gaulle, who insisted that

all matters of policy be negotiated through London to assure that his French National Committee would play a significant role in the defence of France's Pacific territories.⁸⁴

Australia maintained its distinctive policy approach in its treatment of French representation in Australia. It showed some ambiguity towards the Vichy and de Gaulle camps well into the War, departing from British policy. Australia accepted de Gaulle's nominee, André Brénac as a Free France representative to Australia in 1942, while allowing the Vichy Consul in Sydney to continue to operate, whereas Britain had closed Vichy missions in all of its colonies.⁸⁵

Conclusion

Australia's role in installing Henri Sautot as Free French Governor of New Caledonia represented one of the first examples of Australian diplomatic engagement within its region on the basis of its own assessments of its interests. Australia did not simply bow to British instructions. Nor did it simplistically defend continuing administration of the territory by Vichy. Instead, it conducted measured and calculated diplomatic activity, from its early watchfulness over the nickel market with Japan, to its role in ensconcing Sautot, and its follow-up military shoring up of New Caledonia's defences in its own interests.

Making sound decisions called for sensitivity, ingenuity, diplomatic subtlety and professionalism. The professional and personal qualities of Ballard, who speedily established Australia's fourth diplomatic mission overseas in trying circumstances, and of Captain Showers, one 'of the first generation of graduates of the Royal Australian Naval College to reach the rank of Captain',⁸⁶ were pivotal in the success of the operation.

The episode took place at a critical time in the War, against the background of wider interests as France fell and the future of its global empire was in doubt. Australia's caution, and its decisions, were all the more impressive in that the events took place well before the fall of Singapore and before Pearl Harbour, and before the Americans themselves had defined their approach to Vichy and de Gaulle. 'For Australia, grappling with particular issues related to wartime France and its territories, there were no clear policy guidelines; nor was there agreement between her major allies, Britain and the United States, on the manner in which divided France should be treated.'⁸⁷

Against the background of earlier Australian calls for British hegemony in the Pacific to defend its interests, the Sautot episode also represented the first time that the Australian government appreciated the strategic importance of effective *French* administration of its near neighbour, New Caledonia, as a direct element in its own security.⁸⁸ Australia's early establishment of one of its first diplomatic missions, in Noumea, reflected the significance, for it, of having its own links with New Caledonia.

Australia's action involved close cooperation with the various layers of influence in Australia's French near neighbour, all the while maintaining contact with de Gaulle from his London base on the other side of the world, through the intermediary of the British. Australia's experience of its dealings with New Caledonia at the time, with its complex layers of formal links to central French headquarters, to British representatives in Vila and Suva, and to Noumea on the ground with local Caldoches and French-based officials, was to leave an indelible imprint on Australian policy-making circles. The Sautot episode represented one of Australia's first involvements in regional multi-lateral cooperation, with Britain, the dual elements of France at the time, and New Zealand.⁸⁹ It led to a greater awareness in Australia of the Pacific island region and its relevance to Australian security. It initiated a habit of regional consultation and cooperation, a process which, to this day, includes France.⁹⁰

With a stable Free French administration established in Noumea, and subsequent Australian attention to building the defences of New Caledonia, the path was set for the American military presence in New Caledonia during World War II. This proved vital to the US victory in the Coral Sea, and ultimately to Australia's national defence.

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Notes

- 1 For example, Alan Watt, *The Evolution of Australian Foreign Policy 1938-1965*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1967; Coral Bell, *Dependent Ally*, Canberra, Allen and Unwin, 1988; Stewart Firth, *Australia in International Politics*, Crows Nest, Allen and Unwin, 2005, make no mention of the New Caledonian episode, nor do Gareth Evans and Bruce Grant in their summary of Australian diplomatic posts and foreign policy evolution to World War II, which they describe as a time of 'Australian foreign policy subservience' in *Australia's Foreign Relations*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1991, p. 19. David Day in *The Great Betrayal: Britain, Australia and the Onset of the Pacific War 1939-42*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1992, sees a continuing dependency of Australia on British initiatives during the growing crisis in the Pacific, including in a brief reference to New Caledonia (pp. 59-60); and T.B. Millar in *Australia in Peace and War*, Australian National University Press, 1991, situates the New Caledonia events in the context of British-led concerns about Japan (p. 99).
- 2 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy 1937-1949*, vols I-XVI, 'Historical Documents' series, 1975-2001, available on DFAT website in 'Historical Documents' database at <http://www.info.dfat.gov.au/info/historical/HistDocs>.
- 3 L. Cleland, 'From the Archives', *The Journal of Pacific History*, vol. 9, n° 1, 2008, pp. 164-171.
- 4 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 April 1939, p. 9.
- 5 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Statement of Service: Appointments and Biographies*, Canberra, Commonwealth Government, June 2000, pp. 1-76.
- 6 John Lawrey, *The Cross of Lorraine in the South Pacific: Australia and the Free French Movement 1940-1942*, Canberra, ANU Printing Service, 1982, p. 18.
- 7 John Dunmore, *Visions and Realities: France in the Pacific, 1695-1995*, Waikanae, N.Z., Heritage Press, 1997, p. 195.
- 8 Dunmore, *Visions and Realities*, p. 199, and Robert Aldrich, *The French Presence in the South Pacific, 1842-1940*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1990, p. 224.
- 9 Aldrich, *The French Presence*, p. 225.
- 10 Xavier Pons, *Le Géant du Pacifique*, Paris, Economica, 1988, p. 156.
- 11 Aldrich, *The French Presence*, p. 309.
- 12 Lawrey, *The Cross of Lorraine*, p. 18.

- 13 There are three important eye-witness accounts of events in New Caledonia at this time. The Free French Governor of New Caledonia, Henri Sautot, wrote his memoir *Grandeur et Décadence du Gaullisme dans le Pacifique*, Melbourne and London, F.W. Cheshire, 1949; Wilfred Burchett was an Australian journalist in Noumea in 1940 and wrote a contemporary account, *Pacific Treasure Island: New Caledonia*, Melbourne, F.W. Cheshire Pty Ltd, 1941; John Lawrey was assistant to the Australian Official Representative in Noumea from 1940 to 1943 and later wrote about the events, *The Cross of Lorraine in the South Pacific: Australia and the Free French Movement 1940-1942*, Canberra, ANU Printing Service, 1982. An American perspective drawing on American and other archives is Kim Munholland's *Rock of Contention: Free French and Americans at War in New Caledonia, 1940-1945*, New York and Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2005.
- 14 Kim Munholland, 'The Trials of the Free French in New Caledonia 1940-43', *French Historical Studies*, vol. 14, n° 4, 1986, p. 548.
- 15 Lawrey, *The Cross of Lorraine*, p. 8 and Burchett, *Pacific Treasure Island*, p. 194.
- 16 Aldrich, *The French Presence*, p. 314.
- 17 Burchett noted there was no mention of the armistice in the local press or the Government Gazette, in *Pacific Treasure Island*, p. 196.
- 18 Lyn Gorman, 'Australia and Vichy: The impact of divided France, 1940-1944', *The Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 43, 1997, p. 137.
- 19 Lawrey, *The Cross of Lorraine*, p. 24; Burchett, *Pacific Treasure Island*, p. 196; Munholland, *Rock of Contention*, p. 35.
- 20 Burchett, *Pacific Treasure Island*, pp. 197-198.
- 21 Burchett, *Pacific Treasure Island*, p. 197.
- 22 Lawrey, *The Cross of Lorraine*, p. 28.
- 23 Lawrey, *The Cross of Lorraine*, p. 28 and Munholland, *Rock of Contention*, p. 38.
- 24 Burchett, *Pacific Treasure Island*, p. 200.
- 25 Munholland, *Rock of Contention*, p. 39.
- 26 Lawrey, *The Cross of Lorraine*, p. 31.
- 27 In his BBC broadcast of 18 June 1940, de Gaulle said, 'France is not alone! She is not alone! She has a great empire behind her. Together with the British Empire, she can form a bloc that controls the seas and continue the struggle.' (Charles de Gaulle, *Discours et messages I : Pendant la guerre*, Paris, Club français des Bibliophiles, 1971, p. 3.) Munholland noted that de Gaulle wrote to French commanders in North Africa, Syria, Lebanon, the Levant, Tunisia and Indo-China, urging the formation of a Committee for the defence of the empire, with the Empire Defence Council formed in October 1940 representing

- the first step in establishing a provisional government (Munholland, *Rock of Contention*, p. 19). See also Martin Thomas, *The French empire at war 1940-45*, Manchester, Manchester University Press; New York, St. Martin's Press, 1998.
- 28 Munholland, 'The Trials of the Free French', p. 547.
- 29 Gorman, 'Australia and Vichy' and N. Floyd, 'An Expedition in Regime Change: Australia's Party to the Ralliement of New Caledonia during World War II', *Headmark: Journal of the Australian Naval Institute*, n° 124, 2007, p. 10.
- 30 Thomas, *The French empire at war*, p. 5.
- 31 Munholland, *Rock of Contention*, pp. 14-15.
- 32 Munholland, *Rock of Contention*, p. 22.
- 33 See War Cabinet Minute, 18 June 1940, *Strategical Appreciation in Relation to local defence – the effect of the possible occupation of the New Hebrides and New Caledonia by Japan*, Minute n° 345, vol. 3, document 399, which is the first discussion of events in New Caledonia in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade historical documents series, website www.info.dfat.gov.au/historical, hereinafter referred to as DFAT HD.
- 34 Cable Mr Bruce to Prime Minister Menzies, cablegram 447, 19 June 1940, vol. 3, document 408, DFAT HD.
- 35 Departmental Memorandum for Mr John McEwen, Minister for External Affairs, 26 June 1940, vol. 3, document 440, DFAT HD.
- 36 Cablegram 303 from Commonwealth Government to UK Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs Lord Caldecote, cablegram 303, 18 June 1940, vol. 3, document 400, DFAT HD.
- 37 Cable from Mr S.M. Bruce, High Commissioner in London, to Mr R.G. Menzies, cablegram 472, 25 June 1940, vol. 3, document 438, DFAT HD.
- 38 Cable from Mr R.G. Casey Minister Washington to Mr R.G. Menzies, cablegram 143, 28 June 1940, vol. 3, document 464, DFAT HD.
- 39 Lawrey, *The Cross of Lorraine*, pp. 25-26.
- 40 Cable from Mr S.M. Bruce, High Commissioner in London to Mr R.G. Menzies, cablegram 681, 15 August 1940, vol. 4, document 74, DFAT HD.
- 41 Cable from Mr R.G. Menzies, Prime Minister, to Mr G. Pelicier, Governor of New Caledonia, unnumbered, 24 June 1940, vol. 3, document 427, DFAT HD.
- 42 Cable from Mr. Pélicier to Mr Menzies, unnumbered, 26 June 1940, vol. 3, document 439, DFAT HD.
- 43 Cable from Prime Minister's Department to Mr S.M. Bruce, High Commissioner in London, unnumbered, 13 August 1940, vol. 4, document 70, DFAT HD. Drawing on US documentation, Munholland refers to Australian

- Foreign Minister McEwen expressing concern to the US Embassy when Pélicier gazetted Vichy's constitutional laws, noting that the Governor and his Secretary-General (André Bayardelle) were deferential to the Japanese, offering tax exemptions not available to the British and urging further purchases of nickel. (Munholland, *Rock of Contention*, p. 41.)
- 44 Instructions drafted by Department of External Affairs for Mr B.C. Ballard, Official Representative in New Caledonia, undated document, vol. 4, document 45, DFAT HD.
- 45 Lawrey, *The Cross of Lorraine*, p. 27.
- 46 Cablegram Sir Harry Luke to Lord Lloyd UK Secretary of State for the Colonies, 9 August 1940, vol. 4, document 58, DFAT HD.
- 47 Lawrey, *The Cross of Lorraine*, pp. 33-35.
- 48 Lawrey, *The Cross of Lorraine*, pp. 33-35.
- 49 Cablegram Commonwealth Government to Lord Caldecote, UK Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, cablegram 426, 11 August 1940, vol. 4, document 62, DFAT HD.
- 50 Cable from Lord Caldecote to UK High Commissioner in Canberra Whiskard, cablegram 291, 30 August 1940, vol. 4, document 88, DFAT HD.
- 51 Munholland, *Rock of Contention*, p. 43.
- 52 Lawrey, *The Cross of Lorraine*, p. 38. The journalist Burchett referred to the 'glacial frigidity' of this dinner and the 'Gilbertian' situation at Government House, in Burchett, *The Pacific Treasure Island*, p. 204. Even the French Secretary-General at the time, Bayardelle, described the dinner as 'frosty'. (Cited in Munholland, *Rock of Contention*, p. 43.)
- 53 Munholland, *Rock of Contention*, p. 44.
- 54 Cablegram Department of External Affairs to Mr B.C. Ballard, Official Representative in New Caledonia, cablegram 5, 29 August 1940, vol. 4, document 83, DFAT HD.
- 55 See Lawrey, *The Cross of Lorraine*, p. 32; Burchett refers to at least three committees that had been formed claiming to represent the Free French at the time, *The Pacific Treasure Island*, p. 205.
- 56 Cablegram Mr Ballard to Department of External Affairs, cablegram 5, 29 August 1940, vol. 4, n° 85, DFAT HD.
- 57 Munholland, *Rock of Contention*, p. 45.
- 58 Cablegram Ballard to DEA, cablegram 10, 2 September 1940, vol. 4, n° 91, DFAT HD.
- 59 Colourfully described by Burchett, *The Pacific Treasure Island*, p. 205.
- 60 Cablegram Sir Harry Luke to Mr Menzies, 7 September 1940, vol. 4, n° 107; and Lord Caldecote to Menzies, 6 September 1940, vol. 4, n° 105, DFAT HD.

- 61 Cablegram Department of External Affairs Secretary Hodgson to Mr A.T. Stirling, External Affairs Officer in London, 8 September 1940, vol. 4, n° 109, DFAT HD.
- 62 Cablegram Sir Harry Luke to Mr Menzies, 7 September 1940, vol. 4, n° 107, DFAT HD, and cable Lord Caldecote to Menzies, 6 September 1940, vol. 4, n° 105, DFAT HD.
- 63 Cablegram A.T. Stirling, External Affairs officer in London, to Department of External Affairs, 9 September 1940, vol. 4, n° 112, DFAT HD.
- 64 And history was to show that de Gaulle failed to gain support in Indo-China, Madagascar, the Levant, the French Antilles, all North Africa and Djibouti (Lawrey, *The Cross of Lorraine*, p. 61).
- 65 Cable Ballard to Department of External Affairs, cablegram 15, 8 September 1940, vol. 4, n° 110, DFAT HD.
- 66 War Cabinet Minute, 10 September 1940, vol. 4, n° 114, DFAT HD. The general interpretation has been that expressed by Day that Australia ‘buckled under British pressure’ in escorting Sautot (Day, *The Great Betrayal*, p. 91), a view reflected as recently as 2007 by Floyd, who argued that Australia intervened as a result of pressure from the British (‘An Expedition in Regime Change’, p. 12), but this is belied by the sequence of events.
- 67 Teleprinter Message, Secretary of the Navy, Mr A.R. Nankervis, to Mr F. Strahan, Secretary of the Prime Minister’s Department, 13 September 1940, vol. 4, n° 118, DFAT HD, including text of message from Mr Menzies to Sautot.
- 68 War Cabinet Minute, 10 September 1940, vol. 4, n° 114, DFAT HD.
- 69 Cable from R.D. Blandy, UK Resident Commissioner in New Hebrides, to Sir Harry Luke, 10 September 1940, vol. 4, n° 117, DFAT HD.
- 70 Lawrey, *The Cross of Lorraine*, p. 42.
- 71 Lawrey, *The Cross of Lorraine*, p. 44, and Message from Mr Menzies to Mr Sautot, in Teleprinter Message, Secretary of the Navy, Mr A.R. Nankervis to Mr F. Strahan, Secretary of the Prime Minister’s Department, 13 September 1940, vol. 4, n° 118, DFAT HD.
- 72 Sautot, *Grandeur et Décadence*, p. 39; and Lawrey, *The Cross of Lorraine*, p. 44.
- 73 Sautot, *Grandeur et Décadence*, p. 42
- 74 Described by Burchett, *The Pacific Treasure Island*, pp. 211-213.
- 75 Lawrey, *The Cross of Lorraine*, p. 46.
- 76 Commonwealth Government to Lord Caldecote, cablegram 495, 21 September 1940, vol. 4, n° 131, DFAT HD.
- 77 Department of External Affairs to Ballard, cablegram 23, 23 September 1940, vol. 4, n° 133, DFAT HD.

- 78 Cable Commonwealth to Caldecott 21 September 1940, vol. 4, n° 131, and Caldecott to Commonwealth Government, 25 September 1940, vol. 4, n° 138, DFAT HD.
- 79 Lawrey, *The Cross of Lorraine*, pp. 49-50.
- 80 External Affairs to Ballard, 2 October 1940, vol. 4, n° 150, DFAT HD.
- 81 See account in Lawrey, *The Cross of Lorraine*, pp. 51-52. Ironically Lawrey records that Bayardelle himself, who had just escaped from deportation by the Vichyists thanks to Showers' action, told Sautot that within a very short time the British would be running New Caledonia. He went on to take a role in London interpreting events in New Caledonia, and persistently expressed 'profound suspicion of Australian intentions towards New Caledonia'. (Munholland, *Rock of Contention*, p. 56).
- 82 Munholland, *Rock of Contention*, p. 56.
- 83 Cable Mr R.G. Menzies to Lord Cranborne, Secretary for Dominion Affairs, cablegram 43, 23 January 1941, vol. 4, n° 255, DFAT HD.
- 84 Munholland, *Rock of Contention*, p. 29; de Gaulle to Pléven, 22 September 1941, *Mémoires*, vol. 1, *L'Appel*, pp. 481-82.
- 85 Described in Gorman, 'Australia and Vichy', p. 144. Gorman ascribed this in part to tension between the US and Britain over Vichy, which Australia managed pragmatically by accepting a continued Vichy presence, reflecting Australia's shifting traditional allegiances as the war progressed, p. 148.
- 86 Lawrey, *The Cross of Lorraine*, p. 41.
- 87 Gorman, 'Australia and Vichy', p. 137.
- 88 The strategic significance and consequence for policy were enunciated at the time by Burchett, *The Pacific Treasure Island*, p. 218, where he described the importance of New Caledonia to Australian defence deriving from its strategic location, its harbours, its potential as an air base, its abundant food resources with potential to supply an army, and its status as a source of supply for Australia's nickel and chrome for armament production, with the potential for all of these to be used by the enemy.
- 89 DFAT's 'Historical Documents' show that New Zealand was consulted particularly in the first months after the armistice.
- 90 Primarily through the Secretariat for the Pacific Community, based in Noumea from its post-war inception in 1947, but also through France's dialogue relationship with the Pacific Island Forum and the involvement of its Pacific collectivities in the Forum, as Associates (New Caledonia and French Polynesia) and Observer (Wallis and Futuna).