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## PRIME MINISTER

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER OF AUSTRALIA  
HON R J L HAWKE  
DELIVERED AT THE DINNER HOSTED BY  
M. LOUIS LE PENSEC  
MINISTER FOR OVERSEAS DEPARTMNETS  
AND TERRITORIES**

**NOUMEA - 27 JULY 1990**

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At some stage every Australian ponders that great unanswerable question of French and Australian history: "What if La Perouse had arrived a few days earlier ...?"

How different things would be if La Perouse had beaten Captain Cook, and if Australia had been claimed for France rather than England.

One of the unintended consequences would have been that I would not have needed an interpreter for my remarks tonight.

But of course, history could have taken other twists. In some accounts of the history of New Caledonia, the tragic figure of Captain Denham appears as a British version of La Perouse, failing by only a couple of days, because he had dallied in Sydney, to claim these islands for England.

So perhaps an interpreter would have been necessary anyway, to allow my fluent French to be understood by my New Caledonian audience of Anglophones.

Regardless of the language in which it is expressed, I trust my gratitude for the warmth of your welcome this evening, and for the generosity of your hospitality, is clear to you all.

As any map of our region shows, New Caledonia forms part of the very closest circle of Australia's neighbours in the South Pacific.

We stand on each other's doorsteps, with Canberra and Noumea separated by only a few hours' flying time. For someone who frequently flies greater distances without leaving Australia, let me say it is a pleasure to realise on this journey just how narrow, relatively speaking, is the stretch of water that separates us from you.

It was our proximity of course that, during the dark days of the Second World War, reminded Australians and New Caledonians of our vital importance to each other.

That was why in 1940 - exactly fifty years ago - Australia opened its consulate here in Noumea: the first diplomatic post we established outside the United Kingdom and North America.

It is a little remembered fact that, in September 1940, close cooperation between Australia and the Free French leader General de Gaulle led to the installation of a Free French governor in Noumea, allowing this territory to play a vital role in the Allied war effort in the Pacific.

In the following year, Bob Menzies became the first Australian Prime Minister to visit these shores.

Over the decades that followed, Australia and New Caledonia did not, for a number of reasons, build the close ties that the map suggests should have been automatic - ties of trade, cultural exchange, and political consultation that flourished through much of the rest of the South Pacific.

Until today, Bob Menzies remained the only Australian Prime Minister to visit New Caledonia.

Today however we can take pride and satisfaction from the knowledge that we are opening a new chapter in the history of relations between Australia and New Caledonia.

I want my visit to demonstrate a new recognition that Australia and New Caledonia have much to offer each other, and a commitment that for our part we are keen to see more opportunities emerge.

We want to see more business men and women, more students, more tourists, more artists crossing and recrossing that stretch of water just like the neighbours we really are.

There are two, equally important, reasons why we can look with confidence to these exciting prospects, and why I speak with confidence about the opening of new chapters.

The first is the attainment here in New Caledonia of a peaceful and orderly political process under the Matignon Accords.

At the outset of my visit I want to place on record the unqualified admiration of the Australian Government for the way in which New Caledonians and the French Government worked together to reach and implement these Accords.

To someone with my vantage point, the peace and order that has prevailed in New Caledonia since the Matignon Accords were signed in June 1988, stand in the sharpest possible contrast to the futile, dangerous and sometimes brutal divisiveness of previous years.

For this triumph of common sense over senselessness, I congratulate you all. And in particular I recall the work of one of the fathers of this triumphant achievement, the late Jean-Marie Tjibaou, whose assassination last year, with Yeweine Yeweine, tragically robbed all New Caledonians of men of vision and leadership.

Just as important as the process of reconciliation is its end-point: in 1998, New Caledonians will be able to choose their own future. Before Matignon, it seemed that this choice would be denied them. It hardly needs adding that Australia would have been uncomfortable with that denial.

A genuine act of self-determination is necessary not only for the rights of the New Caledonian people but also for the standing of New Caledonia in the eyes of the wider Pacific community.

With the Accords, New Caledonia has brought within its grasp that which it most needed but which it had previously found most elusive: a process for a peaceful transition to genuine self-determination and to a viable long-term political status.

I will be speaking with the participants in the Accords tomorrow and I will make some further comments specifically to the New Caledonian community after that.

Tonight, as the guest of the French Minister M. Le Pensec, I want to acknowledge the value we place on the French contribution to this achievement - not least the involvement of my friend the Prime Minister Michel Rocard and Minister Le Pensec, whose personal commitment to the Matignon Accords has been a vital element in the success.

Indeed, from Australia's point of view, and surely from that of New Caledonia, the political and legislative basis for the peace and progress now being enjoyed in New Caledonia is one of the great achievements of the Rocard Government.

And that of course brings me to the second reason for the new chapter in Australia-New Caledonia relations: the fact that, after some difficult times, relations between Australia and France have once more attained the warmth and fruitfulness that one could expect of two nations that share so many fundamental values and aspirations.

My visit to Paris last year, and the very successful return visit to Australia by M. Rocard, have confirmed that a new spirit of cooperation exists between Australia and France - broad, strong, positive and productive.

In the wider international sphere, we are working together in the search for peace in Cambodia, and taking the initiative in seeking to ban mining from Antarctica so that it can be preserved as a nature reserve and land of science.

Tonight, let me spend a few minutes reviewing how this new spirit between Australia and France is felt here in the South Pacific.

Because inevitably, Australia's view of France is significantly affected by the prism of the South Pacific.

This is where we are; this is where our immediate interests lie; this is where French decisions taken on the other side of the globe will impact on us and on our neighbours.

No one could deny that France plays an important role - cultural, economic, political - in the Pacific.

What has happened over the last two years is that we have seen that role not just acknowledged but, increasingly, welcomed - by Australians and by all those who care for the future of this region.

And the clearest proof of that tremendous transformation is here in New Caledonia.

To anyone who might question whether France can play a legitimate and constructive role in the Pacific, I now say: look at its role in the Matignon Accords.

And indeed, one can point to a positive French role in wider Pacific issues.

Last August, Prime Minister Rocard and I declared our intention of working together on combatting the barbaric practice of driftnet fishing - reflecting the concerns that had been expressed by the South Pacific Forum nations in the Tarawa Declaration.

With the recent decision by Japan not to deploy driftnet fishing vessels in the South Pacific in the coming season, we are entitled to derive some collective satisfaction that the Pacific view is gaining force.

I was pleased to see the statement of M. Rocard that France's Pacific territories should develop closer links with other South Pacific countries.

For Australia's part, we remain very keen to expand our trade with New Caledonia and with the other French Pacific territories.

I hope this visit will remind New Caledonians that Australia is a competitive supplier for many of the goods needed here - but that artificial trade barriers impede our capacity to supply them, with consequent costs to the average consumer here.

Of course, there remain areas on which Australia and France have firm differences.

Australia has opposed the French program of nuclear testing and we will continue to protest against each test.

Put quite simply, there is no single decision France could take that would lift its reputation higher throughout this part of the world than to support the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone.

At the wider international level, Australia also has severe disagreements with France and its fellow members of the EC over the folly of agricultural protectionism - an issue that must, if we are not to threaten the entire structure of world trade, be resolved in the current round of Multilateral Trade Negotiations.

This is not some peripheral issue for my country but one which is central to the health of our economy.

Such issues aside, the scope of cooperation between France and Australia is expanding steadily, and I want it to go on expanding. I am confident that is a shared objective.

We are finding an identity of view and a commonality of purpose that promises many positive outcomes in the future.

It is our genuine desire that the sort of practical cooperation that has marked our relationship over the past two years - here in the Pacific and more widely - will continue to diversify and to grow stronger.

So I certainly trust that New Caledonians won't have to wait another fifty years for a third visit by an Australian Prime Minister. I thank you for your generous hospitality and for the warmth of your welcome.

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