History, tension and mistrust: Norfolk Island digs in

By Frank O'Shea

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Norfolk Island has a storied history of colonisation and marginalisation (image by Steve Daggar via Wikimedia Commons).

160 years ago, the descendants of the Bounty mutineers who had populated Pitcairn Island found that their little piece of paradise was too small.

Their parents and grandparents were long dead, many violently and there was no precedent in British law for punishing one generation for the sins of their ancestors.

They saw themselves as British and appealed for help to their homeland.

Today, six generations later, the descendants of those descendants, are still grateful for the decision Britain made and they thank Queen Victoria for her part. She told them that there was another island, some 7,000 km away, which they could have for themselves, provided that everyone left Pitcairn; Her Majesty would even provide a ship to transport them.

The deal was accepted, and some 193 British subjects with surnames like Christian and Quintal and Adams set off across a wide, sometimes treacherous sea to land on Norfolk Island where each family drew lots for cultivated land and empty houses already on the island.

> Visiting scholar Dr @TimCauser from KCL making use of Tasmania's tremendous archive of convict records & correspondence to reveal insights into Norfolk Island's colonial past #History https://t.co/lN79e8TjKa
>
> — A/Prof Kristyn Harman PhD ?????? (@DrKrissyH) June 19, 2018

At the time, Norfolk Island was uninhabited. Two years earlier, the British Government, appalled by the savagery being carried out there in its name, moved all residents – military, administrators, guards, convicts – to Tasmania.

Britain was keen to get away from a place where its servants had lost all semblance of civilised behaviour, a place where there were 13 suicides every week, where a larger number were dying from floggings or hangings, from beatings by guards or simply because their physical body had worn out like a motorcar after too many unrepaired collisions on unsealed mountain roads. Best to get out before the whole world heard about what was going on in

Victoria's name.

Still, you couldn't very well leave the place completely empty. Those bloody French were still a problem. In fact, the nearest land to Norfolk Island was New Caledonia. So, handing the place over to the Pitcairners solved two problems at once.

Over the next few years, some of the new settlers returned to Pitcairn; today, both islands are populated by descendants of the original Bounty mutineers, each island self-sustaining and proud of their common heritage. Pitcairn is a British territory, population 37, administered from New Zealand. Norfolk has a population of about 1,700 and is officially part of the newly created electorate of Bean in Canberra.

> @QandA politians in Australia have welcomed the recent referendum in New Caledonia as a great display of democracy. Then why in 2015 did they ignore the referendum results on Norfolk Island about an #AusPol takeover?https://t.co/nl2TzxvqgU
>
> — Voice of Norfolk ?????? (@radionorfolk) November 7, 2018

> Visitors to Norfolk Island will, however, become aware that there is deep anger within the population. They won't tell you why unless you ask, and even then, they are cagey, fearful that their position might be misrepresented. In the centre of town, there is a display consisting of a sea of green hands-on hardboard, each hand bearing the name of one inhabitant of the island.
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> Just down the street is a shopfront with information explaining what the display represents. A few kilometres away at Kingston, the World Heritage-listed site that tells the story of early settlement, there is a Tent Embassy, where a local will explain what the situation is.
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> They don't raise their voice or make extravagant claims, but you feel the anger that covers a deep hurt.
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> Up to 1914, Norfolk Island was a British colony, similar to Australia pre-1901. After that, it was an external territory of Australia. They had their own Legislative Assembly and ran the island with minimum input from Canberra. They had their own hospital and their own education system, both supported by NSW.
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> They were not part of Medicare or the Australia system of social security and they did not pay income tax. They ran the island with the kinds of funds that an Australian local council might collect, augmented with 12 per cent GST. They claimed that their annual budget was balanced, in recent years amounting to about $25 million.
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> > Norfolk Island eyes referendum on self-governance. Fed dollars prop up about 2K people #lifestylechoice #auspol pic.twitter.com/01YjX3Acjm
> >
> > — Stefan Armbruster (@StefArmbruster) March 13, 2015
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> Some time in the early years of this Century, Norfolk borrowed from the

Australian Government to do necessary work at Cascade Bay. That loan has been repaid, but one of the posters in the town claims that Canberra used it as an excuse to take over completely the administration of the island.

In 2014, Minister Gary Hardgrave told the Australian Parliament that:

> *"The introduction of a new Norfolk Island Act to effect change of governance arrangements is supported by a substantial majority of residents."*

The islanders were furious with this, claiming it was a lie, and some months later ran a referendum under Norfolk Island statute, which showed that 68 per cent did not want to change their previous status. Effectively, Canberra had voted the Norfolk Island legislative assembly out of existence. They claim that this was illegal and have taken their case to the United Nations.

At this stage, things become unclear. It is possible that there is an element of "us versus them" involved, the former being descendants of the original settlers and the latter being recent newcomers, mostly from New Zealand and Australia. To take a side in such a dispute is a recipe for scorn and an invitation for a charge of talking nonsense.

> Little Britain: Keep calm and carry on https://t.co/9wbi6xgrNb @IndependentAus
>
> — Job Arismendi (@arismendijob) June 27, 2016

Frank O'Shea ***is a retired teacher of quadratic equations.***

Tony Abbott, terra nullius and Warren Mundine, by

@Natalie Cromb. #Indigenous #unsettled #terranullius http://t.co/6IfYsXtgo2

— IndependentAustralia (@independentaus) July 4, 2014