



NEW CALEDONIA

Theatre makes a spectacle of breaking taboos in New Caledonia

Debating politics has never been easy on the French Pacific territory of New Caledonia, where the question of independence is a thorny issue. With talks between those who support separating from France and those who want to remain part of it still deadlocked, writer Jenny Briffa has turned to comedy to say the unsayable.

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Kanak and French flags pictured on 27 July 2013 on Ouvea island, part of the French overseas territory of New Caledonia. © Lionel BONAVENTURE / AFP

By: [Alison Hird](#)

Caledonian writer Louis-José Barbançon dubbed New Caledonia the pays du non-dit – a country where much goes unsaid.

And you can see why.

France planted its flag on the rock in 1853, converting it into a penal colony and displacing thousands of indigenous Kanak people from their land to make way for the ensuing waves of French settlers. It wasn't until 1946 that Kanaks ceased being subjects and became French citizens.

Tensions between the indigenous population and European settlers, known as Caldoches, culminated in four years of civil war between 1984 and 1988.

The "troubles", as they were known, ended with a 1988 peace agreement, followed by the 1998 [Nouméa Accord](#) that laid out the path to decolonisation through three independence referendums in 2018, 2020 and 2021.

All three rejected full sovereignty – though [the most recent results](#) are contested by pro-independence parties, who had called on their supporters to boycott the vote.

- [French court upholds New Caledonia's rejection of independence result](#)

Few people want to risk inflaming the divisions, not least on a small territory of just 270,000 people.

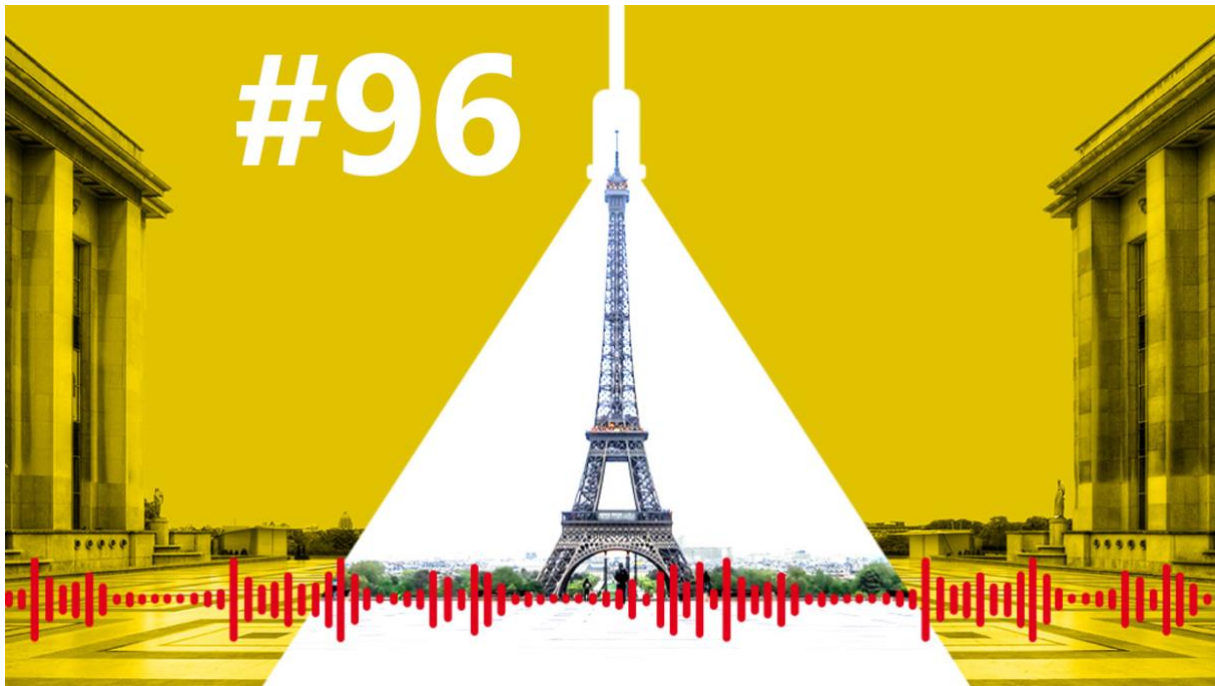
But journalist and writer [Jenny Briffa](#) is part of a younger generation looking to go beyond the historical pro- and anti-independence divide.

"I wanted to shake the coconut tree because my country is a kind of taboo land," says Briffa, who grew up in New Caledonia amid the tensions of the 1980s.

Later, working as a journalist, she saw that while people were divided politically, "they are much closer to one another than they thought".

Briffa has written a triptych of plays around the three referendums, each aimed at saying the unsayable. And with humour.

Listen to a conversation with Jenny Briffa in the [Spotlight on France podcast](#)



Spotlight on France, episode 96_© RFI

Her first play, *Fin mal barrés!* (Off to a bad start), written in 2018, was a one-woman show starring a Kanak actor, [Maité Siwene](#), that took potshots at local politicians and media prone to self-censorship.

The combination of Kanak performer and white European author “was a perfect match”, Briffa believes.

“No one could say you are against independence or against France. We were saying: ‘We want things to change in our country, we want people to talk together and we’re fed up with our politicians because they’re not up to the task.’”



Kanak actress Maïte Siwene performing in the first part of Briffa's triptych "Fin mal barrés!" in Noumea, December 2017. © AFP - ERIC DELL'ERBA/ Cultural center Tjibaou ADCK-CCT

The second play, *Fin mal gérés* (Badly managed), in 2020, showed another protagonist – torn between his Kanak father and loyalist mother – struggling to decide how to vote.

"There aren't just two paths, there are thousands," the character says.

Briffa wrote her third play, *Fin bien ensemble!* (Getting on together), in the wake of New Caledonia's third referendum. The play features a couple – Marguerite, a pro-independence Kanak, and Kevin, a loyalist.

"The couple is an allegory of New Caledonia," Briffa explains. "A black woman, white man, married and deeply in love, but when it comes to politics they fight."



Stéphane Piochaud and Laurence Bolé play Kevin and Marguerite in *Fin bien ensemble!* - a couple who argue all the time but can't bear to split up. "An allegory of New Caledonia" says author Jenny Briffa © Marc Le Chélar

"They can't separate, they love each other too much. I think that's us."

A patchwork of cultures

People looking at New Caledonia from the outside tend to see it as white against black, Briffa says, but "it's much more than that... we're very mixed".

A 2019 census showed 41 percent of the territory's inhabitants identify as Kanak, 24 percent as European and 8.3 percent as from the French Pacific islands of Wallis and Futuna, while the others are divided between Tahitian, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Ni-Vanuatu and other Asian communities.



Members of the Ina tribe play a game of petanque in Hienghene, on the eastern coast of New Caledonia, on December 19, 2021. © Theo Rouby / AFP

The country is no melting pot, but interactions between cultures are part of everyday life. Briffa describes a custom where you'll be served a traditional Kanak dish known as bougna, bami from Indonesia, sugar pork from Vietnam and a French baguette.

"You could say, 'so what?' But those little things of daily life are also important," she insists. "Creolisation is in our hearts, we cannot imagine living apart from one another."

- [Paris talks on New Caledonia's future will 'avoid return to violence'](#)

And yet New Caledonia's politicians, whether loyalist or pro-independence, have exaggerated differences between the different communities and "divided us for electoral gains", Briffa says.

Hence the mockery. Her plays also highlight Caledonians' contradictions: the Caldoches who want to remain part of France, but disparage mainlanders as "[Zoreilles](#)" in reference to their sunburned ears; and supporters of independence who want to break away while hanging on to hefty French subsidies.

Comedy as catharsis

The same gags make audiences from New Caledonia's different communities laugh, recounts Briffa, who says that some 45,000 New Caledonians have seen the three plays.

Her pieces were performed in the capital Nouméa, but also in the bush and in tribal communities, with the idea of helping to decolonise mentalities on both sides. Briffa calls them a form of group therapy.



A performance of "Fin bien ensemble!" - the third and final part of a triptych on New Caledonia's independence referendums by Jenny Briffa - at the Tjibaou cultural centre in Nouméa. 45,000 New Caledonians have seen the three plays. © Marc Le Chélard

"In New Caledonia we're neurotic about identity and the three plays were a cathartic moment for all Caledonians," she says.

"Of course the people who suffered the most through colonisation are the indigenous Kanaks. We accept they are more legitimate than us on this land, but we all suffer from this neurosis... from the legacy of colonisation."

Freedom of speech

Briffa's desire to break taboos began early.

At 12, she noticed that different communities where she grew up didn't seem to mix much, and set up a school newspaper to get them sharing more.

By the age of 16 she was hosting a TV programme. She became a household name in 1997 when she [dared to question](#) loyalist Jacques Lafleur about political pressure on the media. Lafleur, who had signed the peace agreement with his Kanak counterpart Jean-Marie Tjibaou in 1988, was also a business tycoon.

When he dodged her question, she pushed back. "People were shocked and I became a sort of freedom of speech figure in New Caledonia," she laughs.

- [New Caledonia TV to broadcast news in Kanak languages](#)

It led to her forging friendships with supporters of independence. She went on to become the first white Caledonian journalist to work for the Kanak radio station [Radio Djido](#). “We can do things together with our double culture, and that’s the richness of New Caledonia today,” Briffa notes. “For me the march of history is much more to progress with this combination of our two worlds, our two civilisations, because we’re already mixed.”

Her next play will feature passages in Nyâlayu, one of the 28 Kanak languages that she sees it as her duty to “promote and defend”.

Future of independence

Despite close ties to the Kanak community, Briffa voted against independence in each of the referendums.

“We’re not ready for independence,” she argues, citing public services like health and education, which are heavily subsidised by the mainland.

She doesn’t rule out an independent New Caledonia further down the line, but she suggests it will involve moving beyond the binary politics of the past.



Jenny Briffa (r) and Emmanuel Tjibaou (son of the late leader of the Kanak independence movement, left in pink shirt) face one another in a traditional ceremony to welcome Fin mal géré! at the Centre Tjibaou, Nouméa. © Céline Marchal

“We’re in a dead end, not politically, but intellectually,” Briffa says. “Our leaders didn’t make the effort to think about decolonisation, now in 2023. What does it mean?”

"It doesn't mean the same as during the '80s, things have changed, the world has changed, China is now everywhere in the Pacific, there's a lot of interdependence between countries. So we need to think differently."

- [US opens new embassies and promises millions to Pacific Islands in move to counter China](#)

Asked whether France should apologise for colonising New Caledonia, she pleads for a "custom of reconciliation" drawn from the Melanesian civilisation the archipelago belongs to, similar to [Australia's formal apology to indigenous peoples](#) in 2008.

It would allow for reconciliation but does not involve repentance, she says.

Briffa left New Caledonia two years ago and now lives in the south of France.

"I could no longer breathe. Unfortunately there are quite a lot of us. But even far from our country, we're working for New Caledonia."

She's currently adapting Fin bien ensemble! for audiences here on the mainland, which has a lot to learn about its distant overseas territory.