Norfolk Island and Australia: Forced Integration

The tiny Norfolk Island (with an area of 35 km²) is an Australian external territory located in the Pacific Ocean between Australia and New Zealand. It is barely discernible on a map and the voice of its residents (numbering less than 2,000) was not heard by the international community in 2015, when the Parliament of Australia passed the Norfolk Island Legislation Amendment Bill thus abolishing self-government on Norfolk Island and transferring the territory “into a council as part of New South Wales law”. However, according to a referendum held by the island’s legislative body in May 2015, 68% of participants voted against the aforementioned changes, which meant abolition of self-governance the island achieved in 1979. The author will focus on the reasons behind the change and its consequences later on in the article.

British Captain James Cook was the first European to land on the uninhabited Norfolk Island in 1774. Fourteen years later, in 1788, “a party of 15 convicts and seven free men” arrived on the island to take control of it and prepare for its commercial development. In 1824, the British government instructed the Governor of New South Wales to send the “worst” convicts to Norfolk Island, which later became known as “The Hell in the Pacific”. After Captain James Cook landed on Norfolk Island, Sir John Call proposed to use it as an auxiliary settlement because it was uninhabited and New Zealand flax (used to make cordage and sailcloth) grew there. Shipbuilding timber was also plentiful and convicts and settlers were involved in its production. The value of these natural resources to the Royal Navy was meant to offset the costs of bringing convicts onto the island and of the construction and maintenance of prisons.
The decision to settle Norfolk Island was taken due to restrictions imposed on the sale of hemp by Empress Catherine II of Russia in 1786. At the time, practically all the flax and hemp “required by the Royal Navy for cordage” (capable of resisting salt water damage owing to the materials it was made of) was imported from Russia. Due to this dependence on Russia for hemp (the country was its greatest producer at the time), the British government began an urgent search for new sources of supply for its navy, including from Norfolk Island. In addition, the American Revolutionary War in 1776 put a stop to “penal transportation to Thirteen Colonies”, and “British prisons started to overcrowd”. Hence, Britain needed to find other options.

Still, in the middle of the 19th century, the remote island was abandoned because it was not economically viable to maintain the colony there. The last convicts were removed to Tasmania in 1855. In 1856, the next settlement began, with 194 “descendants of Tahitians and the HMS Bounty mutineers” from the Pitcairn Islands, which had become too small for the growing population, arriving on Norfolk Island. Some people decided to return to Pitcairn, but most remained. In fact, the descendants of the Pitcainers, 50 people in total, live on Norfolk today.

The island’s population reached its peak of 2,601 in 2001 and declined to 1,748 in 2016. And it was their voices that the Australian government as well as the international community chose to ignore when, against the will of most participants of the aforementioned referendum, the Norfolk Island Legislation Amendment Act 2015 abolishing self-government on Norfolk Island was passed. And from July 1, 2016, the Norfolk Island Regional Council was established to govern the island at the local level “as a local government area subject to the laws of New South Wales”. Australian systems were then imposed on Norfolk Island transforming it into a part of New South Wales.

Some islanders associate the process of becoming Australian with a loss of cultural and national identity, characterized by their own language (a blend of 18th-century English and Tahitian), their rich and mixed English/Polynesian heritage and their own national flag and anthem. This view is held by 38.4% of the present population who may claim lineal descent from the Pitcairners. Before 2016, some descendants of the Bounty mutineers held important government posts, made budgetary decisions and defended islanders’ right to self-determination and independence from Australia. Other islanders are descendants of later settlers, mostly from Australia, New Zealand, etc. Hence, some Norfolk Island residents may not crave independence from Australia as strongly.

It is well known that any sovereign territory ought to have a stable financial and economic system, which is something that the Norfolk leadership did not achieve during the 36 years of the island’s self-governance starting in 1979. In fact, the territory was being heavily subsidized by the Commonwealth, by $3.5 million in 2015 alone. Under a $136 million plan signed off on by Australia’s government in 2015, the island’s legislative body was to be replaced by a regional council, and investments were to be made in the territory’s medical, education and welfare spheres as well as infrastructure over a number of years.

Norfolk Island’s primary economic activity is tourism (mainly from Australia and New Zealand). Income is generated by offering tourists locally produced alcoholic drinks and recreational activities, such as performances, historic reenactments and local cuisine. The 2008 financial crisis resulted in a reduction in tourism and islanders appealed to the Australian federal government for assistance in 2010. Before the economic downturn, on average 30,000 to 35,000 people had visited Norfolk Island per year, thus sustaining modest salaries of approximately 2,000 locals. Some products, such as fruit, vegetables, beef, wine, fish etc. are produced locally but many goods (pharmaceuticals, machinery etc.) are brought from the outside. Hence, a decline in revenues generated by tourism resulted in budget deficits. According to estimates of UK economists, attracting upwards of 100,000 tourists to Norfolk Island each year would help solve the problems the local economy is facing. Since such changes cannot happen overnight, in 2011, a quarter of the working age population left the island for Australia so that they could help the elderly relatives who remained financially. Thus, the population declined from a high of 2,601 in 2001 to around 1,700 in 2016.

The Norfolk Island Postal Service issues its own postage stamps. Australian coins produced with a specific Norfolk Island theme have also been officially launched. The territory also generates income from the sale of Norfolk pine and Rhopalostylis baueri (a palm) seeds. The former is a popular variety world-wide. The Australian government controls the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) extending 200 nautical miles around Norfolk Island, as well as revenue from it - a proportion of an almost $60 million yearly turnover. It is also responsible for protecting maritime borders of the island.

Australia can rightfully view itself as a country that lent a helping hand to Norfolk Island, as the islanders are now covered by Australian welfare schemes such as Centrelink and Medicare. However, this also meant the introduction of income taxation (paid into the federal budget).
And while some islanders are against the ongoing changes, members of the younger generation are far more open to them.

*We are extremely resourceful, intelligent and capable, and have never wanted to be a charity case. Norfolk Islanders are hard, honest workers. We believe in goodwill, and I’ve never lived in a community that is so willing to give the shirt off its own back to help another. During the Australian bushfires the island united numerous times to donate money to the victims, not because they felt like it was owed - but because we are good salan (people) and we care about our fellow humans. I’m very grateful to Australia in many ways,” said one of the islanders in a comment to yet another opinion piece about benefits and drawbacks of Norfolk Island’s loss of independence.

Hopefully, Australia’s substantial experience and successes with policies focusing on multiculturalism in the past decades can ensure that Norfolk Island will not lose its unique identity and remain a proud and beautiful nation unlike any other in the world.

Sofia Pale, PhD in History, Researcher at the Center for Southeast Asia, Australia and Oceania at the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.