

Colonial Office to The Agents-General for New South Wales, New Zealand,  
Queensland, and Victoria.

Gentlemen,

Downing-street, 31 August, 1883.

I am directed by the Earl of Derby to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 21st July, placing before His Lordship the representations with regard to New Guinea and the islands in the Western Pacific Ocean which you had promised during your recent interview. Lord Derby recognizes the care and ability with which you have recapitulated the history of past transactions in that part of the world, and, as His Lordship does not perceive that this department need take exception to any of the statements in the earlier part of your letter he will not at present examine them in detail. I am, however, to inform you that, as it contains many references to the acts and opinions of the High Commissioner and of Her Majesty's naval officers, Lord Derby has transmitted copies to Sir Arthur Gordon and to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, for their consideration.

2. Turning to your inquiry as to the extent to which the claims of Foreign Powers in the Western Pacific have been recognized by Her Majesty's Government, His Lordship is disposed to doubt whether there is really so much uncertainty or absence of information on this subject in the Australian Colonies as you seem to apprehend.

3. Referring, however, first to the islands of the Western Pacific which are most distant from Australia, the Navigators' Islands, no Power has claimed or indicated any desire to obtain a paramount influence or protectorate over that group. The Consular Officers of Great Britain, Germany, and the United States have, jointly or separately, from time to time exercised influence over public and native affairs at Samoa; and this country, as well as Germany, has entered into treaties with the King and Government of Samoa. The group therefore forms an independent State, recognized as such by European diplomacy, and under these circumstances the question might possibly arise whether its annexation by any Power would not be a violation of international law.

4. The Government of the Tongan or Friendly Islands is also recognized as independent, and this country and Germany have recently concluded treaties with the King of that group. The same argument therefore applies in this as in the former case.

5. Proceeding westward past Fiji, which, with the neighbouring island of Rotumah, is British, we come to the New Hebrides; and your letter shows that you are aware of the understanding arrived at in 1878 between Her Majesty's Government and the Government of France, in pursuance of which the independence of those islands has been up to the present time recognized and respected by both Governments. The Loyalty Islands, being close to New Caledonia, are to be looked upon as dependencies of the French Government in that island.

6. The foregoing brief statement may suffice to explain to you that the claims and interests of other countries constitute a very serious impediment to that "complete jurisdiction" which you represent that England ought now to assume over the Western Pacific, and that the best known and most frequented groups of islands have already such relations with Foreign Powers, in common with England, as cannot be summarily ignored. You do not specifically refer to the important islands or group of islands known as New Britain, New Ireland, the Solomon Islands, and the Santa Cruz Islands. They are at a considerable distance from Australia, and are for the most part of great size, and inhabited by warlike and cannibal tribes. Her Majesty's Government have not before them any evidence that the Governments of the Australasian Colonies have sufficiently considered the extent of the responsibilities which the annexation or protectorate of those islands would involve, and they are far from being satisfied that the assumption of those responsibilities is necessary or justifiable.

7. With reference to that part of your letter which treats of New Guinea, Lord Derby desires me to observe that he has at present nothing to add to the despatch which he addressed on the 11th July to the Acting Governor of Queensland. His Lordship concludes that, after receiving that despatch, the Governments of any Colonies desiring to bear the cost of any measures which, as indicated in the two last paragraphs of that despatch, Her Majesty's Government may be prepared to take, will confer together and make those united recommendations which have been invited, furnishing also an effective guarantee for such expenditure as may be incurred. They will, no doubt, at the same time consider whether they wish to make jointly any similar definite proposal with regard to other islands not already connected by treaty or otherwise with Foreign Powers.

8. I am to add that Lord Derby has read with attention your representations as to the inconvenience and injury which, unless great precautions are taken, might result from the continuance and development of the French penal settlements in New Caledonia and the adjacent islands, and that His Lordship is in communication with the Foreign Office on the subject.

I am, &c.,

JOHN BRAMSTON.