

still holds good. These engagements are very explicit, and the French Government have recently had fresh reasons for knowing that in regard to this matter England is in earnest. We have to do with a country which conducts its affairs honourably; and, in view of the repeated assurances of an intention to respect the independence of the New Hebrides, it is only just to suspend belief in the correctness of the statement. The reference to the courtesies interchanged between the English and French naval commanders seems to point to the presence of the latter for a temporary purpose, not inconsistent with the clearly-defined engagements of a nation with which we are on the most friendly footing. Further details will no doubt soon be telegraphed; but in the meantime the best course is to abstain from assuming the accuracy of the report.

Of the views of the Australian Colonies on any such act of aggression there is no doubt, and French statesmen are well aware that their feelings are a most important factor in the matter. Writing lately, our Melbourne correspondent mentioned the meetings held in all the chief towns of Victoria, at which resolutions denouncing the meditated cession of the New Hebrides to France were passed. Our colonists are on the alert: there is a feeling abroad that care must be taken to prevent a repetition of the error of the Colonial Office in allowing a part of New Guinea to be ceded to Germany. We are able, very opportunely, to print this morning a despatch addressed to the Under-Secretary of the Colonies on the 30th April last by Sir Andrew Clarke, Acting-Agent-General of the Victorian Government, which shows more clearly than any document yet published the nature and strength of the colonists' case. If our Government have at last taken up a firm and decided position, and have shaken off the mood of indifference, so exasperating to the colonists, which Lord Derby mistook for wisdom, the change is to be attributed in no small degree to the character of Sir Andrew Clarke's able despatch. He is surprised that the Colonial Office should appear, in April, 1886, to be in doubt as to the final answer of the federated colonies. The Premier of Queensland, as Chairman of the Committee of Colonial Ministers, made known in March that there were "insuperable objections" to any alteration in the *status quo* of the New Hebrides in the direction of the sovereignty of France. In the language of one of the sections of "the Act to constitute a Federal Council for Australasia" there is explicit recognition of the right of the colonies to deal with the matter; the Federal Council is to be free to consider "the relations of Australasia with the islands of the Pacific," and it was, it is pointed out, a strong argument for creating the Federal Council that it would be invested with such useful powers. Against the notion that France has acquired some sort of inchoate right to the New Hebrides Sir Andrew Clarke argues strongly. On what is it founded? Not on the achievements of French civilization or commerce. "It is notorious that all that has been done to introduce civilization and religion among the races of the New Hebrides has been done by the people of Australia. I am aware that there have been some lands purchased by French subjects. But it is notorious that the bulk of the trade of the islands is with Australasia, and that it is a growing trade." Mr. Bramston (the Assistant-Under-Secretary) had sought for an apology for the action of France in the view that the New Hebrides formed part of the same geographical group of islands as New Caledonia, an observation which provokes the retort, "I think the argument of natural geographical grouping has never hitherto been very attentively considered in the growth of the British Empire; and certainly on the last occasion when it might have been appealed to with some effect—I mean on the occasion when Germany was allowed to seize North-eastern New Guinea, with New Britain and New Ireland—the Australian Colonies had no reason to feel that it was much regarded by the British Government." Besides, as Sir Andrew Clarke observes, it does not require much study of very large maps to see that the New Hebrides are more naturally related to the Fijian group than to New Caledonia.

Some of these arguments may be open to criticism. The material point is that all the Australian Colonies are united in the matter, and that they have a common policy of resistance to the extension of sovereignty by European nations in a remote region from their interests. It is of little consequence whether the antipathy to the establishment of convict settlements is exaggerated, and the apprehensions that the dregs of French society may percolate to the shores of Australia veil dislike and dread of the presence of new foreign establishments in the Pacific. Sir Andrew Clarke refers to the strong feeling evoked by the effort of the English Government to continue and extend the convict system. "I feel," he observes, "that, if that policy had not been definitely abolished, the connection of Australia with the Crown would have been most seriously imperilled." This will seem to many minds a weighty observation. It matters not, however, whether the sensitiveness to the introduction of French convicts be exaggerated. The fact to be noticed is the depth and unanimity of the feeling of aversion to all proposals for a cession on any terms of the New Hebrides to France. Our own Government have come to understand this, and are aware that the easy-going policy pursued in regard to New Guinea is remembered in Australia to the disadvantage of English statesmanship; and we have reason to believe that the French Government understand the importance which is attached to the matter. We are therefore in no hurry to believe in the commission of an act which would be flatly contrary to plain engagements, solemnly renewed, and altogether out of keeping with the character of a great and honourable nation. It is to be remembered that some days ago it was intimated in a telegram from Melbourne that no alarm was felt in consequence of the arrival of French vessels in the vicinity of the New Hebrides; the presence of Her Majesty's gunboat "Raven" and the schooner "Undine" was reassuring. In the present state of information it will be well to assume the existence of a loyal intention to observe the engagements with respect to the New Hebrides.

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