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Pitcairn

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PITCAIRN

The islands of Pitcairn, Henderson, Ducie, and Oeno (commonly known as Pitcairn) make up a single territory, the last remaining United Kingdom Overseas Territory (UKOT) in the Pacific Ocean. But much of the period under review (1 July 2017–30 June 2018) was concerned with Pitcairn's relationship with the European Union (EU), which has been highly advantageous to the territory. However, a long shadow has been cast over these relations due to the upcoming departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union (Brexit), which was officially scheduled for 29 March 2019.

Pitcairn is an Overseas Country and Territory (OCT) of the European Union. OCTs are not part of the European Union and thus are not directly subject to EU law, but they do have associate status and thus receive various forms of assistance from Brussels. As a consequence, the limited resources of the Pitcairn Island Council were focused on securing as much EU funding as possible before

Brexit, while also lobbying London to ensure the territory's interests were safeguarded in the longer term.

A crucial meeting for Pitcairn was the European Union Overseas Countries and Territories Ministerial Conference held in Brussels between 20 and 23 February 2018. A range of issues were discussed, including climate change, sustainable energy, and biodiversity, and what EU funding could best support initiatives in these areas (OCTA 2018). The highlight for Pitcairn was the signing of a European Development Fund (EDF)–11 Focal Sector agreement, worth €2.35 million (US\$2.72 million), to upgrade the island's medical center and to support several tourism-related activities, including “improving accessibility to Pitcairn, specifically by developing the Bounty Bay and Tedside landings and improving on-shore facilities” and “constructing a shelter and information centre for tourists and other visitors” (European Commission 2018a). A further €480,000 (US\$556,000) was allocated under the EU's Pacific Regional Funding to cover two-thirds of the preliminary budgeted cost of the introduction of solar-powered renewable energy to Pitcairn (*Pitcairn Miscellany* 2018b).

Because of the frequent time lag in getting EU funds disbursed, Pitcairn also benefitted from some EDF–10 money during the period under review. For example, a number of local road improvement projects were undertaken through the European Union's INTEGRE (Territories Initiative for Regional Management of the Environment) program (*Pitcairn Miscellany* 2017a). INTEGRE also supported a glass recycling project, whereby

empty glass bottles were recycled into souvenirs for the tourist market (*Pitcairn Miscellany* 2017b). The projects linked into INTEGRE's focus on building resilience and sustainable development in the Pacific OCTs in the face of climate change. In addition, funds from EDF-10 paid for a new goods shed (*Pitcairn Miscellany* 2017a).

The importance of these funds was made clear in July 2017, when Pitcairn Islands Councillor Leslie Jaques gave evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on the European Union on the likely impacts of Brexit. He noted that the European Union provides "a significant amount" of funding—accounting for about 30 percent of Pitcairn's overall budget (House of Lords 2017, 6). He also explained the importance of being part of a regional envelope of funding, which helps to facilitate cooperation with French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna, and New Caledonia. Pitcairn gains benefits in other respects too; the European Union is one of Pitcairn's largest markets for its honey exports, and the free movement of Pitcairners to French Polynesia, and particularly Tahiti, for medical treatment is crucial.

As a consequence, Pitcairn has much to lose from Brexit, and Jaques did not mince words during his time with the House of Lords committee. He said that the loss of EU funding and freedom of movement to other European Union territories would be "catastrophic"; he went on to say that "we trust in the [Brexit] process and we hope for the best" (House of Lords 2017, 19). Jaques also cautioned that "we do not know [who will fill the funding gap], which is a concern" (House of Lords 2017, 6). So far the

UK government has not given any reassurances that it will make good any shortfalls in support. More generally, there is still great uncertainty over what a post-Brexit relationship with the European Union will look like. And so, Pitcairn and the other overseas territories are largely beholden to trusting the UK government to make the best possible deal for them.

The view from the European Commission and the OCTs is rather mixed in terms of whether Pitcairn and the other UK territories will be able to maintain a relationship with them once the United Kingdom has withdrawn from the European Union. In its political declaration after the European Union Overseas Countries and Territories Ministerial Conference in February 2018, OCT representatives recommended that the European Union "explore how [the UK] OCTs can continue to benefit from preferential trade arrangements post Brexit" (OCTA 2018, 3). They also suggested that the United Kingdom could "contribute to the EU financial support earmarked for OCTs . . . with a view to maintain UKOTS within or alongside the OCTs grouping" (OCTA 2018, 9). Overseas Countries and Territories Association (OCTA) Chair and French Polynesia Vice President Teva Rohfritsch stated, "We will not turn our backs on our friends from Pitcairn Island because of Brexit. Regional co-operation will continue" (*Pitcairn Miscellany* 2018b).

The European Commission was more noncommittal, and in June 2018 published a draft for a new "Council Decision on the Association of the Overseas Countries and Territories with the European Union," which

specifically excludes the UK territories: “The proposed Decision will take into account the consequences of the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the fact that the special regime set out in Part Four of the TFEU [Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union] would no longer apply to the 12 British OCTs” (European Commission 2018b, 9). So there are real concerns that, when (and if) a final Brexit deal is agreed to, the interests of Pitcairn and the other territories will be sidelined.

With the potential loss of support from the European Union, debate over Pitcairn’s long-term viability was placed into even sharper focus. The population remains at a near historically low level—in the mid-forties—and it continues to age. Only seven people in paid employment are under the age of 50, and there are none in the 20–30 age group (UN 2018, 7). The new UK governor of Pitcairn, Laura Clarke, who assumed her post in January 2018, said the issue of the island’s future was “an existential question with no quick or easy answers” (*Pitcairn Miscellany* 2018c).

In an attempt to move this debate forward, several workshops on Pitcairn’s future were held during the period under review, although there were concerns that the younger members of the community did not engage (PIC 2018a, 2). Discussions included whether Pitcairners’ attitude toward migrants needed to improve; who should Pitcairn be targeting as prospective migrants; and whether a more realistic marketing campaign—one which also highlighted the difficulties of migrating to the territory—was

needed. But there was also consideration of whether a survey should be undertaken to see if current residents wanted to leave Pitcairn and what support they might require to resettle elsewhere (PIC 2018c, 2; 2018d, 3). Nevertheless, there was frustration over the lack of concrete measures to start addressing Pitcairn’s perilous future. One Islander remarked “that we had spoken repeatedly on the same issues but nothing had happened to take things forward” (PIC 2018d, 3).

Despite heightened concerns over the future of Pitcairn, several new initiatives were taken in an attempt to boost its economic viability. Perhaps the most significant was the plan to designate Pitcairn as a Dark Sky Sanctuary. To date only four locations in the world—Aotea/Great Barrier Island (New Zealand); Cosmic Campground (United States); Gabriela Mistral (Chile); and Rainbow Bridge National Monument (United States)—have this status. A Dark Sky Sanctuary is “public or private land that has an exceptional or distinguished quality of starry nights and a nocturnal environment that is protected for its scientific, natural, or educational value, its cultural heritage and/or public enjoyment” (International Dark-Sky Association 2018). Pitcairn looked to the Aotea/Great Barrier Island in particular, which, after becoming a dark sky reserve in 2012, saw a significant growth in so-called astro-tourism. In February 2018, John Hearnshaw, emeritus astronomy professor from the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, visited Pitcairn and indicated that the island met the criteria, and it was expected that an application would be made to the International

Dark-Sky Association later in the year (*Pitcairn Miscellany* 2018a).

However, the issue of Pitcairn's inaccessibility, which would need addressing if "astro-tourism" was to become viable, was starkly highlighted when it was noted that in the six months prior to November 2017, there were no cruise ship arrivals, and even when *Le Boreal* did arrive the sea conditions were too rough to land the passengers (*Pitcairn Miscellany* 2017c). As a result of these and other constraints, including the continued failure of the campaign to bring new (and younger) residents to Pitcairn, UK budgetary support—worth £3.1 million (US\$4 million) in fiscal year 2018–19—remained crucial (DFID 2018). This support was criticized by the *Daily Mail*, a widely read, right-wing newspaper and long-term critic of the UK aid budget. An article by the paper's deputy political editor, headlined "The paradise island that can't persuade ANYONE to move there: UK gives Pitcairn £6.5m aid after drive to boost population fails," mocked the failure of the recruitment campaign and quoted official documents from the Department of International Development (DFID), stating that the aid was needed because the "able bodied population has declined to a critical level," and that "the likelihood of a significant increase in population is low and the prognosis is very pessimistic" (Stevens 2018).

Another reason why it has proved so difficult to attract new residents is highlighted by the continuing effort to overcome Pitcairn's legacy of past and more recent cases of child sexual abuse. A series of child safety meetings took place in August and early Sep-

tember 2017, and according to the UK government these enabled a successful reconciliation process to take place (UN 2018, 8). Then in November 2017, two child safety reviewers contracted by the United Kingdom visited Pitcairn "to undertake an independent review of [its child safety] systems and processes and overall culture of the island" (PIC 2017b, 1). Pitcairn was still struggling to offer some form of public recognition of what had taken place. Also, one problem of managing the process of rehabilitation was highlighted when Pitcairn's Internet connectivity was closed to other users in order to allow a recently released offender to hold Skype meetings with his psychologist (PIC 2017a, 5).

Reports that Henderson Island had the highest density of man-made debris recorded anywhere in the world, weighing a combined total of 17.6 tonnes, elicited a response from Governor Clarke. Researchers from the University of Tasmania and the United Kingdom's Royal Society for the Protection of Birds made the discovery and suggested that about 13,000 new items were washed up daily (*The Guardian* 2017). Governor Clarke highlighted the problem in her blog and announced that the Pew Charitable Trusts, with support from the Blue Belt Programme (a UK government initiative to help provide long-term protection for the marine environment) would send an expedition to Henderson to undertake a forensic analysis of the plastics to identify the sources of the litter and track the extent of the impact. There were also plans to clear a section of the beach, convert the plastic into a substitute for aggregate in concrete,

and add it into pathways and tourist trails on Pitcairn (FCO 2018). The expedition was initially planned for the latter half of 2018, but it was pushed back to early 2019 (PIC 2018b, 4).

Elections for the local council took place on 8 November 2017. The position of deputy mayor was uncontested, so Charlene Warren-Peu retained her position. The five councilors elected were Michele Christian, Darralyn Griffiths, Leslie Jaques, Sue O’Keefe, and Kevin Young (*Pitcairn Miscellany* 2017d).

So the year under review was one of uncertainty and continued vulnerability, particularly in relation to what will happen with Brexit. It is possible that the UK government will agree to a “softer” version, which would mean maintaining a relatively strong alignment with the European Union. And the closer the United Kingdom remains to the European Union, the better the outcome for Pitcairn. But there is no certainty of that and, as Councillor Jaques warned, the impact of Brexit could be “catastrophic” if there is a significant breach. This threat comes at a time when Pitcairn (along with the UK government) remains unable to mitigate in any real way the (long-standing) “existential” problems facing the territory. The Dark Sky Sanctuary initiative is certainly an interesting one, but without a comprehensive, viable, and sustainable plan for Pitcairn, the future is looking increasingly bleak. The waste-management crisis on neighboring Henderson is perhaps indicative of this malaise: that the islands are too remote and the funding too small to maintain a viable and

effective “British” presence on the islands.

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