



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

South Sea Islanders

SPEECH

Monday, 1 September 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Christensen, George, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mr CHRISTENSEN (Dawson—The Nationals Deputy Whip) (16:46): I move:

That this House:

(1) acknowledges the 20th anniversary of the Australian Government's recognition of Australian-born South Sea Islanders as a distinct ethnic group in Australia;

(2) expresses deep regret

(a) over the cruel treatment of the approximately 60,000 South Sea Islanders, mainly young men, who were blackbirded (or essentially kidnapped) or lured onto ships and then transported to Australia for the purpose of indentured labour; and

(b) that a number of discriminatory acts followed, chief among these being the forced repatriation of Pacific Island labourers back to their place of origin in 1906, in many cases against the will of those being repatriated;

(3) acknowledges the considerable economic contribution of Australians of South Sea Islander descent to the establishment of the sugar industry in the state of Queensland, and other agricultural and industrial development in the north;

(4) celebrates the contributions of so many Australians of South Sea Islander descent to Australian life in every field of endeavour, from the football field to the political sphere; and

(5) calls for consideration of measures to ensure that Australians of South Sea Islander descent can achieve equity and assistance in this present day through:

(a) inclusion on the national census as a separate people group, by the simple addition of an extra question;

(b) access to diabetes treatment in the same way this is available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders; and

(c) access to assistance in all areas of disadvantage such as health, housing, education and training.

On the banks of the Pioneer River in Mackay there is an impressive piece of public art called *Sugar Cubes*. While the average man on the street may not know what it represents, there are about 3,000 people in the area who do, and these are the descendants of South Sea Islanders brought to our shores by force, coercion or bribery more than 150 years ago. *Sugar Cubes*—a semicircle of tall piles of cubes crafted out of steel—tells the story of their ancestors. This period of our history—the blackbirding era—is the closest thing Australia has had to a slave trade. About 63,000 South Sea Islanders were brought to Queensland, and each sugar cube bears the name of a trade ship that carried human cargo as well as the name of the plantation they were sent to work on. These workers came mainly from the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. In one year alone—1881—1,789 people were brought to Queensland in 31 ships; 15 of those ships came directly to Mackay, sometimes at a rate of one each week, and their trade continued for 40 years.

Many are familiar with what happened, but I suspect that few have stopped to consider the sheer number of people who are affected. Many died during the long voyage to Queensland, and more died after arrival from diseases like dysentery, pneumonia and tuberculosis. You could probably call the next sad chapter of their story 'Discrimination by legislation'. The dawn of Federation in 1901 brought with it the push from the union movement for a white Australia, and thousands of South Sea Islander labourers were deported under the Pacific Island Labourers Act. Other racist legislation followed, like the 1905 Sugar Bounty Act, which rewarded producers who used white labour, and the 1913 Sugar Cultivation Act, which required islanders who wanted to grow cane to be able to read and write 50 words in any language. Between 1900 and 1940 there were at least 40 pieces of

discriminatory legislation on the statute books. There were restrictions on voting, land ownership and fishing for pearl shell. South Sea Islanders were even banned from employment in butter factories. This was a bitter pill to swallow, particularly in relation to the sugar industry, because their labour in the cane fields and their contribution to the establishment and ongoing success of the sugar industry was significant.

And this is another chapter of the story that is rarely told. In 1902 about 84 per cent of labourers in Queensland sugar were non-white workers. Another source states that since these islanders performed all the fieldwork connected with the sugar industry it is probable that without them the initial enterprise would not have been forthcoming and very few of the old mills and plantations would have seen the light of day.

It was a significant contribution for one of the state's most significant and enduring industries, which accounted for 1.7 per cent of total exports in 1900 and grew to 25 per cent by 1980. More chapters in the story have unfolded throughout the lives of many Australian South Sea Islanders who have contributed to our culture. Rowena Trieve from Mackay and Joe Leo from Rockhampton are both OAM recipients. Mal Meninga has made a legendary contribution to the sport of rugby league. Faith Bandler, who championed recognition long before others, was made a Companion of the Order of Australia in 2009.

Proud Australian South Sea Islanders did not shirk their duty when it came to serving their country. Sadly, Mackay man, Frank Fewquandie, was the first Australian killed in the Vietnam War. And Percy Mooney Senior, who still lives in his family home at Habana, enlisted and served in World War II. Others who made significant contributions in Mackay include Cedric Andrew, Greg Sutherland, Jeanette Morgan, Christine Andrew, Winnie Boah, Kay Fatnowna and the late Noel Fatnowna.

There is no doubt that the day of official recognition in this parliament on 25 August 1994 was a landmark moment, and I want to pay tribute to the efforts of former member for Dawson, Ray Braithwaite, who pressured the Keating government at the time to respond to the call for recognition. Mackay's Greg Sutherland, who is also chair of the National Australian South Sea Islanders Governance Working Group, remembers the day well. He said, 'A lot of us were excited and pleased to be finally recognised for our heritage and our contribution to the state, and I guess we were hoping a bit more would come from it'.

At the time of recognition it was noted that the government of the day needed to assess how it was servicing the needs of Australian South Sea Islander people. Twenty years on, the time is right to again take stock as the next chapter of their journey unfolds. Why is it that proud Australian South Sea Islanders cannot tick a box on the national census forms acknowledging their distinct heritage? And why is it that Australian South Sea Islanders in need of special treatment for conditions like diabetes need to deny their heritage in order to access what is readily available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders? These questions need to be answered, and as chair of the House Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs, I will call for a roundtable to give full and proper consideration to those issues.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Is the motion seconded?