



Speech by

Hon. PETER BEATTIE

MEMBER FOR BRISBANE CENTRAL

Hansard 7 September 2000

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

South Sea Islander Recognition Statement

Hon. P. D. BEATTIE (Brisbane Central— ALP) (Premier) (9.37 a.m.), by leave: I seek the support of all members of the House in acknowledging a very significant advance. Today my Government will right a wrong that has existed for more than a century in Queensland. Today we formally recognise Australian South Sea Islanders as a distinct cultural group in Queensland. For the information of members, I table the Queensland Government's recognition statement of the Australian South Sea Islander community which, as honourable members can see, has been signed by both the Leader of the Opposition and me. I thank him for his cooperation and his bipartisan commitment to what we are doing today in this formal recognition. I will be moving that my ministerial statement be noted so that the Leader of the Opposition will have an opportunity to address this issue at the conclusion. I also wish to acknowledge in the public gallery representatives of the community, some of whom have travelled overnight by bus to witness this occasion. On behalf of all members of Parliament, I say to them that it is an honour to have them with us today.

From this day, Australian South Sea Islanders will be recognised as a distinct cultural group in Queensland. Over several generations, the community has called for such recognition to acknowledge their special place in the history of this State. South Sea Islanders were first brought to Queensland more than 130 years ago as cheap labour. That is a sorry part of the history of this State, but I think on an occasion such as this we should be up-front and deal with it openly. Many people were tricked into coming, others were blackbirded, which simply means that they were kidnapped. Men, women and children were forced to work long hours for low wages, or no wages, in slave-like conditions, enduring poor living standards and a mortality rate five times greater than Europeans of the time. With the advent of the infamous White Australia Policy, the majority of Melanesians brought to Queensland were forced to leave, despite having helped enrich our State through their backbreaking work in the sugar industry and many other industries.

As we plan to celebrate the Centenary of Federation, it is worth noting that some of the earliest Commonwealth legislation passed in Australia ordered the deportation of South Sea Islanders. Research into the Queensland Government's own Department of the Premier and Cabinet—my department—has unearthed a substantial amount of historical material that shows the effects of the policies of the time on the lives of South Sea Islander people. In 1992, a human rights and equal opportunity report found that the community had suffered from a century of racial discrimination and harsh treatment and was the most disadvantaged non-indigenous community in Australia. While the Federal Labor Government of the day responded to the report and recognised Australian-born South Sea Islanders, no formal recognition statement was presented to the community.

Queensland, the main beneficiary of the work of South Sea Islanders and the home of so many descendants, has until today failed to formally recognise this community. Today we are setting that right. Formal recognition means that Queensland Government departments and agencies must ensure that Australian South Sea Islanders have equal opportunities to participate in and contribute to the economic, social, political and cultural life of the State. In consultation with the community, my department has already begun developing a whole-of-Government action plan to address the key needs of the community. This response is consistent with the Government's Multicultural Queensland

Policy aimed at ensuring access, participation and cohesion for all Queenslanders. I expect this plan to be completed by the end of the year.

However, we already have one initiative from the action plan. The Queensland Department of Main Roads, my own department and the Livingstone Shire Council have, in the past couple of days, agreed to an initial \$160,000 upgrade of Joskeleigh Road near Yeppoon in central Queensland. This is an important road for a significant South Sea Islander community, and it will also provide access to proposed cultural tourism projects. Later today I will be hosting a function at Parliament House to mark this recognition statement. That function will be attended by a large number of Government Ministers and backbenchers, as well as the Leader of the Opposition and his key shadow Ministers. I thank him again for his bipartisan support.

At that function, one of Queensland's favourite sons and an Australian South Sea Islander, Mal Meninga, will be there helping to launch an information kit comprising a poster and brochure. I thank him also for being with us on this occasion. This is just the beginning of a concerted strategy to make every Queenslanders aware of the cultural heritage and significant contributions made by the South Sea Islander community. I am confident that formal recognition will also help build the self-esteem and dignity of what is already a very proud community.

The recognition statement cannot undo history. However, it is a sincere acknowledgment of a special community within Queensland. I again welcome the representatives of that community to this Parliament. I look forward to seeing them later today. I move—

"That the House notes this statement."
