




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

ADJOURNMENT

South Sea Islanders, Sesquicentenary

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (5.49 pm): I rise to share with the House the privilege I had in representing the Premier at the dedication ceremony of 29 Pacific islander gravesites on a farm in my electorate. The dedication ceremony was thoughtful, sensitive, emotional and informed, and had strong symbolic importance to Australian South Sea islanders. Strong representation from the governments and peoples of Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands and a large representation from my local community highlighted the significance and the emotion of the occasion. We all worked hard to gain recognition for the Sunnyside property. I was delighted when the property was recently heritage listed, as the drystone wall built by South Sea islander labour, two weeping fig trees planted by Edward Turner in 1874 and the existence of 29 graves have been recognised. I acknowledge Brian and Marcia Courtice whose dedication to the historic recognition of their property was tireless.

In recognising Australia's past inhumane treatment of Australian South Sea islanders, many descendants again call for action to remove disadvantage for descendants. That is a message for us all and one I support. The reality of the conditions for Pacific islanders on indenture contracts is not well known in Queensland. It is a part of our history that needs to be publicly acknowledged, with government action to reduce disadvantage among descendants. Most people do not know that Australia has a history of slavery, which began 150 years ago and involved the blackbirding of 50,000 people from the Pacific islands to work on sugarcane fields in Queensland on 62,000 indenture contracts. Islanders were kidnapped, coerced and subject to contracts they could not have understood and that were designed to keep them in many forms of slavery. When the White Australia Policy was introduced, Pacific islanders were forced to leave the country despite building families and communities, and sometimes not knowing where they originated from.

Australian South Sea Islanders Recognition Day is on 25 August, and I take this opportunity in the parliament to reflect on the past and talk about moving forward for the 40,000 descendants living in Australia, whose social and economic disadvantage is equivalent to that of Aboriginal Australians. While being defined as a distinct disadvantaged ethnic group, there are no specific programs and services for Australian South Sea islanders nor are there official figures on how many descendants there are in Australia. I welcome the government's commitment to multicultural affairs and the formation of parliamentary friends, of which I am a proud representative, to work with Australian South Sea islanders to help build community esteem and a positive future.

The minister's visit to our Bundaberg Multicultural Festival on 18 August was a significant recognition of the value of the multicultural society we have in Queensland. The Bundaberg Multicultural Festival, in acknowledging the 150-year recognition of blackbirding, was also well represented, with the Prime Minister for the Solomon Islands and Paramount Chiefs from Vanuatu in attendance. It was a great day for all who attended the Bundaberg Multicultural Festival. We had a large representation from the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. People came and spent a week or so in Bundaberg, doing wood carvings and other culturally important activities. Of course, we all know and respect their strong Christian values. On 25 August we should all take a moment to recognise the blackbirding history in Australia. I wish all members a good weekend.