



Speech By  
**Stephen Andrew**

**MEMBER FOR MIRANI**

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Record of Proceedings, 31 August 2022

**MOTION**

**Australian South Sea Islanders**



**Mr ANDREW** (Mirani—PHON) (5.00 pm): I move—

That the House:

- (a) acknowledges that next week marks the 22nd anniversary of the Queensland Recognition Statement, in which certain undertakings were made to the ASSI community;
- (b) acknowledges that most of those undertakings were never fulfilled;
- (c) acknowledges that ASSI people continue to suffer a level of disadvantage on par with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who many ASSIs share a common ancestry with;
- (d) expresses sincere regret for:
  - (i) the cruel deportation of ASSIs in 1906, the only group ever forcibly deported from Australia;
  - (ii) the raft of discriminatory laws passed in this House against ASSIs; and
  - (iii) the misappropriation of monies from the Queensland Pacific Islanders' Fund, containing the wages of 15,000 men who died while indentured in Queensland.
- (e) acknowledges that researchers recently discovered ASSIs had been victims of the same human trafficking and trade in body parts as ATSI;
- (f) seeks that an expression of regret be made for this inhumane practice and that the government assist the community in the repatriation of those remains for respectful burial; and
- (g) notes that the member for Mirani proposes to table a bill for the implementation of special measures to reduce ASSI disadvantage in Queensland.

Next year will be 160 years since the first ship carrying South Sea islanders arrived in Queensland. Between 1863 and 1904 more than 50,000 islanders were brought to toil in the fields of Queensland for white farmers. Many were cruelly exploited, chained, beaten, starved and whipped. In the 1870s Reverend JC Kirby described seeing a group of chained islanders walking through Dalby without shoes accompanied by armed men on horseback and said it was like a scene straight out of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. I grew up hearing the stories of my Kanaka ancestors, the backbreaking work they did and the suffering they went through.

The South Sea islanders had the highest death rate of any other immigrant group to Australia—an astonishing 30 per cent. The deaths at the government run Kanaka hospitals in the 1880s were even higher, although the exact numbers may never be known. Islanders were terrified of hospitals, saying they would rather die than go there. A story by Paul Turnbull revealed that a Mackay Hospital superintendent was engaged in the scientific trade of South Sea islander remains and body parts. Over 200 autopsies were done between 1884 and 1885. Dr Charles Clarkson provided skulls and full skeletons to the Queensland Museum and possibly other institutions worldwide. This revelation has caused a great deal of shock and distress amongst the community.

Sadly, the crimes against South Sea islanders did not end with the 19th century. One of the first acts passed on Federation led to the forced mass deportation of islanders from Australia. The harrowing event has been described by historians as a crime worse than blackbirding itself. There are many horror stories from that time. For me the worst were the accounts of boats leaving islanders on the reef at low tide to perish rather than incur the expense of the long journey back to the islands.

Queensland has more than 40 pieces of racist legislation in relation to South Sea islanders on its statute books. These include restrictions on employment, voting, land ownership and pearl fishing. Another injustice involves our ancestors' stolen wages. The Pacific Islanders' Fund held all the wages owed to deceased islanders. It was meant to be held in trust and paid to the men's families on their deaths. Only 15 per cent of those wages were ever paid out to their families. The rest was misappropriated by the Queensland government and used to pay office expenses and later the cost of deportation. A report submitted to the parliament in 1905 gave the final balance of the fund's accounts as £39,363—an amount equivalent to about \$40 million today. We have found in some other places that the amount is much higher. No apology or restitution has ever been made to the community for these stolen wages. A 1992 report described South Sea islanders as a black minority living on the fringes of white society that suffer persistent and pervasive poverty on par with Aboriginal people.

On 7 September 2000, the Queensland government recognised South Sea islanders and committed to ensuring that present and future generations of Australian South Sea islanders have equality of opportunity to participate in and contribute to the economic, social, political and cultural life of the state. The government also said it would require its departments and other agencies to act on this commitment through their policies, programs and services. I think it is fair to say that none of these promises have been fulfilled, until recently when a bit of money was given across and some of that was a government department job.

Last year I oversaw the drafting of a private member's bill which introduced a program of special measures to assist South Sea islanders. I wrote seeking the Premier's support in obtaining a message from the Governor so that the bill could be tabled in parliament. The response I received from the Minister for Health and Leader of the House was short and to the point—

Due to the current fiscal climate, it would not be appropriate ... for the Government to support a Governor's Message for your proposed Private Member's Bill.

It was a bitterly disappointing response for not only me but also the other South Sea islanders who helped draft the bill. South Sea islanders remain one of the most severely disadvantaged and neglected communities. We are not just another migrant group. The Kanaka story has been one long history of cruelty and injustice in Queensland. Real action is needed to bring this dark chapter in this state's history to a close.

This motion calls for the undertakings made in the Queensland recognition statement 22 years ago to be honoured. It should be honoured as soon as possible. I find it offensive and unfair that our people have to trade in their own identity to access any sort of funding. They are administratively ethnicised in government paperwork. Two years ago, a 97-year-old ex-serviceperson died on a dirt floor in Ayr, one of the richest towns in all of Queensland. It is a shame.