




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Record of Proceedings, 31 August 2022

MOTION

Australian South Sea Islanders

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (5.30 pm): We know that 150 years ago South Sea islanders were coerced, tricked and kidnapped before being bought to the shores of the Burnett River in Bundaberg for sale in the slave trade market. South Sea islanders were shipped to Queensland as indentured labour to work in the sugar, farming, railways and mining industries—all important industries that started with this labour. While some came willingly, many did not.

It is important that we acknowledge the contents of the motion moved by the member for Mirani as being significant and important. As has been said tonight, Queensland and Bundaberg became the reluctant home for more than 50,000 Pacific islanders. Of those 50,000 who were bought here, 16,000 died. That is a mortality rate of around 25 per cent. Sadly, the records for the islanders who were transported to our coast were destroyed.

Back in 2013 I worked with Brian Courtice and the then environment minister—the member sitting down the front—to commemorate 29 South Sea islanders who called Bundaberg home through obtaining heritage listing for their grave sites on Sunnyside property on Windermere Road. This is a property that is surrounded by a drystone wall that was built by these South Sea islanders. The 29 unmarked graves lie under two weeping fig trees planted by Edward Turner in 1874.

We cannot say for sure who lies beneath the ground on Sunnyside farm in my electorate, but we know that the South Sea islanders loved to come and sit under the historic fig trees. We also know that sadly one of their ancestors was hung from one of those trees. The heritage listing was a small step in the right direction to recognise the strong and special spiritual association that Sunnyside has with our South Sea islander cousins whose ancestors lived, worked and died on the plantation. I acknowledge Brian and Marcia for their dedication to the historic recognition of South Sea islanders in the region. Having their property recognised was a tireless endeavour.

The dark days of blackbirding saw islander men and women live under extremely harsh conditions before the Pacific Island Labourers Act was legislated in 1901. This act made it illegal to import South Sea islanders after March 1904. We have seen Australian governments welcome islanders back over the years. We have had programs like SWP created in 2012 and the Palm program. That enabled more South Sea islanders to come to Australia for work.

I would have hoped that we would not see again the horrific practice of blackbirding in my electorate or anywhere in the world. Recently it has been revealed that a number of South Sea islanders have been subjected to slave-like treatment once again in the Burnett. The promise of better work and better pay meant several men were induced by non-approved employment firms to work illegally. It is alleged that the interstate contractor exploited workers after they came to Australia from Vanuatu with their families.

I am happy that the Minister for Industrial Relations is in the House. I have written to the minister today highlighting this practice. It is insidious. Unfortunately, these issues continue to plague our community. We should be embarrassed and upset by that. This employer has left those people with hardly anything to live on—no money. They are saying quite openly now that communication has been opened up that they feel like they have been used like their ancestors who were blackbirded under false promises in the 1800s.

I take this opportunity to thank motel manager Amanda Morris who has been working tirelessly with the Vanuatu community. She has been there every step of the way. She has uncovered exploitation and has helped the victims of this illegal operator wade through the chaos, bureaucracy and legal problems they face. Thank you Amanda for exposing these horrors. It takes people like Ms Morris to stand up for what is right, stand up against cruelty and stand up for the human rights of these workers.

That brings me to my final point about our South Sea islander relationship. It is important that we as a country do all we can to protect our neighbours and prevent modern day slavery. The recently signed security deal between the Solomon Islands and China has unleashed geopolitical convulsions of immense magnitude. There is a long history of shaping the recent deal, but questions remain. Most crucially, how can Australia correct the many past mistakes and move forward given the new regional reality? We cannot afford to continue to exploit people from these countries.

Now the geopolitical situation has become precarious, it is time to think about what major adjustments are needed to the way things are done. What is the most constructive way to offer foreign aid? It is time for Australia to offer nursing and education scholarships. It is time to try to compensate for the past wrongs through helping the South Sea islanders of tomorrow. It is time for Australia to take bold steps to reinforce its Pacific relationships and secure its strategic interests.

We have people living in the community who are scared and frustrated. This goes back to what the people who were brought here over 100 years ago and put into enforced slavery must have felt like. I congratulate the member for Mirani for bringing this motion forward. It has been a pleasure to have a five o'clock motion debate that is respectful and meaningful. I thank him for that.