



Information Sheet 5: The Deportation of Australian South Sea Islanders by the Commonwealth Government, 1901-1908

62,475 Pacific Islander indentured labourers were contracted to work in Queensland onwards from 1863. In 1901, approximately 10,000 Pacific Islanders lived in eastern Australia from Torres Strait to northern New South Wales. They comprised the original labourers and their children. In 1900s they were two-thirds from the Solomon Islands and one-third from the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu).

Pacific Island Labourers Act, 1901

In 1901 the new Commonwealth Government passed the *Pacific Island Labourers Act*, part of a package of legislation to achieve a White Australia. The aim was to remove Pacific Islanders from Australia through gradual attrition (those on new three-year contracts entered into up until the end of 1903) and forced deportation. Only 839 'ticket-holders' (pre-1879 arrivals) were exempt. This racist legislation was in line with the sentiments of the majority of the parliamentarians and the Australian people. To compensate the sugar industry the Australian Government introduced an embargo on all 'foreign' sugar and a bonus for sugar produced using only white labour. This transition was well in place by 1906 and by 1911 94% of the labour in sugar industry was provided by Europeans.

The Islander Reaction to the Deportation order

They mounted complex legal and humanitarian arguments: that they were legal immigrants; that the Act was against the principles of racial equality within the British Empire; that their families would be financially and socially disadvantaged by deportation; that many were alienated from their original island societies by long residence in Australia or because they would be in danger if they returned home.

The Pacific Islanders Association was formed in Mackay in 1901 by Tui Tonga, a Fijian of chiefly status, but he died soon afterwards. Control was then taken by Henry Diamuir Tonga, from Tongoa Island in the New Hebrides. With assistance from missionaries, between 1902 and 1906 the Islanders petitioned the King, the Governor of Queensland, the Governor-General, Federal politicians, and gave evidence to the 1906 Royal Commission into the sugar industry. They also mounted a challenge to the High Court that Section 8 of the 1901 Act was unlawful, exceeding the powers of the Australian Constitution and exceeding the powers of the Australian Parliament. In 1906 Tonga and another Islander voyaged to Melbourne to interview the Prime Minister.

1906 Amendments to the 1901 Act

Under 1906 changes Islanders were exempt from deportation if had lived continuously in Australia since 31 December 1886, were aged or infirm, had children educated as State schools, owned freehold land, were (before 31 October 1906) married to a person not from their own island, or could prove that they would be in danger if they returned home. The majority of present-day Australian South Sea Islanders are descended from this group.

Final Deportation, 1906-1908

Forced deportation began in late 1906 and continued until mid-1908. Families were ripped apart and property was forfeited. On return to the islands many faced severe problems readjusting to their old lives and some were killed. The official number allowed to remain was 1,654, but later estimates suggest that around 2,500 remained. The result was a cruel, racially-based mass deportation unique in Australian history and a matter of shame for the Australian Government and people.

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Sincerely,



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