

Motion (by Mr Beazley)—by leave—agreed to:

That:

- (1) this House authorises the publication of the Auditor-General's audit report No. 1 of 1994-95; and
- (2) the report be printed.

DISTINGUISHED VISITORS

Mr SPEAKER—Order! I note that present in the gallery are representatives of the Australian South Sea Islander community. We bid them welcome.

Honourable members—Hear, hear!

HUMAN RIGHTS AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITY COMMISSION

Report: Government Response

Mr LAVARCH (Dickson—Attorney-General)—by leave—It is most appropriate that representatives of the South Sea Islander community should be present. It gives me great pleasure today to table the government's response to a Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission report entitled *The call for recognition*. Tabled on 6 May 1993, this is a report on the situation and needs of Australian South Sea Islanders.

The report's title encapsulates the most fundamental issue for Australian South Sea Islanders; that is, to be recognised. It is a major step in addressing a serious wrong. In the formal statement I am tabling today, the Commonwealth government recognises Australian born South Sea Islanders as a distinct ethnic group in Australia with its own history and culture.

The report concludes that Australian South Sea Islanders are a unique minority group and have been severely disadvantaged through racial discrimination. Yet until now they have not even been formally recognised as a distinct ethnic group in Australia. In other words, they have not existed officially. Perhaps this is the greatest insult that can be paid to any ethnic group. More than an insult, this deflates a community's self-esteem. It also threatens the collective heritage of Australian born South Sea Islanders.

These people have a right to a fair go as much as any other Australians. *The call for recognition* vindicates the government's concern for issues raised by such people as Faith Bandler in her book *Wacvie*. Published in 1977, the book tells the moving story of Ms Bandler's father. He was taken by force from the island of Ambryn, which is part of Vanuatu, and put to work on the cane fields of Queensland.

I would now like to spend a few moments detailing the history of Australian South Sea Islanders. It is a history that, regrettably, few Australians are familiar with.

South Sea Islanders are the descendants of the 55,000 to 60,000 Melanesians brought to Queensland between 1863 and 1904 to develop the local sugar industry. They came from many Pacific islands—mainly from Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. Like Faith Bandler's father, they were often brought against their will. In other words, they were treated no better than slaves. That is the ugly truth of the matter. This sorry chapter in Australian history was referred to as blackbirding, which is of itself an obnoxious term.

No other group came to Australia with less status than did the South Sea Islanders. To add insult to injury, between 1904 and 1906, many were deported under the white Australia policy. This policy was implemented as one of the first acts of the newly formed Commonwealth of Australia. However, about 2,400 people either evaded deportation or were exempted from it.

Today's Australian South Sea Islanders are the descendants of this remnant community. We are not completely certain how many members make up the community, but the report suggests that there are 15,000 to 20,000 Australian South Sea Islanders. Many still live on the Queensland and northern New South Wales coast, where their forebears sweated and strained to develop Australia's sugar industry.

Despite having been in Australia since before Federation, South Sea Islanders have had very little written about their situation. In 1991, the Evatt Foundation directed the attention of the government to the social and economic disadvantage facing many Austral-

ian South Sea Islanders. As a consequence my predecessor, the then Attorney-General, the honourable member for Holt (Mr Duffy), asked the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission to undertake an inquiry into their situation.

As I have already mentioned, the report prepared by the commission as a result of this inquiry was tabled in May last year. The brief history of Australian South Sea Islanders I have just described is drawn largely from that report. A lengthy process of consultations with relevant Commonwealth departments and agencies has been undertaken since the tabling of the report.

I am pleased to announce that the government response which I am tabling today proposes a number of positive initiatives. The government's response is designed to foster a real sense of community amongst Australian South Sea Islanders. The report acknowledges that Australian South Sea Islanders feel they will not become part of multicultural Australia until they are properly acknowledged with their own special heritage and cultural traditions.

The government fully supports the report's first recommendation, which calls for the government's formal recognition of Australian South Sea Islanders as a unique minority group that is severely disadvantaged through racial discrimination. This government acknowledges that the descendants of Pacific labourers see themselves as quite distinct from other ethnic minorities in Australia. They are not indigenous, nor are they descended from mainstream settler migrants. Their historical experience in Australia has generally been one of a lack of control over their own affairs and of exclusion.

In the formal statement I am tabling today the government acknowledges the injustices of the indentured system of labour under which the ancestors of Australian South Sea Islanders were brought to Australia and the economic and cultural dislocation suffered by those South Sea Islanders and their descendants, the severe disadvantage experienced by South Sea Islanders and their descendants, and their contribution to the culture, history and economy of Australia.

The government's response to the other five recommendations is set out in detail in the formal response. Briefly, the initiatives we are proposing are based on the recognition of the group as an entity. The census provided by the report is a good start. We need to assess how government is servicing the needs of the community. First of all, we have named the Australian South Sea Islanders as an access and equity group. This means that all Commonwealth government agencies must include service statistics in their reports.

We are funding two liaison officers for three years to provide the community with organisational support. We have also decided to commission a small cross-portfolio research project to gather data on Australian South Sea Islanders, which should ultimately help service delivery agencies in identifying the community needs. I am seeking to have an Australian non-government organisation take up this research.

Finally, government agencies should take steps to increase public awareness of South Sea Islanders and their role in Australia's history. My colleague the Minister for Development Cooperation and Pacific Island Affairs (Mr Bilney) has earlier today announced details of initiatives that are outlined in the government response. These directly address some of the needs identified in this recommendation.

When my predecessor asked the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission to conduct an inquiry into the situation of Australian South Sea Islanders, it was an important first step in the process of recognising their existence and examining their special needs. This initiative demonstrates the Commonwealth government's commitment to making social justice a reality for all Australians. It is also about all Australians celebrating their particular heritage and having their contribution to this country recognised. I would like to think that the steps the government is taking mark a new chapter in the history of Australian South Sea Islanders. Mr Deputy Speaker, I table the government's response to this important report.

Mr NEVILLE (Hinkler)—by leave—I thank the Attorney-General (Mr Lavarch), his

shadow in this House—the honourable member for Kooyong (Mr Peacock)—and indeed the House for its indulgence today in allowing me this opportunity to make a brief response to today's statement on the status and future of the South Sea Islander people who now live in Australia as Australian citizens.

As the Attorney-General quite rightly observed, the South Sea Islander Australians have been recognised as neither an indigenous nor an officially recognised ethnic group. To that extent, they have been sidelined from the great mass of Australians. The injustice perpetrated against this group in the 19th century stands to our enduring shame. They were used, exploited and then returned or, for those who stayed behind, abandoned—but in a way that is only exceeded in its injustice by decades of studious indifference and neglect in the 20th century. One has only to read speeches to this parliament by the honourable member for Dawson (Mr Braithwaite) or to read Noel Fatowna's book *Fragments of a Lost Heritage*—again, often referred to by the honourable member for Dawson—to know just how unjust and demoralising their existence has been.

The history of World War II and its aftermath shows how debilitating deprivation from one's cultural background can be. Our multicultural policy in Australia has sought to rectify that situation for a broad raft of ethnic groups. Yet a group which has been with us—and no longer as indentured labour—in some instances for nearly 150 years has been studiously ignored.

I am sure I speak for those along the Queensland and New South Wales coastal regions, and indeed for those in capital cities, in welcoming the Attorney-General's formal statement regarding South Sea Islanders. For the first time there is formal recognition by this parliament of the economic and cultural dislocation these people suffered, the disadvantage experienced by their descendants and the acknowledgment of their cultural history and their place in the economy of Australia. This has long been awaited and indeed it has been demanded by the damning report of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. Now that it is on the record, and if

it is genuinely going to mean anything, this must be more than rhetoric.

Earlier today, the Minister for Development Cooperation and Pacific Island Affairs (Mr Bilney) announced four cultural programs to create an awareness of and a cultural surround to the South Sea Islander people. One of them will be a South Sea Islander cultural awareness awards scheme which will allow up to six of their number to visit their home islands and home countries in the South Pacific to re-establish cultural and family links. It will also involve a curriculum project, funded by AIDAB and the Queensland education department collectively, to bring about a two-year \$150,000 program on the history and culture of South Sea Islander people. This will be tested initially in Queensland schools. There will be a South Sea Islander historical exhibition of photographs and artefacts, which in many instances will not have been seen before, which will tour the museums of Australia and a limited number of country centres before touring the South Pacific.

The project that is of particular interest to me, because it is in the electorate of Hinkler, is the Bundaberg historical building project. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Office of Multicultural Affairs and the Queensland government have undertaken to restore two small wooden buildings at Fairymead, adjacent to the Fairymead mill, where many South Sea Islanders were indentured labour. These rather humble buildings are a representation of the new culture of the South Sea Islander people. It was in and around these buildings that the South Sea Islander evangelical church was formed.

You, Mr Deputy Speaker, were in the chair on the day on which I reported to the parliament on a very moving event which happened in Bundaberg on the afternoon of Friday, 6 May when some 500 residents of Bundaberg and 150 South Sea Islander residents of the Solomon Islands flew into Bundaberg for a religious celebration and what was an unsolicited act of reconciliation. You will further recall that that group, through their Minister for Home Affairs, the Hon. Michael Maelliau, presented to this parliament a symbolic war club with the wish that never again would

there be any disharmony between the South Sea Islander people and the Australian people. That was a very generous act of reconciliation. As I said, it was totally unsolicited, totally uncalled for and totally unplanned, and it came from their hearts. It is fitting that today in this parliament we should reciprocate by putting on the record our acknowledgment of the injustices perpetrated on these people.

The statement made by the minister announces three initiatives. First, Australian South Sea Islanders will be declared an access and equity group. This means that, in future, all government departments and agencies will include them in statistical analyses and reports, which will certainly provide some form of database. Second, the government will fund two liaison officers for three years, at a total cost of \$80,000. Third, the government also announced that \$50,000 will be provided for a small cross-portfolio research project. This is a restatement of the minister's press release of 26 July.

While I do not wish in any way to be churlish, and while I readily acknowledge the generosity of many of the moves that have been undertaken today, those last three initiatives are generally small bickies. I do not criticise them, but I hope that they are no more than the first faltering steps towards some genuine recognition. It should be abundantly clear to government departments that these people have been outrageously neglected in the areas of housing, education, health and training.

I would hate to think that the announcement of building up databases, providing two liaison offices for 20,000 people and \$50,000 for a cross-portfolio research project would be the end of the affair. As I said, I hope this will be just the start and that it, very quickly, rights some of the social and economic injustices that have been perpetrated by studious indifference over the last 90 years or so.

Today is a great day of celebration for the South Sea Islander people. They have seen their culture recognised by the minister at a midday function. In some ways it is an embarrassing day for Australians to have to admit past wrongs, but it is something that

had to be done and something we must do with all due humility. It is a day to acknowledge the first faltering steps towards greater social and economic justice for the South Sea Islander residents of this country.

Mr NEHL (Cowper)—by leave—I will speak only briefly because I am aware of the time constraints on other honourable members. First and foremost, I congratulate the Attorney-General (Mr Lavarch). I am delighted that he has come through on this matter. Many members on both sides of parliament have been genuinely concerned about the situation of South Sea Islanders. Again, I congratulate the Attorney-General on this breakthrough. As the honourable member for Hinkler (Mr Neville) mentioned, he is hoping for more. However, I note that the minister, in his tabling statement, has said that the government's response to the other five recommendations is set out in the formal response. I look forward to reading that response.

I also pay tribute to the honourable member for Dawson (Mr Braithwaite), who has been assiduous in pursuing the position of South Sea Islander people. He comes from Mackay, where there is a very large number of South Sea Islander descendants. I supported a motion that he put forward on 30 September last year, seeking the government to take the action that it has taken today. He and I later participated in a deputation to the Attorney-General, who was pleased to see us. We had very full and detailed discussion about the needs of South Sea Islander people. One of the good things about this parliament is that we can have bipartisanship in many areas, particularly in this area. With the support of the opposition, the government will undertake action which will go part of the way to remedy the disgraceful treatment of a great many wonderful Australians.

The statement about wonderful Australians is not a general statement. I speak from experience. When I spoke last September I mentioned a wonderful and great man, Noel Fatnowna, whom I had the great privilege of meeting and knowing. I am also privileged that one of his nephews, Garth Fatnowna, is

a teacher at a primary school in my electorate and is doing a wonderful job.

Finally, and again, this is one of the highlights of this sitting because the government is moving the way the opposition and the South Sea Islander descendants want it to move. It is really a first-rate effort. Again, I can only say congratulations. We look forward to continuing to work with this government and the next government—which will be us, of course—in furthering the position of South Sea Islanders.

MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Uranium

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Jenkins)—Mr Speaker has received a letter from the honourable member for Gippsland (Mr McGauran) proposing that a definite matter of public importance be submitted to the House for discussion, namely:

The failure of the Government to abolish its discredited 'three mines' uranium policy, which has cost Australia hundreds of millions of dollars of export income and new investment.

I call upon those members who approve of the proposed discussion to rise in their places.

More than the number of members required by the standing orders having risen in their places—

Mr McGAURAN (Gippsland) (4.31 p.m.)—The events of the last few days have been very instructive as to how the ALP is managed. The public, I am sure all honourable members on both sides would agree, has gained something of a rare insight into the brutal, grubby and thuggish world of factional politics in which the honourable member for Lalor (Mr Barry Jones) claimed, quite rightly—and not surprisingly, to us at least—that power in Victoria in the Labor Party resides within the hands of only two individuals: Senator Robert Ray of the Right and Senator Carr of the Left.

What sort of self-respecting member of parliament would allow his or her future to be determined by two single representatives of the party that member swears allegiance to? Collectively, how can those opposite surrender the fortunes of the Labor Party, an histori-

cal and major player in Australian political history, to a handful of individuals in each of the different states representing the different factions? We can say this with certainty though: the honourable member for Lalor was not one of them. The member for Lalor stood his ground and refused to bow to the heavy-handed tactics of the factional leaders.

This is very relevant to the matter of public importance because, just as factional politics determine party affairs, they also determine government policy. We might stand bemused by the intrigue surrounding factional politics within a Labor Party context but, when it comes to deciding government policy according to factional wants, needs, prejudices and ideological obsessions, it is a different thing altogether because any government should govern purely on the basis of the national interest. We have seen none of that in regard to uranium policy where two of the three factions in existence that we know, namely, the Centre Left and the right wing faction—leaving aside the loose collection of Independents—have opposed the government's current restrictive three-mine uranium policy.

We know that because senior representatives of both those factions have gone public and described the uranium policy of the government as illogical, absurd and a joke. These senior representatives are: Senator Robert Ray, one of the executioners in the case of the honourable member for Lalor; Senator Loosley from the right wing; Senator Collins, the Minister for Primary Industries and Energy; the Minister for Development Cooperation and Pacific Island Affairs (Mr Bilney) from the Centre Left; the Special Minister of State (Mr Johns)—I presume he belongs to the Centre Left; we are never quite sure where his ambitions are best suited—and Senator Beahan.

Labor Party icons such as Peter Walsh, John Button, Graham Richardson and—dare I say—Bob Hawke have reiterated in recent days that the Labor Party's three-mine policy makes no sense. It is an absurdity but, more than that, it is an absurdity that is costing this country dearly, to the tune of \$260 million a year in lost income and the drying up of new investment. Those figures were supplied by