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House Hansard

Report: Government Response

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Thursday, 25 August 1994

Page: 397

[Previous Fragment](#)

[Next Fragment](#)

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[Start of Business](#)

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AMENDMENTS) BILL 1994

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Mr LAVARCH (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.

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**Report: Government
Response**

Mr LAVARCH

Mr NEVILLE

Mr NEHL

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TERRITORIES LEGISLATION
AMENDMENT BILL 1994**

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AMENDMENT BILL 1994**

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AMENDMENT BILL 1994

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**AND CONSEQUENTIAL
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PURPOSES) BILL 1994**

ADJOURNMENT

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Main Committee

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

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 Australian 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.

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