

Revisiting recognition

Who are Australian South Sea Islanders?

- 1.1 Australian South Sea Islanders (ASSI) are the Australian-born descendants of the workers who were brought to Australia to work as indentured labourers in Australia's primary industries. Between 1863 and 1904 more than 50 000 South Sea Islanders were brought to Australia from around 80 islands in the Pacific, though the majority came from Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands.
- 1.2 Although some South Sea Islanders came to Australia by choice, many were tricked by recruiters or kidnapped and brought here by force. Most worked in difficult conditions in the Queensland cane fields, and those who remained in Australia after Federation faced ongoing racial discrimination and harsh treatment throughout the 20th century.¹
- 1.3 It is difficult to say exactly how many Australian South Sea Islanders there are in Australia. Many ASSI people have mixed ancestry and may identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. The Queensland Government has noted that the official Census figure of approximately 4 000 is most likely a substantial undercount, and cited estimates of around 20 000 ASSI people living in Australia, though the actual number may be even higher than that.² The largest ASSI communities are along Australia's East coast, with

1 Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships, *Australian South Sea Islanders*, <http://www.datsima.qld.gov.au/people-communities/australian-south-sea-islanders>, viewed 3 March 2015.

2 Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships, *Australian South Sea Islanders' 150th Anniversary*, <http://www.datsima.qld.gov.au/resources/datsima/people-communities/assi/150th-anniversary-factsheet.pdf>, viewed 3 March 2015

the highest concentrations in Sydney, Tweed Heads, Bundaberg, Rockhampton, Mackay and Bowen.³

Recognition

- 1.4 In 1994, via a statement to the Australian Parliament, the Australian Government recognised Australian South Sea Islanders as a unique and distinct ethnic group and accepted that ASSI people suffer from severe social and economic disadvantage as a result of racial discrimination.
- 1.5 Recognition by the Government occurred as part of the Government's response to the 1992 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) report entitled *A Call for Recognition: A Report on the Situation of Australian South Sea Islanders*. The HREOC report highlighted the hardship and discrimination faced by the Australian-born descendants of Pacific Island labourers brought to Australia in the 19th century.
- 1.6 In 1994 the Australian Government accepted each and every one of the recommendations made in the HREOC report and made a number of undertakings designed to address the disadvantage faced by ASSI people.

Roundtable discussions

- 1.7 Last year, to mark the 20th anniversary of recognition, the Social Policy and Legal Affairs Committee held a roundtable discussion with leaders of the ASSI community. The Committee wanted to hear from Australian South Sea Islanders how far Australia has progressed towards the goals set out in the HREOC report, which we as a nation made our own in 1994.
- 1.8 The roundtable featured the Chair of the National Australian South Sea Islander Governance Working Group, the Chair of the Mackay and District Australian South Sea Islander Association, and prominent members of the Australian South Sea Islander community. A list of roundtable participants is at Appendix A.
- 1.9 At the roundtable, representatives of the ASSI community told the Committee that little has changed for ASSI people in the 20 years since recognition. ASSI people suffer a level of disadvantage which is on par with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but they do not enjoy similar access to government services and programs, and their unique

3 *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 27 November 2014, p. 3.

culture is rarely acknowledged by the Australian Government.⁴ The Committee has published a podcast on its website which summarises the issues raised during the roundtable.

Government advice

- 1.10 As a result of the evidence received during the roundtable, the Committee resolved to seek more information from the Government on its efforts to reduce the disadvantage faced by ASSI people.
- 1.11 The Committee wrote to the Attorney-General, the Minister for Education and Training, the Minister for Employment, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Treasurer and the Minister for Immigration and Border Protection to seek advice on how the HREOC report's recommendation were implemented. The Committee also sought advice on any current policies or programs that relate to the ASSI community.
- 1.12 Having reviewed the Ministers' responses, the Committee has found little evidence of ongoing efforts to address Australian South Sea Islanders' economic and social disadvantage. Although a number of policies to fulfil the Government's undertakings were enacted in the wake of the 1994 response, these appear to have lapsed in subsequent years, and very few Government departments could point to ongoing programs specifically intended to alleviate the disadvantage faced by ASSI people.
- 1.13 The Attorney-General, for example, noted that his Department commissioned a report on ASSI access to Government services which was published in 1996, but did not point to any current policies specifically tailored to ASSI people.⁵
- 1.14 The Minister for Foreign Affairs reported that some records relating to the Department's implementation of the HREOC recommendations were destroyed after their authorised records retention period expired. However, Departmental records showed a small number of 'public diplomacy' activities related to ASSI people in the years since recognition.⁶
- 1.15 When asked how the Government helps ASSI people to access employment services, the Minister for Employment noted that ASSI people are recognised as a 'disadvantaged cohort' by Job Seekers Australia

4 *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 27 November 2014, p. 5

5 *Correspondence*, dated 11 February 2015.

6 *Correspondence*, dated 10 February 2015.

when it calculates a job seeker's level of disadvantage. Consequently ASSI people may have access to more intensive employment services.⁷

- 1.16 After hearing that ASSI people felt ignored by having to identify as 'Other' in the Census, the Committee asked the Treasurer whether the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) would consider recognising the unique status of ASSI culture in the 2016 census. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasurer responded on the Treasurer's behalf that the ABS had no plans to change the way it identifies ASSI people.⁸
- 1.17 Finally, the Minister for Education listed a range of policies which are designed to address educational disadvantage generally, but did not list any programs targeted specifically at ASSI people.⁹

Committee conclusions

- 1.18 On the basis of this evidence, the Committee has concluded that not enough is being done to address ASSI peoples' ongoing disadvantage. The Government's efforts to ensure that recognition is given to Australian South Sea Islanders' unique cultural identity and historical experience have so far not been sufficient. It is fair to say that the promises we as a nation made to ASSI people in 1994 have so far gone unfulfilled.
- 1.19 The social and economic situation of Australian South Sea Islanders is a matter of national concern, and the Committee will continue to monitor the Australian Government's policies in relation to ASSI people. More needs to be done to ensure that the long history of injustice faced by this unique group of Australians does not continue.

7 *Correspondence*, dated 13 February 2015.

8 *Correspondence*, dated 12 February 2015.

9 *Correspondence*, dated 18 February 2015.

Recommendation 1

- 1.20 The Committee recommends that the Australian Government establish an interdepartmental working group to liaise with Australian South Sea Islander groups, so as to identify priority areas to address disadvantage, improve coordination with State governments, and address problems in the provision and delivery of culturally aware and appropriate Government services to Australian South Sea Islanders, in accordance with the 1992 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission report *A Call for Recognition*. In identifying priority areas, the interdepartmental working group should provide the Parliament with a progress update no later than 30 June 2016, and subsequently every three years.