

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

House of Representatives

Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs

Australian South Sea Islanders

Thursday, 27 November 2014

Canberra

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs

Thursday, 27 November 2014

**Members in attendance:** Ms Butler, Mr Christensen, Ms Claydon, Mrs Markus, Mr Pasin, Mr Perrett, Ms Price, Mr Sukkar.

QUAKAWOOT, Auntie Mabel, Traditional owner of Curtis Island1

SUTHERLAND, Mr Greg, Chair, National Australian South Sea Islander National Working Group1

VEA VEA, Mr Starrett, Chair, Mackay and District Australian South Sea Islander Association1

QUAKAWOOT, Auntie Mabel, Traditional owner of Curtis Island

SUTHERLAND, Mr Greg, Chair, National Australian South Sea Islander National Working Group

VEA VEA, Mr Starrett, Chair, Mackay and District Australian South Sea Islander Association

*Evidence was taken via teleconference—*

**Committee met at 09:46**

CHAIR (Mr Christensen): I declare open this briefing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs. We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land. We pay our respects to elders past, present and future. We acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who reside in this area and thank them for their continuing stewardship of the land. Almighty god, we humbly beseech thee to vouchsafe thy blessing upon this committee, direct and prosper our deliberations to the advancement of thy glory and true welfare of the people of Australia. I welcome our participants. Is everyone there?

Mr Sutherland: Auntie Mabel and Fiona are together in a car somewhere stuck in a traffic jam. Someone had an accident and one lane of the road is closed.

CHAIR: This meeting is a formal proceeding of the parliament. Everything said should be factual and honest. It can be considered a serious matter to attempt to mislead the committee. We are going to publish on the committee's website a transcript of what is said.

Given that this is the 20th anniversary of the recognition of Australian South Sea Islanders as a distinct ethnic group, we thought we would have this roundtable briefing to find out from South Sea Islander representative bodies what issues, I suppose, from the time of the original recognition were still outstanding. In particular, we are aware that a report *The Call for Recognition* was done in 1992 by HREOC, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. There was a government response to that report, which we thought it would be good to talk about. We all have copies of it and have had a look through it. I invite you to give an opening address to the committee if you so desire and then we might ask a few questions. It is going to be fairly informal. There will be no grilling or anything like that. We just want to tease out some information from you guys as to where you think we are at in relation to what was originally recognised by the government and originally put forward by the government as to how it was going to deal with people of South Sea Islander descent into the future.

Mr Sutherland: In the 20 years since Mr Braithwaite up here first spoke to many of us—he was the then federal member—we expected a lot more to have progressed than it has. It is almost as though the recognition was a bit of lip service by the government and the opposition, because it had bipartisan support, as it has in Queensland. The reality of it is that South Sea Islander people still have trouble accessing a lot of services. I will give you an example. I am South Sea and my wife is Aboriginal-Torres Strait. She can go to a medical centre but I have to go to another line with private health. My wife and children are divided from me even though in our community we are all seen as one group of people with separate identities, if that makes sense to the committee.

In my role I see, and you would study, the census figures. They do not show a high proportion of South Sea Islanders. I know, when I look around the area where I work in North Queensland-Central Queensland, there are a heck of a lot more Australian South Sea Islander people than the census says. A lot of that is because prior to the introduction of things like ATSIC, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, the departments federally were Aboriginal and Islander, so we were all together. Then there was a split of the generations was, 'You can only identify one way or another.' Many people felt that they were going to lose their house or their entitlements, so they do not mark those boxes on a census form, not that it is clearly there for them to say Australian South Sea Islander. They have to go and use the 'Other' box. A lot of people just do not understand that particular part of census and recording or the importance of the census. Our local councils' dividends, I guess is the word, from government would be significantly higher should those true recognitions occur.

From the time 20 years ago to now—and we have lived that period of time—it has really been the Australian South Sea Islander community itself who have led the discussion to get changes, until just recently. Locally, different members would be aware of the people in their community, the make-up of their community and would work with community groups. But, at the departmental level, there is very little done. In fact, I was talking to Starrett earlier, and here in our area we think a trophy was given out through the old Centrelink 10 years ago, and I was the recipient. They came to present it, but it was actually funded by Mrs Rowena Trevi OAM, one of our elders and leaders, and that was the only thing. Ten years ago, the Commonwealth hosted a dinner at the entertainment centre, told us they were all good little fellows and did not do anything else. It flows across to the state; it is not one area. Primarily, that is a lot to do with our culture, because a lot of our older people are very quiet. They work shoulder to shoulder in most industries where they were brought here to work, whether from the blackbirding days or today, they will still [inaudible]. It is disappointing to see that families can have access to health, housing, education, scholarships, traineeships, opportunities to start [inaudible]. We always acknowledge that Australia has [inaudible]

CHAIR: We have an audio issue here, Greg. Just hang on a second.

Mr Sutherland: Yes.

CHAIR: Okay, you can keep going.

Mr Sutherland: It will not be at our end, because I just got a message slipped under my nose: Fiona will have to be an apology. Her daughter has been taken to hospital for an operation. She is very pregnant, so I guess I know what that is! Mabel is still in traffic—answering but cannot get through. I just give those apologies, Mr Chairman. Going back, I think members need to understand. Just listening from the broad area—Western Australia, South Australia, New South Wales and Newcastle—the Australian South Sea Islander who was brought to New South Wales and to Queensland 152 years ago has made a significant contribution to this country. We have always been tax-paying members of society. We have always been ones who have contributed, but we have never been ones to complain. We are a very silent group of people, primarily because of our cultural background. I returned from Vanuatu at 10 o'clock last night after doing a Rotary project over there to do with scholarships. I have to say that, through AusAID, even the people in the islands get a better deal than we get here. They get support with housing, with health and with education. We do not get the same things here in Australia at all. We have some very active pockets, like in Port Jackson in Sydney and some in Brisbane, but the majority of people who live in rural areas are like those in the rural areas of the 78 islands from which our people were brought originally to work here. They are just quiet, hardworking, everyday people and many do it very tough, but many are very proud of their achievements. Starrett and I are sitting here talking to a committee, and people may say, 'Well, they're lucky, they've got a house and they are paying it off, or they've had a good job.' Starrett's been in the mines since we left school and I have a good job, but we did not have access to tutorial assistance or schemes like that. We had our mothers. Our mothers came to the high school and, whilst they were not welcome to work in tuckshops and libraries, they did not give up. They taught us out the side of the school under trees. I share that with you from when I was a young boy. I am only 52—you cannot see the greys, but I am in better condition. As chairman George will tell you, I have had a few hurdles—and mainly they are around health, because of our lifestyles.

But we are not walking away and saying we are ungrateful for our lives here in Australia—far from it. What we are saying is that our contribution is as good as any that any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander would have given to the country, and we were brought here, let's face it, basically as slaves. We have not marched up the streets waving flags, rocking the doors of parliament and demanding apologies or anything like that. We have just sat down and said, 'Well, that's the way it has been.' That is because we are still, to this day, heavily influenced by the churches, the missionaries and our political leaders. We take what is there as the norm on many occasions. Starrett and I may be something different in the way in which we speak out a little bit, but we do that because we had that opportunity, because of our mothers, to be educated. Even now, the government funds thing like the PaCE Program—Parent and Community Engagement Program—but that is not for our kids. Auntie Mabel is joining us now, Chairman George.

CHAIR: Great. G'day Auntie Mabel.

Auntie Mabel Quakawoot: Hello.

Mr Sutherland: That is George. They are recording this in Canberra. George is chairing a committee of politicians from all around Australia, and they are the ones who are interested in our concerns.

Auntie Mabel Quakawoot: Good.

Mr Sutherland: Auntie Mabel is from the Gladstone and Rockhampton area. I am not going to say her age, but she is a mature age person who has given a lot to our community and who also served in the women's army corps—

Auntie Mabel Quakawoot: Air force.

Mr Sutherland: Air force. And she was only recognised this year.

CHAIR: Wow.

Mr Sutherland: She gave so much. We sit here, and we look and we just scratch our heads. In fact, at the school the other day—one in your electorate, George—there was a plaque opened to acknowledge the contributions of Australian Aboriginals, Torres Strait Islanders and South Sea islanders over everything from the First World War. A number of serving officers and former officers were present. It has taken until now. We had to pay for the plaque, mind you. We had to pay for it; we fundraised. But it is just an example of how you can get pushed to the back because you do not make a noise. When everyone else marches down the road on Anzac Day, we have a little one ourselves out at the hut. We have our own little Anzac Day because South Sea islanders have not been readily accepted, even though it was good enough for them to go to war and serve the country for so long. Like many Australians, they told fibs about their age to go there and to do what they did. But that is on the side.

Housing is an issue. Health is an issue. Education is a huge issue. Classes are divided, up here. If you are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, you can get certain courses and certain funding. If you are South Sea islander, you get nothing.

Auntie Mabel Quakawoot: Zilch.

Mr Sutherland: Auntie Mabel tutors kids, still, after school. She still tutors and does what many other senior South Sea islander women do, helping the other kids because they get no support. So when they sit there and look at the results at year 12, they track a student and they say: 'Gee, we've done well. Look at us!'—pat, pat, pat on the back—'We've got all our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through.' They do not even mention the South Sea islander kids. They do not even mention them. I have been in education for quite some time. They do not get a mention.

I was the head of Commonwealth government economic development, originally set up by Mr Crean and Mr Beazley, and taken over by Minister Abbott at the ACC, which you would be aware of, George. I chaired sugar reform. It was quite an amazing feat for a descendent of a Kanaka slave woman to sit in the chair as the chairman of sugar reform—and I am a diabetic; I have to say I had a giggle—for Sarina, Mackay and Whitsunday. Our people were very proud of me to have that appointment. It showed that we were finally being accepted. Whilst it was a voluntary thing—Minister Truss did not give us a free lunch at the time for three years—we did it. I was very proud of it. I asked those farmers, growers and mechanical cane harvester people, 'Can I tell my community what is going on because they are still out there cutting fields. They are still working in the fields.'

As you are aware, my uncle died at 101½ years old. He joined the Labor Party when he was 14. He was their oldest serving member but he, too, would say it is not fair that the other kids cannot get the same apprenticeships. They cannot get the same jobs. A mining company up here, they do not care if you are Aboriginal or Torres Strait. It can be a TI's land and they can get a job but a South Sea kid cannot.

CHAIR: Could I ask a couple of questions specifically on what you have said there. Firstly, this is a bit of a boring question, but just so that we have some background: Greg, you mentioned before that most South Sea Islander Australians stayed where their families were brought to. Could you give us a very quick overview of where those places are along the eastern seaboard?

Mr Sutherland: Primarily there are some in Sydney where they went to first, then on the north coast of New South Wales and stretched right throughout the Queensland coast. You will even find that there are some as far north as Lockhart River community. That is because the great man they named Townsville after got paid in advance to drop people back in the islands, but it must have been too far—he dropped them off at Lockhart. Then you go to the Torres Strait to St Pauls on Moa Island and there is the first and only South Sea Islander reserve. So the South Sea Islanders are a big part of the Torres Strait. But the Torres Strait people say they are Torres Strait because they get funded as Torres Strait. They do not get funded as South Sea Islanders. So we go all the way up.

We also stretch out because after that they then worked the cane and the cattle. They worked the railway and some of those who were brought in to Port Curtis or the port of Bowen, Gladstone and Bowen, they were taken out to work on a thing called cotton. They did not even know what it was. Some of them had to work on sheep. They had never seen such a thing. When I was there on Monday night—I have chief recognition over there— I sat there talking to the chiefs and they were telling the stories again about the sheep. They are still amazed about the sheep. The Australian governments have this seasonal worker program and South Sea people can come from the islands now and work on sheep down in those southern states. They pick fruit. You know, some of that fruit they have never seen. You know, they get them to work in rose gardens and they prickle up all their fingers because they did not know what they are.

Mr Vea Vea: Mr Chairman, it is Starrett here. You will find that the majority of the South Sea Islander groups—you are probably looking at Tweed Heads for the large population. Then go up to Bundaberg. Bundaberg will have a large population. Then on to Rockhampton and Mackay, which has one of the largest, and then on to Bowen. They are the main pockets of Australian South Sea Islanders and that there.

I want to pick up a few things from what Greg was saying. Probably on a local level and that, I see discrimination all the time. This is black people discriminating against black people as in we, Australian South Sea Islanders, not having access to basic services and that there. We could go to the doctors or that but most of us—as Greg said, me and Greg are probably lucky—are all low-income earners and that. They are doing minimal jobs and that there. At a local level, it is probably the recognition that we lack. After 1994, and after 20 years, it seemed to be a big hoo-ha for the first four years. Then it dropped off, and I think it was never picked up again. One point that Greg brought up was with the census. I was not around then, but they said that the Australian South Sea Islanders would get a tick box in the census. I thought that would be good. If we get a tick box, it will help in two ways: it will help to get clear numbers in the census of Australian South Sea Islanders; also, culturally, it will help our people to be proud to see that tick box there. When you look at the census, you will see the boxes there with every other ethnic group but Australian South Sea Islanders. We are down with Other. We came out here in 1854 in New South Wales and 1863 in Queensland. To me, it seems that we have been left out of that conversation.

With education up here, a lot of our people are finding it hard to access training. It is just as well that we have Greg here in Mackay and south of that. He looks after us Australian South Sea Islanders. Aged care is something we need to look out for, too, because one day we will get old. Who will be looking after us? A lot of us cannot afford to go to nursing homes, or have access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services.

Auntie Mabel Quakawoot: I joined the air force more than 50 years ago. It was the White Australia Policy then. But, because I was a South Sea Islander, they put me through but they did not know I was black until I got in. Anyway, that is beside the point. I lived in Canberra for nearly 5½ years and I used to go to parliament in the old parliament building. Mr Menzies was the Prime Minister then. So I know what it is to be a black person in an organisation where everyone else is white. You are either pitied or put aside because they do not think you have enough nous in your brain to do the job. But I pushed myself forward to be a teleprinter operator in the Department of Air in Canberra, and we moved from the old building to the new building now. I have made sure that my children, when they went through, did not have to tell a lie to say they were Aboriginal. Therefore, they would get the same education as the white children. I wish that this was stopped. Otherwise, we are going to be like this for the next 50 or 100 years. So if there is any possible way we could get a tick box to say we are South Sea Islanders, apart from that—

CHAIR: Yes, okay.

Auntie Mabel Quakawoot: And I just have a funny little note: it was the first South Sea Islanders that took religion to the Torres Strait.

CHAIR: There you go! I suppose that there are many distinct ethnic groups in Australia. Someone could argue that the reason services are specially dedicated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is that they are indigenous to the country. However, you would probably also consider yourselves a very special ethnic group in Australia given that you are the only ones—as you alluded to earlier, Greg—who were brought into Australia under duress, in the form of slavery, or, at the very least, in slave-like conditions. Do you want to comment on that?

Mr Sutherland: Yes, I would. My great-grandmother had no choice. She was brought here and, along with another lady, was put in shackles and offloaded at the mouth of the river. She walked up the river to the Leichhardt Tree and was politely sold. Unlike somebody who is fleeing economic conditions or who is an economic refugee, they were slaves—there is no other way to put it. When the slave trade and the civil wars occurred in America, the smarter British decided there was a new way and they brought people from the Pacific. They sold them under the trees—which, ironically, we do not want chopped down because it is part of our history. They are not people who came here by choice by boat or plane—and those people have hard conditions as well. From the stories of the European boat captains and others, when our people died down in the cargo hold their bodies were unceremoniously thrown over the side.

As a kid playing on a beach you would be offered a trinket to swim out and see a boat. You would then be locked up and your parents would be waving and screaming for you. You would then be brought to a country you do not know and a plantation that you do not understand. There is a distinct difference. Aboriginal people did work in the cane fields. There were no Torre Strait people here; they were not down on the coast until a long, long time later. They came with the railways. They also did the railway line in Western Australia—and set world records. Good on them for that; that is commendable. When it came to the South Sea Islanders, we were not like the Maltese or Italians, we were not 10-pound Poms, we were slaves. Let's be honest, members of the committee, we were slaves. We have not demanded a sorry or anything like that. As Auntie Mabel has indicated, those things that happened happened and we have had to work to be where we are now. It is an offensive sort of way to look at it but—

CHAIR: It is a truthful way as well. We might not like to hear it but, as you say, it is probably the truth. There are a lot of areas of disadvantage for Indigenous people, particularly in health—diabetes and other chronic diseases. That would be very similar to what is prevalent within the Australian South Sea Islander community, wouldn't it?

Mr Sutherland: Yes. Aborigines are worse than us in glaucoma and communicable diseases—in everything else we are in front—and that is because South Sea Islanders live under a Christian stronghold.

Ms CLAYDON: What about hearing diseases—otitis media?

Mr Sutherland: I have actually asked the Aboriginal health service and they said we are pretty well on a par. They know who is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and who is South Sea Islander but, like everything, they will take us as a number and let it be. Those things were called Aboriginal and Islander community health services but now they are called Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community health services. So if I go to the dentist around there, I have got to pay $600 for two fillings. When my wife goes she just has to have some sort of card—no wonder she has got a nice smile!

Auntie Mabel Quakawoot: My aunt is from the first generation born out here. She is still alive. She is as lively as anything. She is well into her 80s. She went to hospital to get her eyes done. She would have had to pay $6,000 because there were a few things wrong with her. But Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders could just tick the box. My auntie would not lie because she is a Christian. She would not tick the box to say that she was Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. So she suffered the indignity of not being able to see properly. So we have to put up with things like that when we go to the hospital. When it comes to education, if mothers tell their kids not to tick the box for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and they do not tick the box, they are more disadvantaged than the white children who come along because the education for them is free also.

CHAIR: I gather from what Greg said earlier that there are members of the South Sea Islander community who may have mixed ethnicity, may be unsure of their ethnicity or may not have any Indigenous ethnicity but, for fear of losing support, they regularly identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and not as Australian South Sea Islanders. That is what I got from your testimony earlier, Greg. Is that correct?

Mr Sutherland: That is correct. It is also correct that many of the agencies and hospitals automatically tick Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

CHAIR: So as to help them out—even though they know they are not.

Mr Sutherland: No. It is because the hospital gets no recognition or funding for helping a South Sea Islander. But it gets it for helping an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander!

CHAIR: I understand.

Mr Sutherland: Sometimes we do not know. I will use my health as an example. When I had the five heart bypasses I was lying there in the intensive care unit and the lady said to my wife, 'Just tick the box and we'll fly him to Townsville straightaway.' My wife said, 'If you think he's having a heart attack now, he'll be gone if you tick that box!' She knew. She said, 'Greg has private health cover'—and then the Flying Doctor picked me up that night. But had I not had private health cover—and many South Sea Islanders do not have it—I would just have to lie there. The workers come to them at the hospitals, the Martyr Hospital and the Base Hospital—private and state—and talk to you. I know because I visit a relative who has got no Aboriginal and no Torres Strait. I said, 'How come you are going to Brisbane so quick.?' He said, 'I don't know. Some lady came and visited me.' I said, 'Who?' He said, 'An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girl. They just did some paperwork for me and said they will fix it up.' When old bugalugs goes along to the chemist, I get slugged for all the pills I get; but that person, a direct relation of mine, gets all these cheap tablets. I was paying $600 or $700 a month to keep alive—and they are getting theirs for $6! We had the same thing; we both had heart operations. So I thought, 'Stone the bloody crows! I'm going to change from being an honest Christian blackfella to one who ticks a box.'

Mr Vea Vea: Greg is right in saying that. A lot of the health services around Mackay will take in Australian South Sea Islanders to make up the numbers. The more numbers they get, the more funding they get. Of course, that has helped us. That is probably why we are getting taken—to make the numbers up for more funding or whatnot.

Ms CLAYDON: Thank you for your contributions this morning. It has been really interesting. Greg, where are you based in your role as the national director of the organisation?

Mr Sutherland: I am based in Mackay, where I was born and grew up. So I am here, but I travel from Cairns to Sydney. I have to take holidays and pay for myself, because we have no funding.

Ms CLAYDON: There are a couple of things I want to come to. I read with great interest the 1994 government response to the then HREOC report and a number of the recommendations which clearly, given the evidence or the lived experience that you have articulated to the committee this morning, if they were implemented in some way, shape or form, have not filtered through to everyday life for people. Your experiences of the health services have been interesting. I have lived and worked in remote Indigenous communities, and I know that the Aboriginal medical services, for example, have always serviced everyone. There were not South Sea islanders in the area that I was working in, but certainly white people were attending all of the Aboriginal medical services. They were being flown in and out. Nobody was being turned away, although I grant there is an issue around the funding of that. There were certainly some dental services I was aware of over in Queensland where pastoralists, in particular, were using the Aboriginal dental services because they did not have access to any other forms of dental services in the town. But those services were open to negotiation and taking on additional patients from beyond their chartered responsibility of servicing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. So one question is around those Aboriginal controlled health services. Are you welcomed in as a patient in that service? I accept totally that you may want additional and other culturally appropriate services, but, if they are available, are you able to use them and made welcome to do so or is there push-back? What services are you accessing if it is not those ones?

Mr Sutherland: The public hospital system is very good up here. Some people, particularly those who have working leaders in their families, will have some form of health care. The others, the vast majority, go to the health service, but I think what is important for your committee to understand is: over the generations, with the cross-cultural relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and South Sea islanders, it is really hard to draw a divide. If you are not claiming one side, you are claiming another, for where it needs to be. For example, round at the local health service, on the front of my file it is written, 'He's not an Aboriginal.' That is fine. I do not have a problem. But that access is there. I go there because they have got the better doctor. I am quite happy to be a private patient of theirs. And they open on Saturday morning, and he does night calls, and that is great. But a lot of people will go there because it is accepted as a community hub. I too lived in remote Indigenous communities for about seven years. I used to be a policeman in the state of Queensland. I was out there and saw those things that you talk of. That is correct. I could access the Aboriginal health service without any problem. They did not really understand what a South Sea Islander was—they thought 'sugar baby' or 'Kanaka kid' or something like that. One of the things that I believe your committee needs to seriously consider is that the expenses to government will not be that high. The majority of people are accessing in some way through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island process. It just needs to be defined so that the generation can tell the next generation, 'It's okay, it is not illegal and you are not lying to go in there and be an Aboriginal, a Torres Strait Islander or Australian South Sea Islander.'

Ms CLAYDON: In the evidence this morning, there was a strong preference for the inclusion of a tick-box on the census form. There were a lot of recommendations put forward by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity report, and the government responses is there. Am I right to suggest that that was your No. 1 preference?

CHAIR: Just to clarify, what is on the census? There is something on the census currently, isn't there?

Mr Vea Vea: All we have under it is 'other'.

Ms CLAYDON: So your proposal is a specific box saying 'South Sea Islander'?

Mr Vea Vea: Australian South Sea Islander.

CHAIR: Subsequent to the motion that I brought to parliament earlier this year, I received correspondence from the ABS which indicated that they were going to do that. We will follow that up to check it, but I think that may be in train.

Mr Sutherland: Chairman, you may need to follow that up, because the ABS sent two officers here to Mackay. A number of us, the different groups, met with them, and they told us that they do their forms in advance and that, maybe in 2020 or 2021, it would be considered. That would be their response to government—they are working on it to have it implemented, but not next time around.

CHAIR: I will check the correspondence that I got. Thanks for that.

Ms CLAYDON: This question might best be applied to either Mr Sutherland or Mr Vea Vea. I am interested in the fact that your representative organisations, if I understand it correctly, are not currently funded in any way, shape or form. Is that correct?

Mr Sutherland: That is correct. In regard to the National Australian South Sea Islanders Governance Working Group, we were funded by the Rotary Club of Mackay for a couple of thousand dollars. My wife and I were funded for a couple of thousand dollars from MARABISDA, which is the Mackay And Region Aboriginal and Islanders Development Association, of which I am the chair—so I had a bit of influence on what I could get. That was so that we could get meetings together to get the constitution and to consult widely. We used that for airfares to bring out people like Gilbert + Tobin, who are the solicitors in Sydney doing the work pro bono for us, and the representative out of Port Jackson and the Brisbane ones to the meetings. We tried to have them, where we could, in regional areas, where the people were, and we have had those. Port Jackson received some funding themselves to do some WANTOK meetings, but, at a national or a state level, none of that has been funded at all. We are having our next meeting in Rockhampton on 24 and 25 January to finalise the national constitution and then elect the first board of the National Australian South Sea Islander Association to represent everybody nationally.

Ms CLAYDON: So your organisation is very much in its infancy, developing that constitution, or have you been around for a long time and you are only now formalise things?

Mr Sutherland: Yes, formalised.

Mr Vea Vea: At a local level, I am the chairperson of Mackay and District Australian South Sea Islander Association. They were formed in 1994 when the statement came out. In the beginning we did have the funding and then, as I said, it all fell away. We are currently not funded unless we put submissions in to state government.

Ms CLAYDON: Are you having difficulty in finding a funding source that you fit into or are you feeling explicitly excluded from existing funding sources?

Mr Sutherland: On some occasions we are told we are ineligible—that is, it is only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander funding. Small organisations try to compete against things like the Smith family, the Salvation Army or the Endeavour Foundation. Because government seems to want to deal with all the big things, it is not getting to the grassroots. Locally, people do not do it. We are out there doing fairs, raffles and all that sort of stuff to try to keep the organisations going. In 1994, there was access to some programs and they shut down. The only access was to employment programs of the state. Basically, everything for a South Sea Islander has to be through a mainstream program. They were very successful up this way, and in Rocky and Bundaberg, in running some employment programs for the government, but now they have stopped all those programs as well. That means there is no opportunity unless the kids go back to telling the fib that they are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders. Then they can get apprenticeships and traineeships and hopefully secure a good future for themselves.

Ms CLAYDON: Not having seen the constitution of your national body, is one of the tasks before you to revisit the 1994 recommendations—to follow up and see through their implementation or be an advocate or lobby group for the implementation of those—or are there new and additional matters that you wish to pursue?

Mr Sutherland: The issues raised in the HREOC report are the ultimate goals, to see those implemented. I would like to point out to members of the committee that, whilst I am the chair at the moment, I will not be seeking election to the national body at the conclusion of this process. It has been a bit of a drain in itself to get this far, but I feel that there are those who are able to carry it forward. My contribution with regard to the national level would cease and I would do things in a different way with some of them. In Queensland—basically anywhere—they cannot get the same legal aid. A South Sea man against his Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander wife in the family law court has to pay his own and she will be funded. Anyone wanting legal support basically has to get it privately. They do not get Aboriginal legal aid; they can get in the line at the other legal aid office or go to a private solicitor. We have discussed health.

Education in Queensland—and I can use no other word—is a farce. The curriculum was written in 1994. We all got together. It was you beaut. There was recognition. We wrote the curriculum to be taught in Queensland schools. Those books are still sitting on the shelves somewhere—the purple book and the blue book. The elders from all the different communities got together from Sydney to the Tweed and up north here to put those books together. They were published and printed and put on a shelf.

Ms CLAYDON: Do you mean that the schools are just not using them?

Mr Sutherland: They do not use them. They do not teach it.

Auntie Mabel Quakawoot: It is not put in the curriculum.

Mr Sutherland: It is not put in the curriculum. For those members not in Queensland—and certainly Chairman George is aware of this; his family has been associated with many islander families—my mother, for example, could not go to school above grade 4 because the Queensland law said she was a contaminant. I do not know if you all understand what it is like to have your mother called a contaminant. When Starrett and I went to school in a normal sort of neighbourhood we could not go to kindergarten or preschool—they did not have prep. We had to sit outside while all the little white kids of the neighbourhood, our mates, were allowed to go to kindergarten. We were behind the eight ball. That is where our mothers started teaching us. Then you come along to school and in grade 1, 2 and 3 you are at an impressionable age. There we were. We were still black. Under the Queensland Aboriginals and opium act they counted us with the cattle. We were not counted as humans; we were counted as cattle with the flora and fauna—good on them! Then we would go to school as seven- and eight-year-olds, line up every Friday on the other side of the yellow line and get our hair checked for nits and our bum for piles. The nurse had the authority to come to your house and check that your mother kept you in a clean house. My God, if they ever went to my neighbour's ramshackle place those kids would have been taken off them.

Ms CLAYDON: Thank you for sharing that part of your lived history. I agree it is probably not a well-known part of Australia's colonial history at all. The other big issue you have made clear is that there was some considerable preparatory work done in the development of materials to go into a school curriculum but they have not been implemented in your experience. Certainly on the Queensland side this is not something that has been taught at school. Those purple and blue books, as you say, are sitting on shelves, which is pretty appalling.

Auntie Mabel, I would like to ask you a question. We have already discussed health, education, some of the housing issues, some issues around scholarships and access to education. Are there any other specific issues that you are coming across that Australian South Sea Islander women want to pursue or have put on the table? Are there any specific issues that we have not mentioned already?

Auntie Mabel Quakawoot: When South Sea Islander women go into hospital they are treated as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. That to me is degrading not because of that but because I am not recognised as a different nationality to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. I went into hospital recently when I broke my leg and they classed me as an Aboriginal or a Torres Strait Islander. Because I have private health the nurse who was there just did not understand. She did not come from this area and she told me to get to the other ward. She tried to put me in the other ward. These are the indignities that Australian South Sea Islanders have to put up with, because they do not understand that because of any colour, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, you are put in there. Because you are paying your way, they do not care.

It is the same as in education. I worked in the education department for about 22 years after I got out of the Air Force. What I saw there was shocking because the children would be made to sit outside the door if they played up. The white child could play up as well as the South Sea Islander or Aboriginal child and they were allowed to stay in the room, but if the Aboriginal, or Torres Strait Islander, or South Sea Islander child played up they were sat outside the door. That still goes on today.

I am asking, now, could we have South Sea Islander people in some of the schools? They could group some schools together and we could go and make sure that these South Sea Islanders are getting the exact same education and things as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders get. They are not counted, but they allow them to go there to be counted to get the money for the schools. I would like to know if that can be done.

CHAIR: That is something we can continue to follow-up on. There are a lot of questions that have come out of this and a lot of questions have come out of just having a look at the original government response to the HREOC report, and we are going to follow-up that and some of the matters that you have raised. Are there any other questions that you have, Deputy Chair?

Ms CLAYDON: No, other than to say that it would be good for us to know who is actually monitoring the implementation of these recommendations.

CHAIR: Yes.

Ms CLAYDON: It was 20 years ago now. What capacity does the Australian parliament have to request a report into what progress, if any, has been made on these recommendations? That is something that the chair and I can certainly talk with the secretariat about following up and the best ways to do that, and to also remain, I guess, engaged. Once you are comfortable with your constitutional process and you have elected your board members and chair, maybe it is a good time re-engage, then, with the Australian government about the sorts of issues that you really want to bring to the attention of the federal government.

Mr Sutherland: Thank you for that. That is a real issue. Who has ever monitored the recommendations of the HREOC report? We do not know. One of the reasons that the local, state and national bodies are being created is that, after 20 years, those of us who have now reached an age where we get that permission to act by the elders are saying that it is just not good enough. We need to have that voice to go there. If we were a farmer we would be there getting something for the drought and then we would back up for something for the flood and then we would back up because the dollar price drops. It is not about that. It is just about correcting a wrong. We were brought here as slaves, we are the descendants, we are contributing to the country, but we are not recognised. Twenty years ago we all got a piece of paper, and I still have mine in my house, and Starrett and Auntie Mabel and everyone I talk to all have photocopies of those recognition things to say, 'Here you are. You belong somewhere.' Twenty years down the track that bit of paper is starting to fade and so is the struggle because people are wondering what government is going to do anything for us.

CHAIR: Can I ask a last question to Auntie Mabel? You talked a lot to the deputy chair about the identity issue. I want to know, in your words, why is it so important for Australians of South Sea Islander descent to be recognised as that ethnic group? Why is that an important thing?

Auntie Mabel Quakawoot: I grew up knowing my grandparents on both sides who were brought out here. I like to know that I can identify with a person who was not here of their own will. My ancestors were imported here. I would like people to know that I am a different identity to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. I am not trying to be funny or anything. What I would like to know is that our children, now, can be identified, way down the track, as South Sea Islanders, because we were brought out here under terrible conditions. If we could, sort of, have something to show that we are different. We are a nation unto ourselves. We are Australian-born South Sea Islanders. I would like to be identified and have our people identified as that.

Mr Sutherland: If I could follow that. It is no different. If you look around your committee table, you people come from all different political parties, but you are all politicians, and you are all there for the best interests of Australia. It is the same sort of thing. We are who we are by birth. No-one gave us anything else other than: you are an Australian-born South Sea Islander. This is who you are. We have been taught from day dot to be proud of who we are. I can remember going to mission school and being told that we could not talk and joke in tongue. It was not allowed. People were told that they could not go to church if they did not identify as a certain religion. You could not do this or that unless you identified. So, we have this, I guess I could use the words 'in-built thing' that we identify as who we are. There are those in need in different socioeconomic circumstances who require assistance and through fright or otherwise will not change because they are afraid to be out on the street with no medical cover, no roof over their head and no education for their kids, or in the case of many in Rockhampton, Mackay and Bundaberg, their grandkids that they raise.

Mr Vea Vea: I just want to follow-up too, on what was said about the identity. As you well know, if you have black skin and that, you are automatically classed as Indigenous or a Torres Strait Islander. That is concept with the broader public. What I want to say is that, we may not be first nation people, but we are definitely nation builders.

CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Sutherland: Yes, we want the same services, but we want them done properly. We want them done so they are Aboriginal, Torres Strait and Australian South Sea Islanders. We know there will be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who will object. We understand that. For the financial viability and sustainability of their organisations they, too, require South Sea Islanders to be accessing those services.

CHAIR: I think that we have got a fair bit out of that, and there are some issues that we have to follow-up on. Is there anything else that you would like to say before we conclude?

Mr Sutherland: On behalf of the national association working group and on behalf of all Australian South Sea Islanders we would like to thank all members of the committee for coming together today to listen to Auntie Mabel, Starrett and me present to you our concerns and our views. We are independent sort of people in that what we do we do because we believe in ourselves, we believe in our communities, we believe that we contribute to this nation. It is our adopted homeland, even if is was by force. We have resisted, over a number of years, the arguments of other academics to get us to join petitions to the United Nations and to do things against slavery and that sort of stuff, because we have the Christian background that we should talk. Talk over the last 20 years has been on one side of the fence. There has not been an echo or a yell back of any real significance.

HREOC did a great report, and the bipartisan support shown in the House of Representatives and then in state houses of parliament was very commendable, but the reality of it is that the rubber never hit the road to give us the runs on the board that we require. We would be keen, as the deputy chair mentioned, that there be some advice to us in regard to who has been monitoring or who has been implementing what. As far as we know locally—and I am just talking locally—when I travel from Cairns to Sydney, it seems to be that only the Centrelink staff or the human services people were doing anything that we knew of. To be honest, we did not want people in dole offices or dole queues, but they were the only ones who have come out and given us any real support that we have been aware of, and still is from that department. The programs that come out now, like the Indigenous Advancement Strategy and those sorts of things, would be programs and projects that Australian South Sea Islander community organisations could do and could give the government its necessary employment outcomes.

I guess I might sound like I should be in the parliament, but it is just of matter of we need now to take responsibility, stand up and look for some accountability in regard to this recognition, so that it is not just a document with fancy words, but it can be a document of direction for government, for departmental people and for people here. One suggestion we could offer is a process whereby an undersecretary or someone of similar senior ranking within a government department be given the rights of sponsorship of the Australian South Sea Islander cause, so that it is identified. It is significantly different to any other immigrant or migrant in that our ancestors were forced here. It is true that some returned later to pursue the careers they had. When it came to things like leasing and land ownership, Australian South Sea Islanders were way, way ahead of any other cultural group in doing those sorts of things. As much as it was crap country, they farmed that land as best they could.

Auntie Mabel would like to conclude her statement now.

Auntie Mabel Quakawoot: I want to say that, when my grandfathers were freed, or whatever you say, they were allowed to stay here and they took out a petition to do that, but they could not buy land at all. The land was there, the people who they were the slaves of allowed them to live on the land, but they could not own that land. When they did have enough money, slowly and surely, they thought that they would have the land, but then they did not because they were aliens to this country. My grandfathers could not own that land. They had a very good lawyer who said, 'Well, why not put the land in the name of your children who were born here in Australia?' That land is still in our family to this day. We would not have been able to own it if that lawyer did not tell my grandparents what to do. I am just saying that that is a part that we had to put up with.

Mr Vea Vea: I want to thank the committee for their help and for taking the time to listen to our concerns. I want to conclude with that I am a fourth generation Australian South Sea Islander. I have seen the hardship that we went through. I was brought up on the dirt floor on the banks of a river and I have come to where I am now. A lot of our other people do not have that opportunity that we went through. In saying that, I am frightened that the identity of who we are will get lost in the big wash of things.

CHAIR: I want to thank all three of you for taking the time to talk to us. Greg, I will not be suggesting you get pre-selected anywhere because Blanche will kill me first and then you.

Mr Sutherland: You might not have a seat, George.

CHAIR: I am glad to give it up, mate, if you want it.

Mr Sutherland: It is all right. I would be lost there running around after my people.

CHAIR: Thanks, once again. We are going to follow up some of the issues that you have raised here today and other things that we see coming out of the HREOC report, which probably needs to be followed up as to where it actually all went. Thank you, again. That concludes the public hearing. Thank you all for your attendance today.

*Resolved that these proceedings be published*

**Committee adjourned at 11:00**