

Speech

-
given by

Don Fewquandie

on behalf of

local Sunshine Coast Australian South Sea Islanders

at the opening of the

Across the Coral Sea photographic exhibition

at Maroochy Library Nambour,

Harmony Day,

Monday , 21st March 2005

First and foremost I wish to recognise, with respect, the traditional owners of this land we stand upon.

The Mayor - Joe Natoli
CEO John Nages
Maroochy Shire Councillors present

Other distinguished guests, including our own South Sea Islanders Community Elders.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

I have much pleasure being here today to present this address on behalf of our local South Sea Islander community and thank the Maroochy Shire Council, the John Oxley Library for displaying this photographic portrait and history of the plight and life as it was of our original forefathers and mothers.

I particularly would also like to thank Debbie Kleidon from the Maroochy Library who has been the co-ordinator of this wonderful community event. Thanks also to the Maroochy Shire Mayor and Councillors in particular Cr. Jenny Mackay, Cr. Tom Hulett and other supportive councillors who have assisted our community in the past and now hopefully the future.

Thanks to our community members/elders, Pam Blackman, Sonny Byquar, Adele Withers, who have helped me get this community address together.

Don Fewquandie Portrait

Born 52 years ago in Mackay and my family island heritage is from the Soloman Is and Vanuatu. I grew up in a South Sea community on the banks of the Pioneer River in Mackay. I have been married to my wife Sue for 31 years who I now call my "Vanuatuan Princess" as her family heritage is from Vanuatu. Sue works part time in Chiropractic. I migrated as the sea bird does, as the old islanders would say, from Mackay to Nambour to be with my girlfriend, play Rugby League and further my studies in Engineering. We have a daughter Deneita who is 2nd in charge at the Acclaim Apprentices and Trainee company based on the Sunshine Coast and Cairns.

I worked in the Sugar industry for around 13 years and Breweries, and Heavy

Industrial Engineering for 3 - 4 years. To date I am employed by QLD Health as an Engineer and Manager in Capital Works and Planning, Strategic planning and as an adviser in areas of maintenance planning, project planning, design, Engineering Administration and Asset Management.

I am a member of the Board of Advice of the Australian South Sea Islander Community Foundation (which reports direct to the Premier's office via Multicultural Affairs) which raises/generates and allocates funding for South Sea Islander Students for Tertiary level education. I have lived in Nambour for almost 30 years and have recently built a new house beside the Noosa River at Tewantin, where I can walk down, cast my net and go fishing, as I did in my childhood days.

Yes, I did cut cane with my father, uncles and brothers-in-law for many years during the school holidays for pocket money. I soon learned this work was too hot and too bloody hard. I was determined to work in sugar but not in the cane-fields as my forefathers did.

History as is, refers to the first South Sea Islanders to work for some form of wage in Australia and were employed on ships visiting Sydney after 1788.

The dates most often referred to as being the beginning of South Sea Islander history in Australia are 1847 and 1863 during which time South Sea Islanders were bought to NSW and then QLD, as indentured labourers, in reality - SLAVES.

We, the Australian South Sea Islanders are descendants of predominately Melanesian people who were brought to QLD between 1863 and 1904 from 80 Pacific Islands primarily Vanuatu and the Solomon Island groups. Many were tricked into coming others were kidnapped or "black-birded" as the term was referred to in those days.

Men, women and children were forced to work long hours at exhausting manual work for very low or no wages while living in very poor conditions eg. In the early 1880's the death rate among South Sea Islanders was 5 times higher than the comparable European population.

Between 1906 - 1908, South Sea Islanders were deported under the White Australian Policy. At that time some South Sea Islanders protested and petitioned the government against deportation mainly due to the unknown of where they were going, their tribal acceptance on their return by maybe another tribal generation or a completely different island tribe. Some reports indicate, when this happened they were killed. Also by this time, most had intermarried and their partner and siblings would or could not identify with a specific tribal or island group.

White Australia Policy

In 1901 the Federal government passed the "Pacific Islander Labourers Act" including provisions for deportation. By 1908 most of the South Sea Islanders had been deported leaving a population of around 2,500 most of whom were single men.

The deportation on separation Act (No 16) must be seen along with two other Acts of 1901 (No 15) - the Immigration Restriction Act (commonly known as the "White Australia Policy", and (No 17) - The Post and Telegraph Act, which established the rules about the use of "Coloured Labourers" in the Transport of Australian Mail.

At this time the security, safety and prestige of carrying mail interstate and overseas were seen as a matter of great importance.

Although the deportation provisions of Act No 16 of 1901 were aimed specifically at the South Sea Island community, they were also a part of a package of Acts and Policies designed to pressure Australian culture and jobs for Australian-born "White Citizens" only.

I ask the question, how would we feel today if we were left in that predicament?

However some did survive and we today are the descendants of those original South Sea Islanders who remained in this our now beautiful adopted country.

Life was not easy for our early forefathers and mothers who remained. They were subjected to ongoing racial discrimination and harsh treatment including restrictions as a consequence of Government legislation. Some unions also adopted exclusionary practices that disadvantaged the community. Many South Sea Islander families today are still living in conditions well below the standard of living enjoyed by most Australians. South Sea Islanders played a significant role in establishing the Sugar Industry and also contributed to the development of other areas of farming, grazing, pearling, mining, railways, domestic and childcare services.

The name of the indentured South Sea Island Labourers were often interchangeable and at various times they were called Polynesians, Melanesians, Pacific Islanders, Kanakas, Coloured or just South Sea Islanders.

The term "Kanaka" is seen by the vast majority of the community as derogatory or an insult, however there are some members of the community who say they are proud of it and still call themselves descendants of the "Kanaka's".

The 1960 - 70's saw the last of the original Islander recruits pass on:

Alex Daniel 1963
Thomas Robins 1964
Peter Santo 1966
George Malekula 1967

On the Sunshine Coast the last of our original Islanders was Jack Mandry.

As the original islander numbers grew I think at one stage before deportation 1906 - 1908 there were 50,000+ in QLD and Nth NSW. The government and local councils of the day were forced to give our forefathers (land leases) so they could establish their own communities and cultural conditions. Most of these leases were given and structured around creeks, rivers and seaside waterways where islanders felt comfortable at least "spiritually at home".

I personally lived with my parents on leased community land on the Pioneer River at a place called Dumbleton in Mackay. This lease was for 100 years and expired in the mid 1970's therefore commencement of the lease was in the 1870's. At that time we all lived happily as an island group on ground floors, corrugated iron walls and thatched or timber/corrugated iron roofs. Our bathroom was the river below and without the river mullet, taro, watercress, bananas, mangoes and tapioca, which were abundant at times and very scarce other times most island families would not have survived.

In those days there was no such thing as social security and our fathers were mainly cane-cutters or worked in the Sugar Mills for 4 - 6 months in a year. The rest of the year we survived on money leftover, some part-time work and mainly the river food.

I still remember when they, in Mackay were forced off the land in the 1970's. It broke the hearts of all the elders who were sent into Mackay into island housing commission houses. They wanted to see the rest of their life out beside their beloved river, but that was not to be. The government has since been forced under pressure from descendants to allow the old river home-sites to be used as Cultural and Camping Centres and are undergoing a beautification program so the heritage area can be used by all.

At present we have a similar situation here on our beautiful Sunshine Coast. A portion of land called Lot 71, approx 1 km upstream from Bli Bli bridge where original islanders lived and used as a halfway house while moving throughout QLD from around the 1920's until Tom Manfay's daughter married and settled on the land and her family were the last to leave in 1979. Tom Manfay was the grandfather & great grandfather of the Jones' family. I am told the original families were Bowdas, Swali's, Arramy, Manfay's and Forsella's. Other South Sea Island families who lived in the area and also lived or stayed for short periods on their riverside paradise were - Ambrum, Buhka, Byquar, Bowda, Jones, Chilly, Dow, Eggmolesse, Manfay, Fewquandie, Forsella/Forester,

Muckan, Robe, Toas, Tallis, Veave, Wimbus, Swalli, Silveney (Mal Meninga's Grandmother), Marrata, Mandree, Nunwah and Bubongie.

In an attempt to preserve this land in order to create a cultural, educational and interactive learning environment for all visitors, the local DASSI (Descendent Australian South Sea Islanders) group have secured a 17 year lease. However due to ongoing vandalism and pressure for public liability, we as a cultural group plead and seek support from politicians, local/state/federal governments, to retain and develop this land as a historical, cultural and interactive learning site for all. This would involve:-

- Develop natural vegetation
- Traditional village hut construction
- Tourist centre with boardwalks likened to the wetlands sanctuary
- Use of alternative energy such as solar/wind

We are a proud, determined and spiritual race and some of the older generation names linked with South Sea Island History and who were prominent authors and community leaders are:

H D Tonga and J Bombassy
(1906 - travelled to Melbourne to address and present a petition to:-
Prime Minister Alfred Deakin, re Deportation issues)
Faith Bandler (author/activist)
Noel Fatnowana (author and island commissioner)
Nasven Enares (Researcher and community leader)
Joe Leo OAM (Community leader)
Rowena Trevie OAM (Community leader)

H. D Tonga and J Bombassy formed the Pacific Islander association in Mackay who wrote to Winston Churchill protesting the deportation of the last 5,389 South Sea Islanders. In September 1906 H D Tonga & J Bombassy went to Melbourne to meet Prime Minister Alfred Deakin to address and present a petition regarding deportation of the remaining Islanders.

Faith Bandler was an author, activist and council member for the advancement of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders. Faith was responsible for helping set up the Evatt Foundation which provided partial funding for Nasven Enares to travel through the state gathering up to date information on South Sea Island condition and concerns. This report made 8 recommendations which included special legislation and special funding for a detailed survey. In 1992 the Attorney General requested the Human Rights Commission to enquire further which eventuated into a 'Call for Recognition' and a special ministry for Pacific Island Affairs. This led to several important policy decisions effecting culture, education, and liason activities which were tabled in Parliament in 1994.

Noel Fatnowna was an author and ambulance officer. He was appointed by the Bjelke-Petersen government in 1976 as special Commissioner for Pacific Islanders within the Aboriginal & Island Commission.

However there were many others then and now since cultural recognition of our race. The momentum continues. Our race has excelled and had many a success in sports, medical, nursing, teaching, engineering, senior management, the arts, ministry and the armed forces.

Our patron of the "Board of Advice" Mal Meninga is widely regarded as one of the greatest players ever to play Rugby League. Other Rugby League greats - Gordon Tallis, Sam Backo, Wendell Sailor all represented Queensland and Australia with Tallis captaining Australia and QLD. Ken Nagus represented Qld. Presently Reese Wesser (Penrith) and Ty Williams (Cowboys) and I believe a couple of others are presently playing national league. My own nephew, Baden Choppy was our first Australian Olympian representing the Australian Hockey team in 1996 at the Atlanta Olympics. We have also had many of our children representing State and Australia at school sport.

I would like to read out from the Encyclopaedia of Rugby League Players the history and achievements of our own Patron, Mal Meninga. I played football with Mal here on the Sunshine Coast for a few seasons before he went to Brisbane and then went on to bigger and better things. I followed Mal's career and did not really know what the big fella had achieved until I read this a few months ago in the Players Encyclopaedia.

**(Taken from the Encyclopaedia of Rugby League Players)*

'Meninga became the most capped Australian Test player surpassing the precocious second held by Reg Gasnier. He has also equalled Keith Holmes Test Second against Great Britain (14) overtook Graham Langlands as Australian leading points scorer in Ashes Tests (108 points) and became leading points scorer in international league with (250 points). He has also grabbed a store of club seconds:

Most Career points (744 points)
Most points in a match (38 points)
Most tries in a match (5 tries)'

Our most famous community event in history was in August 1994 when the federal government recognised the Australian South Sea Islander as a distinct cultural group.

In July 2000 the Beattie Government formally recognised the Australian South Sea Islander as a distinct cultural group and acknowledged the outstanding contribution to the state. It also acknowledged (as the federal government did)

the history of unjust treatment, disadvantage, prejudice and racial discrimination endured by this community and the significant disadvantage this group still faces to this day.

In 2001 the Government enclosed an action plan designed to address 5 main categories:

1. Access to government services
2. Greater whole of government awareness of the community issues
3. Community development initiatives in the area of cultural maintenance, local protocols in relation to - Consultation and Planning processes
Infrastructure and Training
4. Strategies to combat prejudice and
5. Discrimination against the community members and groups

I am personally involved with action plan 3, which is community development/training. This area of education and training in particular whereby we ensure our up and coming generation have the opportunity to become well educated and trained we believe is the future of our race and culture.

I personally believe that if we are successful in maintaining this section of the action plan this will be the future and ongoing foundation stone which will support and push forward other areas of the governments action plan. A favourite quote I have read many times was stated by my wife's uncle, Noel Fatnowna in 1988 - "This year 1988 sees us not fully accepted, but we're there in the community alongside of white people. We're no longer out there on the edges of the district living on the fringes, around the creeks or along the riverbanks. So much of what those first islanders who stayed on after deportation hoped for, for their children and grandchildren has come to pass, yet so much has been lost too."

Local History

Local research carried out in 2000 by Adele Withers (local being considered between Caboolture and Gympie) found very limited information on the original 'kanakas' of this region due to a number of reasons.

- Very few landholders kept records of the illegal activities of using "Kanaka" labour
- A number of books written by local historians and researched by Adele had very little information with reference to South Sea Islanders
- The Nambour Chronicle did not commence business until 1903
- There are very few local South Sea Island identities whose original ancestors worked on the Sunshine Coast from 1860 - 1904 prior to deportation.

However it is well known and documented in Ship Captains Diaries that "Kanaka Labour" was used at Caboolture around 1865 and photographic evidence shows Island village housing between Woombye and Nambour which I'm told was close

to the old Nambour Dump - now Rugby Union grounds. Many names are also recorded in cemeteries but few have descendants.

Records from around 1920 show the movement of Islanders from around the state sometimes staying on Lot 71 on the Bli Bli River, Yandina, Buderim, Nambour, Woombye and Caloundra. One of our local identities and islander families were the Eggmolesse's who owned a large portion of land around the top of Buderim Mountain and grew bananas.

Pam Blackman (nee Eggmolesse) has a list on display noting all the island cane growers of the time. One particular grower she pointed out to me was a "Tom Tanna" who is Mal Maninga's great grandfather. He worked for a Mr Low at Yandina then grew his own 16 acres of cane around Yandina in 1903.

A story from Pam Blackman about her father Jim Eggmolesse.

This was the time Government legislation prevented Island labour to be used in the cane fields.

Jim at the time worked for 2 Finnish families, Soussari and Savamaki. When the union official arrived someone would see him coming and they would blow a whistle. This was the signal for Jim to run into the cane and hide. The union official would look around and questioned who had cut all this extra cane. The answer from the Fins would be that the "boss" came down and helped and had since gone home. One day the union official came and I think he must have smelt a rat as the saying goes, because he came before smoko, stayed for lunch and afternoon smoko and here was poor old Jimmy stuck in the middle of this hot and steamy cane paddock, sweating, very thirsty and hungry. After the union official left and Jimmy came out his only comment was "I thought the bugger was going to stay for EVER!"

We can laugh about these things today however in those days this was a very serious matter, never the less Jimmy got over his heat exhaustion and lived on to a ripe old age of 82.

I would like to close with this statement that reflects our community's future and aspirations as we see it today.

We as a descendant race of the original South Sea Islander indentured labourers thrive on the knowledge and the understanding of the achievements of our forefathers and mothers. They, as slaves, helped mould this state and Australia by virtue of their physical and spiritual strengths. We now as an identified distinct cultural group known as the "Australian South Sea Islanders" and are a very proud and determined race.

Driven by the spiritual and physical examples set by our forefathers and mothers we will ensure our future generations move forward as a distinct cultural group and during this journey we intend to make an impact on the social and economic

status of this, our beautiful, adopted country.

As stated by the late Noel Fatnowna and in his book, *Fragments of a Lost Heritage*, "So much of what those first islanders who stayed on after deportation hoped for, for their children and grandchildren, has come to pass. Yet so much has been lost too."

We as a community have no intention of losing any more. Yet, in my opinion, still much remains.

And as I have heard many a time as a young fella, when the old island cane cutters used to work late into the evening or on Saturday and Sunday cutting cane in Mackay, in Pigeon English they would say "you fella 'catch up' time!"

Guess what you lot out there, 'catch up time' has arrived and we have to make it happen!

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.