

# Information Sheet 6

## THE SOUTH SEA ISLANDER LABOUR DEBATE IN IPSWICH

### SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- The Polynesian Question and the Sydney Petition, 1869
- Views for and against reintroduction of South Sea Island labour

### THE POLYNESIAN QUESTION AND THE SYDNEY PETITION, 1869

Mr Henry Challinor, of Ipswich, writes to the editor of the Brisbane Courier with reference to the rejection of the Sydney petition against the Polynesian labour system of Queensland:- It would seem from the tenor of some of the speeches lately made in the Legislative Chambers, as well as from some of the recent articles in the local press, that certain inhabitants of Sydney committed a grave offence in petitioning, through their Chief Magistrate, the Parliament of Queensland on the subject of the Polynesian Labourers Act; but in rejecting that petition the Legislative Assembly appears to have entirely overlooked the important relations which the petitioners sustained to be subject matter of their petition.

“Had this colony, under the provisions of the 26 Vic., No. 5, been inundated with Asiatic labourers from British India, the citizens of Sydney would have no grounds for petitioning our Legislature on the matter, for the simple reason that all such labourers are British subjects – that they can only be engaged in British ports, where the

Government Emigration Agent must, before any contract be completed, explain the same fully to the immigrant, with the aid (if necessary) of a duly qualified interpreter, and take all proper precautions to prevent the immigrant from being induced to contract by any fraud, falsehood, or unfair means or representations, and that such labourers are only permitted to emigrate to colonies where stringent regulations have been enacted for their due protection during the term of their engagements. But it is far otherwise with the Polynesian labourers. They are aliens, engaged in alien ports, and without any security worthy of the name that they have not been engaged under gross misrepresentations – for any and every certificate in the term of Schedule 1, 31 Victoria, No. 47 may be utterly worthless, the Queensland Government having no satisfactory means of testing the truthfulness of the contents of such certificates, or the genuineness of the signatures, and even if it had, it has no power to punish the persons making false declarations or perpetrating forgeries.

“It must also be presumed that Mr. Lilley had not recently read the ordinance and regulations in force in the Mauritius, or he would not venture to affirm that the license granted to special agents for recruiting emigrants in India for that colony was analogous to the license granted by the Queensland Government for recruiting Polynesians for this colony. The former license restricts the operations of the special agent to a particular presidency, and ‘he is under the direction and control of the Emigration Agent as the presidency for which he is licensed, who has full power to suspend and withdraw the license in case of misconduct.’



## THE POLYNESIAN QUESTION AND THE SYDNEY PETITION, 1869 – CONTINUED

The Queensland license is a 'roving commission,' which no one out of Queensland has power to cancel however much the license may set at nought all the provisions of the Act which authorises the granting of the said license.

"Again, it will scarcely be denied that the kidnapping of Polynesians has already occurred, and that it may occur again; neither will it be denied that such kidnapping has been followed by retaliation, or that the massacre of innocent white men has been the result of kidnapping effected by other white men. This circumstance renders the recruiting of Polynesians by Queensland agents an exceedingly broad question, for it affects not only the interests of all the Australian colonies, but those of all white nations whose subjects may trade with the Pacific Islands. For, in avenging an injury, the incensed islanders are guided more by the colour of the skin than by the description of the flag suspended from the mizzen of the white man's ship. And, indeed, this indiscriminate revenge was one of the considerations which induced the British and French Governments to use their influence with the Peruvian Government to put a stop to the recruiting of Polynesians under its flag.

"A late Colonial Secretary is reported to have said that if certain Sydney clergymen 'had taken the precaution to communicate with the Government of the colony on the subject, they might have saved themselves a great deal of trouble.' But if the Mayor of Sydney, in his official capacity, had no right to ask the Legislature of this colony to inquire into the working of the Act in question, it follows by parity of reasoning that Sydney clergymen had no right to communicate with the Government on the same

subject.

"Again, if the citizens of one colony may not appeal to the Legislature of a sister colony on a subject which they believe affects the interests of our common humanity, neither can the senior naval officer on that station have any right to do so either. Yet we find that Captain Luce had no hesitation in requesting Sir George Bowen' to cause him to be supplied with certain information on the subject of the admission into Queensland of Island natives,' in consequence of certain unfavourable statements he had received respecting it.

"Further, if sister colonies may not approach each other on the subject of alien coloured labour, then neither ought independent States to do so. Yet, when the British Government were convinced that the scheme for importing such coloured labour into French colonies was likely to degenerate into slavery, our gracious Queen on that occasion did not scruple to cause the subject to be brought under the notice of the Emperor of the French; and we do not read that bristling up in the consciousness of his own self-importance and detestation of slavery, he indignantly replied, 'That if this scheme had failed to carry out the views of his Legislature, it was certainly not his intention to plant slavery in the colonies. Had it attempted to bring about a system of slavery, then her Majesty might have been allowed to lecture it, but as it had not, he was not going to submit to such an insolent attempt to fix upon France a stigma it was not guilty of', and 'that when the matter was brought under his notice by his own people, he would be found in a position to discharge his duties without requiring any assistance or advice from her Britannic Majesty's counsellors.' On the contrary, we learn that he

did what was much better and wiser, and far more dignified, he inquired into the truth of the allegations, and what was till more to his credit, when he ascertained that the allegations were well founded, he caused the system complained of to be abandoned.

"The kind offices of the British Government have often been brought to bear in behalf of oppressed races - the subjects of Sovereign States - for instance, Jews and Christians in the Turkish Empire. Yet, if it had adopted the principles lately enunciated by many of the leading members of the Queensland Legislature, her Majesty's ambassadors in various parts of the world would have held their peace, or have run the risk of being snubbed for their impertinent interference, or for 'lecturing the Sovereigns to whom they had been accredited on matters concerning which they did not know what they were talking about.'

"I do not think that anything was gained by the rejection of the Sydney petition; for if the petitioners believe in their own statements, they will assuredly memorialise the Home Government on the subject, and in doing so the treatment they have received at the hands of the Queensland Parliament will tend materially to strengthen the cause they have undertaken to plead. Neither can I conceive of the Home Government, after the steps it has previously taken to suppress it in the case of Peru, permitting the recruiting of Polynesians for one of her own colonies to continue, except under such restrictions that the working of the Act will become so cumbrous and expensive that the principal reason for initiating the system will be defeated - viz., obtaining a supply of cheap labour.

**T H E P O L Y N E S I A N Q U E S T I O N A N D T H E  
S Y D N E Y P E T I T I O N , 1 8 6 9 - C O N T I N U E D**

I would observe, in conclusion, that I believe that Polynesians make excellent servants, and that many Queensland employers of such labour treat them as they ought to be treated; but this is just one of those things concerning which you cannot put a part for the whole. If you may not impute to the innocent the misdeeds of the guilty, neither condone the guilt for the good deeds of the innocent. There can be no question that in the Southern States of America there were many benevolent slaveholders, but this beneficent treatment of their slaves did not justify the institution of slavery, or prevent its deteriorating influence both on the slaves and their owners generally. So the

irreproachable character and conduct of many of the present employers of Polynesians in Queensland will not prevent the tendency, which the general employment of such labourers invariably has, to exalt the white man in his own estimation, and to depreciate in an equal degree the status of his coloured dependents, and to use them, whether free or enslaved, for the mere acquisition of wealth, with 'little or no regard for their moral welfare or social advancement, or the wellbeing of the State in which he seeks by their means to obtain a rapid and extensive fortune; witness the degraded and demoralised condition of the

lower stratum of whites in the late slaveholding States of America, and the highly fatal insanitary state of the Mauritius, where 'in 1866, 4918 persons died from fever; in 1867, 31,920; and in 1868, 8343, making a total loss of upwards of 45,000 lives. The death-rate from other causes being unusually high during the same period. In 1867, 88 per 1000 of the population died of fever alone.' (See the Lancet of December 26, 1868.) Which like insanitation may Queensland never experience, whatever may be the colour of its prevailing population, or the nature and extent of its products. "Yours, " Henry Challinor,

**T H E Q U E E N S L A N D E R , S A T U R D A Y ,  
6 J A N U A R Y 1 8 7 2**

In a leader on the recent debate in the Legislative Assembly on the Polynesian question, the Ipswich Observer, under date January 3, suggests the following solution:- "The simplest way would be to place them [the Polynesians] on a level with other immigrants, by giving them the right to sue for the current rate of wages. Let it once be understood by those who employ them, and by the islanders themselves, that labor must be paid for at its market value, whether the man who sells it has a black skin or a white one, and we are convinced

that not a single Polynesian will be imported, and that, if one should come here, scarcely an employer will give him work. For instance, the current rate of wages for field work is, say, £30 a year and rations. Give the Polynesian the right to sue for that amount if he is employed, and the employer will speedily find it to his interest to engage men of the superior race. This, in our opinion, would be by far the best way of getting rid of the difficulty. It possesses this merit, besides, that it is not exceptional legislation - it is simple justice,

the justice which a black man has as much right to look for at our hands as the white man. If it should fail, it will then be time enough to consider some other plan by which Queensland can be reserved for a higher civilization than will ever be possible if the establishment of a class system, which more nearly approaches Russian serfdom than the civilised labor which has made enlightened Christian countries what they are, is permitted."

**D O E S C O O L I E L A B O R P A Y**

Sir: That exceedingly bumptuous writer, Mr. Nind, has put the question, "Where has free labor paid in cotton growing?" I answer, "In Queensland." Let Mr. Nind come up in the Ipswich district, and he will find dozens of white settlers growing cotton, doing well at it- for they express themselves

contented, which is more than I have heard from any of the employers of South Sea Islanders. And now that Mr. Nind's question is answered, it might not be out of place to ask him to point out where colored labor pays those who employ it. Johannes Schmidt, Normanby, September 28 1867

**DOES COOLIE LABOR PAY?  
JOHANNES SCHMIDT.**

Normanby, Sept. 28.  
SIR: That exceedingly bumptuous writer, Mr. Nind, has put the question, "Where has free labor paid in cotton growing?" I answer, "In Queensland." Let Mr. Nind come up in the Ipswich district, and he will find dozens of white settlers growing cotton, doing well at it— for they express themselves contented, which is more than I have heard from any of the employers of South Sea Islanders. And now that Mr. Nind's question is answered, it might not be out of place to ask him to point out where colored labor pays those who employ it?

**Ipswich, 9 March 1892**

The Morning Bulletin (Rockhampton) on Thursday 10 March 1892 reported that: At a large meeting held here last night, a resolution condemning the Premier's manifesto in reference to the extension of Polynesian labour was passed.

**William Salkeld, M.L.A. - 1892**

The Queenslander on Saturday, 19 March 1892 reported that: Mr. William Salkeld, M.L.A., addressed a meeting of his constituents at Flinders last week (says the Queensland Times), and was well received. After explaining the bills introduced into Parliament last session he spoke at length on the leading questions of the day. Dealing with the re-introduction of kanaka labour into Queensland for the purpose of reviving the sugar industry, he said that his chief objection to the introduction of kanakas was on human grounds. At the conclusion of his speech Mr. W. Tyler asked if, in the event of the present Parliament retaining office during the coming session, and the question of reintroduction of black labour being brought forward, Mr. Salkeld would support it or not. Mr. Salkeld said he would not support it. Mr. Tyler further asked, in the event of the majority of his constituents desiring it, what would he do? Mr. Salkeld said that he had been returned to oppose it, and the only way to ascertain the feeling of the electorate was through the ballot-box. A vote of thanks, as well as one of confidence, was accorded to Mr. Salkeld, amidst cheering and applause.

**J. Isambert - 1892**

On Wednesday, 23 March 1892 the Brisbane Courier reported that: 'Mr J. B. L. Isambert, M.L.A., addressed his constituents at Marburg on Monday evening last, directing his remarks principally to the black labour question and land-grant railways. He stated that he was opposed to black

labour, and always had been, but he would vote for the reintroduction of black labour temporarily. Mr Isambert received a vote of confidence'.

**James Wilkinson - 1894**

The Brisbane Courier of Tuesday, 20 March 1894 carried an article about the 'Ipswich Election'. Mr. James Wilkinson (journalist) addressed a crowded meeting in the School of Arts building. 'He strongly opposed Kanaka and other forms of alien labour'.

**1901**

The Brisbane Courier of Friday, 22 March 1901 reported that: The Hon. A.J. Thynne and the Hon. A.S. Cowley, candidates for the Senate addressed a meeting in the Building Society's Hall in Ipswich in March 1901. Mr Tynne 'dealt trenchantly with Mr. Barton's utterance on the Kanaka labour question, and, referring to the coloured labour imported into New South Wales, a considerable portion of which was finding its way into Queensland, he recommended that this matter should be grappled with, before the less objectionable Kanaka was interfered with'.

**Ipswich Municipal Council**

The Brisbane Courier on Tuesday, 3 September 1901 reported on the fortnightly meeting of the Ipswich Municipal Council. Matters discussed included a letter from the Town Clerk of Townsville. 'The letter from Townsville, the resolution enclosed being practically an insistence on the necessity of the continued employment of the Kanaka, was received'.

**Labour Opposition Party - 1901**

On Friday, 19 October the Brisbane Courier reported that: The Ipswich branch of the Labour Opposition party held its monthly meeting in the 'Leader' Office in October 1901. 'Re the Kanaka Bill, - That this branch congratulates the Federal

Premier upon the prompt and statesmanlike action he has taken with regard to the gradual abolition of coloured labour on the sugar plantations in this State, and trusts that he will preserve in the direction indicated'.

**R. Hall - 1901**

On the 22 October 1901, The Brisbane Courier carried the following article from R. Hall of Ipswich titled 'Appeal from an Anti-Kanaka.' 'Sir, As one who has for some time taken an interest in the Kanaka question, and has always viewed the traffic with horror, may I lift up my small voice to say that the Kanaka Bill has filled me with both delight and alarm; delight that the decree has gone forth that the Kanaka must go, and alarm that the time given us will be all too short to prove that the white man can replace them. Thousands of us in Queensland conscientiously believe, through strong conviction and sound argument, that the Kanaka can be replaced to the advantage of everyone. Are our convictions to be squashed and our arguments to appear unfounded for the want of a little precaution to evade a false step at a critical moment? We are confident that, given sufficient time, say, then years, and assisted by intelligent legislation to foster suitable immigration for the sugarfields, that Queensland can prove to the hilt that this great industry can be carried on and flourish in a Christian manner. If Mr. Barton adheres to his term of five years our arguments will not hold good, but be thrown back in our faces, and Mr. Barton will have defeated his own end, which we trust is to show that the sugar industry in Queensland can thrive without taint or blemish to her fair name. With the Kanaka Queensland may be prosperous, without him she may be pure, but give us time to replace him and she will be both pure and prosperous, and to that happy goal I trust we all aim. I am, sir, &c., Ipswich, 21<sup>st</sup> October'.