

Life for a South Sea Islander in Queensland in the late 19th Century was marred by physical abuse and racial discrimination and these conditions worsened in the first quarter of the 20th Century.

The first elected Commonwealth Government of Australia in 1901 saw the implementation of the controversial White Australian Policy through a range of legislative measures. The Pacific Islander Labourers Act of 1901 ordered the deportation of all South Sea Islanders to their home islands by 1906.



*William Finucane 'On return with Gana his Kanaka servant', ca. 1867.*

**Photographer:** Albert Lomer, Ipswich Genealogical Society, Picture Ipswich, Ipswich City Council.

At this time 9,324 South Sea Islanders lived in Australia, divided into those on first contracts, time expired labourers, and those who had lived in Queensland since before 1 September 1879. Some had married and had families in Queensland. Others had lived here for a very long time and grown old. It would have been difficult for them to return to their home islands. The cultural adaptations that South Sea Islanders made to survive in their new home meant that they were also likely to face rejection in their home islands if they were deported.

This led some South Sea Islanders to establish the



*South Sea Islanders readying for deportation in Cairns, Queensland, 1906.*

**Source:** John Oxley Library of Queensland. Neg 70056

Pacific Islanders Association which lobbied to have South Sea Islanders and their families stay in Australia. The Act was eventually amended to allow some Islanders to stay. In the end, only 1,654 Islanders were given permission to remain. There is relatively little known about people after deportation.

However, some people were split from their families and others were deported to the wrong islands. There are stories about Islanders who escaped into bushland to avoid deportation.



*Group of South Sea Islanders and Aboriginal men and women in their attire, Nambour district, 1906.*

**Source:** Sunshine Coast Libraries.

*“When they had helped enrich the State through their back-breaking work in the sugar industry, we kicked most of them out under the White Australia policy.”*  
**Queensland Premier, Peter Beattie – September 1999**

Legislation/Policy	Date	Why
Masters and Servants Act	1861	<b>Effects of legislation</b> Meant South Sea Islanders could not negotiate their own contracts. Under this Act they were servants.
Polynesian Labourers Act	1868	To regulate and stop the abuse in the trade of Pacific Islanders. <b>Effects of legislation</b> Islanders entered Australia under three year contracts.
Pacific Labourers Act QLD	1880	A licence was needed to import Islanders. <b>Effects of legislation</b> Islanders could not be recruited for pastoral work and could only be employed within 30 miles of the coast. Restricts South Sea Islanders to sugar industry.
Pacific Labourers Act QLD Amendment	1884	Restrictions on Islanders to field work in tropical agriculture. <b>Effects of legislation</b> Explicitly banned them from domestic work, jobs in sugar mills and maritime industries, and confined Islanders to menial jobs in agriculture such as clearing, planting and weeding.
White Australia Policy	1901	White Australia <b>Effects of legislation</b> Development of the Pacific Islander Act.
Pacific Islanders Labourers Act	1901	Closure to recruiting Islanders and the repatriation of all South Sea Islanders. <b>Effects of legislation</b> Establishment of the Pacific Islanders Association which lobbied to have South Sea Islanders stay in Australia.
Immigration Restriction Act	1901	Limited immigration in Australia. <b>Effects of legislation</b> Provided for illegal immigrants to be deported and granted immigration officers a wide degree of discretion to prevent individuals from entering Australia. It introduced the dictation test.
Sugar Bounty Act	1903	Bounties were paid for cane cut by white workers only. <b>Effects of legislation</b> Forced South Sea Islanders out of the sugar industry into very menial tasks.
Qld Sugar Cultivation Act	1913	Non-Europeans had to apply for article of exemption to be employed in sugar industry. <b>Effects of legislation</b> Forced South Sea Islanders out of the sugar industry.
The Liquor Act	1885-1904	A licensed victualler or wine-seller shall not sell liquor to an Aboriginal native of the Pacific Islands or Polynesian born in the Colony or any half-caste of that race.
Shearers and Sugar Workers Accommodation Act	1905	A sugar worker is a labourer employed in any sugar plantation or sugar works, other than any Pacific Island labourer.

Legislation/Policy	Date	Why
Sugar Workers Act	1911	Pacific Islanders must read and write fifty words in English to be granted a certificate to work in the sugar cane fields.
Local Authorities Act	1902-1917	Pacific Islanders must read and write fifty words in English to be employed in the construction, bus and tramways maintenance services.
Sugar Cultivation Act	1913	Pacific Islanders must read and write fifty words in any language directed by the Inspector or they are disqualified from growing or cultivating sugar cane on any land in QLD.
Mines Act	1898-1913	Licences for miners' rights were not to be issued to persons from the Pacific Islands, Asian or African races.
Pearl Shell and Beche de Mer Fishery Act	1913	No-one who has not passed the 'dictation test' can hold a licence for any boat or be employed in this industry.
Workers Accommodation Act	1915	The sleeping and dining for workers is to be kept separate from those of any Pacific Islander or Asian who is employed at the plantation or sugar works.
Dairy Produce Act	1920	No-one who has not passed the 'dictation test' in the English language shall be employed in any registered dairy produce premises.
Banana Industry Preservation Act	1921	It shall be unlawful for any person who has not...first passed the dictation test to engage in, or carry on the industry of the cultivation of bananas upon any land within QLD.
Aboriginal Protection & Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act	1897	This Act was amended in 1934. It included anyone of Pacific Islander extraction who lived or associated with Aborigines. This Act placed Islanders on the social scale below Asians who were not affected by this legislation.
Legislative Sanctions handed down	1919, 1920 & 1921	A licensed victualler or wine-seller shall not sell liquor to an Aboriginal native of the Pacific Islands or Polynesian born in the Colony or any half-caste of that race.
Aliens Act	1965	To control the movement of foreigners in Australia.



South Sea Islander family in front of their timber slab house, Nambour district, 1906  
Source: Sunshine Coast Libraries.