

Resolution of Council

11 April 2022

Item 11.1

City of Sydney Recognition of and Support for Australian South Sea Islanders

The original motion was moved by Councillor Davis and seconded by the Chair (the Lord Mayor).

It is resolved that:

(A) Council note:

- (i) Australian South Sea Islanders value their South Sea Islander (SSI) heritage and Pacific islands of origin: the eighty islands of Vanuatu and Solomon's, inclusive of Tuvalu, Kiribati, Fiji, Papua New Guinea and New Caledonia;
- (ii) Australian South Sea Islanders are the descendants of Pacific peoples that were coerced and forcibly removed or kidnapped from their islands and brought to Australia, through an Atlantic Slave trade practice known as blackbirding in the 1800s. The trade saw South Sea Islanders trafficked under the guise of 'Indentured Labour' contracts. They worked mainly in sugar cane farming, but also as seafarers, wharfies and deckhands. Other industries were pastoral, maritime, cotton, fishing, beche-de-mer and the railway economy across Queensland and New South Wales;
- (iii) in the early 1970s, the term 'Australian South Sea Islanders' was agreed upon by a widely consulted community made up of many first generation born leaders and elders. It was agreed that the word 'Australian' gave the mass displaced community a sense of belonging, place and identity as severely disadvantaged peoples;
- (iv) 2022 marks 175 years since entrepreneur politician Benjamin Boyd illegally trafficked the first 200 South Sea Islanders (SSI) to Eden, NSW, to labour alongside Maori and First Nations peoples (1847);
- (v) between 1863 and 1904, some 55,000 to 62,500 South Sea Islanders were forcibly brought to Australia;

- (vi) Sydney and NSW were deeply implicated in this immoral human trafficking, noting for example:
 - (a) Burns Philp, once a leading Australian and international food processing, retail and shipping conglomerate had its foundations in owning and operating ships engaged in blackbirding;
 - (b) Robert Towns (1794-1873), Member of the NSW Legislative Council, President of the Sydney Chamber of Commerce and leading businessman, owned ships used for blackbirding and profited from the forced labour transported on these ships; and
 - (c) The Colonial Sugar Refinery, located on the site which is now Waterfront Park, Pyrmont, processed sugar harvested on the Queensland canefields by blackbirded labour;
- (vii) in 1901, the Parliament of the newly federated Commonwealth of Australia passed the Pacific Island Labourers Act, as part of the larger White Australia policy, making it illegal to import South Sea Islanders and mandating the forcible deportation of all Islanders from Australia, even though many had established lives and families in Australia;
- (viii) some exemptions were made, with those South Sea Islanders who were allowed to remain having limited employment and other opportunities;
- (ix) this sorry, and still largely unknown history for many Australians, has resulted in a legacy of discrimination and disadvantage which is largely unrecognised still today in the 21st century;
- (x) on 6 May 1993, the Commonwealth Government tabled the report 'The Call for Recognition', A Report on the Situation of Australian South Sea Islanders, completed by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) in December 1992;
- (xi) the 1992 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Report 'The Call for Recognition' included six recommendations, with the first recommendation being:

"The Government should formally recognise Australian South Sea Islanders a unique minority group which is severely disadvantaged as a consequence of racial discrimination."
- (xii) in 1993 the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous and Minority Peoples identified Australian South Sea Islanders as 'population transfer';
- (xiii) on 25 August 1994, the Commonwealth Government formally responded in Parliament to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Report 'The Call for Recognition', explicitly accepting the report's first recommendation, with the Government's response receiving bipartisan support;

- (xiv) this recognition included the Government acknowledging:
 - (a) Australian South Sea Islanders were a “distinct ethnic group in Australia with its own history and culture”;
 - (b) the injustices of the indentured labour system;
 - (c) the severe disadvantage suffered by the South Sea Islanders and their descendants; and
 - (d) their contribution to the culture, history and economy of Australia;
 - (xv) the annual anniversary of the Government’s formal response is now commemorated by Australian South Sea Islanders as Recognition Day and is marked in the National Cultural Calendar;
 - (xvi) in 1995, the then NSW Premier, Bob Carr, issued a Premier's Memorandum requesting all NSW Government agencies to ensure that the particular needs of Australian South Sea Islanders are adequately reflected in their programs and services, with particular reference to housing, employment, education and health services;
 - (xvii) on 15 August 2013, the NSW Legislative Assembly formally noted 25 August 2013 as Australian South Sea Islander Recognition Day and acknowledged the contribution the Australian South Sea Islander community makes to New South Wales and its history in Australia; and
 - (xviii) on 12 September 2013, the Communities Relations Commission Chairperson Stephen Kerkyasharian AO, sent an official letter to all New South Wales State Agencies drawing their attention to the resolution passed in New South Wales Parliament and the Community Relations Commission and Principles of Multiculturalism, for their internal policies, programs and services to enable people of South Sea Islander heritage to be recognised and included;
- (B) Council:
- (i) recognises that the official term ‘Australian South Sea Islanders’ relates to the descendants of blackbirding to NSW in 1847; while the historical term, ‘South Sea Islanders’ refers to both their ancestors, and today, the contemporary community of South Sea Islanders who have migrated to Australia;
 - (ii) recognises the discrimination, injustice, disadvantage and prejudice experienced by South Sea Islanders throughout Australia’s history and the significant disadvantage the community still faces today as Australian South Sea Islanders. This history must also be uncovered, acknowledged and embedded into the City of Sydney’s planning for the future;
 - (iii) is committed to achieving a City for All: a sustainable, inclusive, diverse city that is welcoming and embraces people from all walks of life; and
 - (iv) commits to formally acknowledge Australian South Sea Islander Recognition Day on 25 August, from 2022 onwards;

(C) Council note:

- (i) community consultations by the City in the planning for Sustainable Sydney 2050 uncovered a number of key concerns. Common themes that emerged during the consultation process included retaining:
 - (a) the unique character of Sydney; a city that is bold and daring and where residents participate in shaping their own future;
 - (b) a socially connected community that embraces sharing of spaces, resources and knowledge; and
 - (c) an equitable and inclusive community that celebrates diversity and difference;
- (ii) as part of their consultation and planning for Sustainable Sydney 2050, the City of Sydney undertook The First Peoples Dialogue Forum on 6 May 2019. This was set up to help ensure that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice was incorporated into the strategic planning process;
- (iii) Recognition Day, and a surrounding Recognition Week, provide the City of Sydney an opportunity to program and promote initiatives especially designed in collaboration with Australian South Sea Islanders, with the goal to strengthen the community's awareness of, and pride in, this distinct culture; and
- (iv) prior Recognition Week ceremonies have seen the official Australian South Sea Islander flag raised annually at locations including Petersham and Leichhardt Town Hall (supported unanimously by Inner West Council) and the Australian National Maritime Museum to coincide with the Australian South Sea Islander 25th Anniversary since Commonwealth recognition. These gestures have helped provide the Australian South Sea Islander community a greater sense of belonging; and

(D) the Chief Executive Officer be requested to:

- (i) investigate the raising of the Australian South Sea Islanders flag over Town Hall annually for Recognition Week on 25 August, and/or light the Town Hall in the flag colours;
- (ii) investigate the scheduling of a Recognition Week program, where learning and cross-cultural awareness events, workshops and panel discussions could assist the community to better understand, learn about and share the lived experience of Australian South Sea Islanders;
- (iii) in consultation with the Australian South Sea Islander community, develop a briefing on the history of Australian South Sea Islanders and invite senior City of Sydney Staff to attend. This briefing will enhance the City's capacity to address these issues in a culturally appropriate way and provide feedback on long time community priorities such as grants, procurement and tracking;

- (iv) investigate a potential Dialogue Forum that brings together Australian South Sea Islanders, specialists, stakeholders, cultural institutions, and City of Sydney Staff, to assist in identifying long term community priorities and the appropriate frameworks for engaging with Australian South Sea Islander organisations and community representatives, that relates to and is inclusive of Australian South Sea Islander methods of cultural governance and practice through lived experiences;
- (v) where the City does not have the power to directly implement or affect these programs and services, advocate to the NSW and Commonwealth Governments to influence more equitable outcomes, including the continued implementation of the recommendations of the 1992 Call for Recognition report, the 1994 Commonwealth Government response to this report and the 1995 Premier's Memorandum; and
- (vi) provide an indicative timeline and framework for the above via the CEO Update.

The motion, as varied by consent, was carried unanimously.

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