

CRISIS AND RESPONSE – The Kanaka Crisis

This essay will discuss the crisis that followed the decision in 1901 to deport the Kanaka (Pacific Islander) labourers from Australia. It will analyse the reasons for different perspectives regarding the crisis and how these influenced responses.

What were the responses to the deportation of the Kanaka Labourers?

In 1901, amidst the excitement of the birth of Federation, one of the first pieces of legislation passed by the federal government was 'The Pacific Islander Labourers Act'. It required the deportation of around nine thousand South Sea Islanders (known as "Kanakas") resident in Australia. Advocates argued it would end a practice "akin to slavery" and would prevent low-priced coloured labour taking jobs from higher paid white workers. In response, three thousand islanders signed a petition addressed to King Edward VII protesting this legislation and seeking to avert a humanitarian crisis. The Kanaka Crisis was perceived and presented differently by various stakeholders. While much verbosity was given to the human aspect of the crisis, the key motivators for concern were vested interests and political agendas.

This Act was part of a package of legislation reflecting the principles of "White Australia". Indeed, a major driver for Australia's federation had been popular support for this principle, particularly the aspect of substitution of "white" for "black" labour. Federation enabled consistent control of the borders which was not possible at the state level. With the borders controlled, the federal government immediately set about enacting legislation to control who was allowed into Australia, and who should be made to leave. The Kanakas were an efficient and cheap source of labour for Queensland farmers. Predominantly working age males, they were brought from nearby Pacific islands under three-year contracts to do agricultural work. Passage from and returning to their island homes was free, they received a wage, lodging and food. At the end of the term, they could either return home or contract for a further term. A 1901 report comparing the cost of cane-cutting in Queensland by white labour and Pacific Islander labour noted that in the "Cairns district no cane [is] cut regularly by white labour" and in Bundaberg "white men...cost about four shillings per ton and Kanakas about two shillings to cut and load". Accordingly, "practically all cane...[is] cut by aliens" (Cane Cutting by White or Kanaka Labour, 1901). Consequently, Australian farmers greatly opposed 'The Pacific Islander Labourers Act'.

In opposition to the Act, 'The Kanaka Petition' signed by 3000 Pacific Islanders, expressed concerns regarding consequences of enforced deportation from the 'Kanaka Perspective'. These included the loss of limited rights acquired under state laws and unfairness to those who had worked to build a life in Australia. The source also discusses how the Kanakas feel they will not be welcomed if they return home. The Kanakas opined: "Many of us have been continuously resident in Queensland for upwards of twenty years, and during these years our parents and brothers in the islands have died, and we are forgotten there". Many of the Kanakas "have children who for years have attended the State Schools of Queensland" and are married "to women belonging to Islands and tribes with whom our tribal law would not permit us to marry". Concerns were raised also regarding welfare and danger associated with returning from civilised to possibly barbarous situations. (Kanaka Petition, 1901) In terms of "many" as opposed to a "few", this emotional appeal and connection to Australia seem to be unreliable when considering a reply from an opponent of the petition, future prime minister Alfred Deakin, who wrote that as per their contracts, "Islanders had been returning to their homes ever since the establishment of the traffic, and apparently without injury save in very exceptional cases". (Deakin, 1901) Considering the well-written text of the Kanaka Petition on behalf of, as Deakin describes, "nominal petitioners...spread over 1000 miles...entirely without organisation...where differences of language, customs, and even of race, contribute to the absence of bonds of sympathy between them", (Deakin, 1901) it seems likely the petition was created by Queensland plantation owners, supported and encouraged by the state government. The obedient labourers would have readily obeyed instruction to sign the document, oblivious to the content.

To further the farmer's case, a Bundaberg Chamber of Commerce protest usefully communicates the feelings of the farmers. The protest states, "whilst my Chamber sympathises with you in your intention to make the Commonwealth a White Australia, they respectfully submit that if the Kanaka trade as at present carried on be interfered with it would cause a very serious menace to the wellbeing of the sugar industry." (Bundaberg Chamber of Commerce, 1901) The farmers while supportive of the popular policy of White Australia, were also keen to preserve a cheap resource. From the Kanakas point of view, it seems the majority were perfectly content with the deportation. While there had been improvements in the methods of recruitment and treatment of those engaged in sugar growing, even by 1901 'blackbirding' involving kidnapping may not have entirely ceased and working and living conditions could be very poor for the contracted islanders (The Kanaka Trade Report, 1970). A letter by Mrs Nichol of Bundaberg, who had obtained 1800 signatures of petitioners but in doing so observed the living conditions of Kanakas personally, appealed to Mr Deakin, "the position of the Kanaka is deplorable...Why it would be better for the boys, and it would

not make but little difference to the farmer that compulsory deportation should take place at once.” (Nichol, 1901) Indeed, Alfred Deakin wrote the history of conditions was such that “up to 1894 out of a total of 50 000 Kanakas imported to Queensland, no less than 10 000 had died during the course of their service, most of them within a short time after arrival.” (Deakin, 1901) Mrs. Nichol also highlighted dissatisfaction among the islanders that opportunities to take up free passage home were often limited such that they were left with little choice but to sign repeat contracts and continue service. A newspaper clipping from the Brisbane Telegraph Dec 13, 1902 reported a group of 50-60 islanders in Rockhampton had “denied the statement that they were afraid to be returned to their native islands.” (Brisbane Telegraph, 1902) Opinion of missionaries who had worked in the islands was that they perceived few problems for the majority as repatriation had been ongoing since the beginning of Kanaka activity, and that considerable Christianisation of the islands had occurred. Rather, the return of working aged males would be welcomed and indeed, there was considerable opportunity for employment in the islands. Those unable to return to home communities could be resettled elsewhere. (MacDonald, Kerr, 1906) Thus the premise of the petition seems at odds with other sources of evidence suggesting many islanders would be very willing to return home.

The perspective of the Federal Government of Australia was they had a strong mandate from voters to remove the Kanakas in support of the principle of ‘White Australia’. The Federal Government believed that coloured people were taking away jobs from Europeans and the letter from Alfred Deakin highlights this when stating, “the Prime Minister announcing the policy of the Government that the substitution of white for black labour throughout Australia was to be one of the chief proposals”. A second issue was the dubious ethics of the Kanaka trade itself which had been described by Alfred Deakin as “this blot on the reputation of the country [that] must be erased.” Thus, it seems the “crisis” promoted by Plantation owners and the State Government of Queensland reflected vested interests hoping to retain a cheap source of labour. The federal government while arguing against a practice “akin to slavery” was pursuing an agenda to supplant black labour with white. While concern for the welfare of the islanders was expressed by both political groups, their underlying agendas dictated position. The petition was declined by the British government with the caveat of an expectation that repatriation of these people of the British dominion would be conducted humanely. The federal government had also given undertakings this would occur. Although initially opposed to exemptions, the federal government eventually allowed exemptions where it could be shown hardship was likely to follow (Royal Commission, 1906). Nonetheless, the Kanaka trade ended, and the majority of the Kanakas were in due course deported. Archived copies of a Sep 17, 1902 telegram concerning the “Rio Loge” and a “West Australian” newspaper clipping dated Oct

7,1902 concerning the “Ivanhoe” report these ships offloaded returning islanders without event (Telegram, 1902). By the end of the decade, almost all the workers in the sugar industry were of European background.

From the perspective of the modern Australian, it is alarming to observe an architect of Federation, Alfred Deakin, who did nobly take the political fight to vested interests, yet also proceeded to express a frankly racist argument that exemptions should not be allowed to the petitioners to preserve the “purity of race” and not impair the principle of “White Australia”. Reassuringly, exemptions were allowed and over time, albeit decades, the system of government was flexible enough to rescind the White Australia Policy. Nonetheless, it behoves all Australians to be vigilant concerning the risk racist perspectives are embedded in the psyche of the nation.

Bibliography:

N/A. (1902-1903). [The Kanaka Petition to the King]. National Archives of Australia. NAA: A1, 1903/1694, Item 39.

This source is useful in depicting the different views and perspectives on the Kanaka Crisis. The petition is very well written, articulates the case against deportation and was signed by 3000 Kanakas. It seems likely that the petition was written by educated representatives of the Plantation owners keen to retain their cheap labour rather than the islanders themselves. The archive also contains supporting letters by the Premier of Queensland, Robert Philp, and the Governor of Queensland, Herbert Chermide, a tightly argued, detailed fourteen page opposing response by the federal attorney-general, Alfred Deakin, the reply to the petition from Downing Street, copies of a series of prickly letters between Philp and Deakin, an opinion regarding the safety of deportation by a British representative in the Solomon Islands and various other letters to the Prime Minister Edmund Barton, and Mr Deakin from members of parliament and the public including Mrs Nichol. The Petition also contains newspaper clippings and telegrams from the time.

N/A. (1901). [Cane cutting by white or Kanaka Labour]. National Archives of Australia. NAA: A8, 1901/132/6 Item Number 52037

This source is useful in understanding the argument from the Queensland Plantation owners. The source compares the amount of cane cut by Kanaka Labour compared to ‘white’ labour and the cost for each type. The source states that in the “Cairns district no

cane [is] cut regularly by white labour” and in Bundaberg “white men...cost about four shillings per ton and Kanakas about two shillings to cut and load”. Accordingly, “practically all cane...[is] cut by aliens”. The cheaper labour results in much of the cane being cut by the Kanakas and illustrates why the farmers were upset with the loss of the Kanaka labour.

Royal Commission. (1906). [Sugar Industry Labour Commission Report]. National Archives of Australia.

This Royal Commission, reported in 1906, was tasked with determining the number of islanders still to be deported, whether hardship would ensue, and whether the sugar industry would remain viable following the departure of the islander workforce. The report of 513 pages includes an executive summary and transcription of the minutes of forty sittings of the Royal Commission held in twenty-seven centers throughout Queensland. The Commission interviewed 304 witnesses. 691 islanders were identified who already had exemptions. The number remaining to be deported at that time was 5280. The Commission determined that there were yet cases where hardship would ensue and recommended a list of exemptions be considered. It concluded little risk existed to the viability of the sugar industry.

Correspondence with Rev Dr Macdonald, J G Macdonald., Rev Kerr, R. (1906). [Kanaka Repatriation]. National Archives of Australia. NAA: A1, 1906/3763 Item Number 7042

Bundaberg Chamber of Commerce. (1901). [Bundaberg Chamber of Commerce protest re interference with use of Kanaka labour on sugar plantation]. National Archives of Australia. NAA: A6, 1901/569 Item Number 51415

N/A. (1863-1901). [Migration of South Sea Islanders to Queensland 1863-1901]. National Archives of Australia. NAA: A5507, 9/15 Item Number 429993

N/A. (1863-1904). [The Kanaka Trade Report 1863-1904]. National Archives of Australia. NAA: J1083, 1970/166 531893 (pp.13-15 useful summary of history of Kanaka traffic)