

Submission of the
UNITED VOICE OF PACIFIC ISLAND COMMUNITIES

on behalf of
PACIFIC ISLAND COMMUNITIES IN VICTORIA

to the
JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON MIGRATION

on the
Inquiry into *MULTICULTURALISM IN AUSTRALIA*

7 June 2012

1. Introduction

This submission is made by the United Voice of Pacific Island Communities (“United Pacific Voice”) on behalf of Pacific Island communities in Victoria and Australia. The United Pacific Voice makes this submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration on the Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia.

The Pacific Island community is culturally and linguistically diverse, coming from a range of cultural groups (22 Pacific Island countries and territories). Pacific Islanders are often referred to incorrectly as being from one community. However, the term generally refers to three specific cultural areas of the Pacific Ocean: Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. Whilst each cultural group has specific and distinctive social characteristics, there are strong cultural themes that cut across all our communities, e.g. the strength and solidarity of family and community come before the individual need.

The Pacific Island community in Australia is predominantly Polynesian, including Cook Islanders, Maoris, Samoans and Tongans. Fijians are the single largest group represented followed by Maoris.

2. Summary of key issues and recommendations

The United Pacific Voice in Australia presents to the Committee a summary of the four key issues that impact on the health and economic and social participation of Pacific Island communities in Australia. Each issue includes: a brief introduction about the issue, its impact on Pacific Islanders in Australia; and recommendation/s for the Committee.

Issue 1: Immigration policy and system

Australia has a very close and significant relationship with New Zealand. Currently, citizens of New Zealand do not need to apply for a visa to enter Australia, but are allocated a Special Category Australian Visa (subclass 444) once they arrive in Australia. This Special Category Australian Visa (SCV) is a temporary visa automatically granted to New Zealand citizens who arrive in Australia who do not already hold a permanent Australian visa. A SCV permits the holder to remain in Australia for an unlimited period of time, as long as the individual holds valid New Zealand citizenship status.

Before February 2001, an ‘eligible’ New Zealand citizen according to the above description was generally entitled to all of the associated benefits of permanent Australian residency. However, following the introduction of a new bilateral social security arrangement between Australia and New Zealand on 26 February 2001, citizens of New Zealand who arrived in Australia under a SCV **after** 26 February 2001 are not entitled to the benefits associated with permanent Australian residency. This bilateral agreement was an amendment to the Family and Community Services Legislation Agreement (New Zealand Citizens) Bill 2001.

This 2001 agreement has had a significant negative impact on New Zealand passport holders, the majority of whom are Pacific Islanders of Maori, Cook Island, Samoan and Tongan descent (Polynesians). The adverse impact extends into all areas of people's lives:

- For children born to those who arrive in Australia after 2001 who are not Australian citizens; their children have no legal status in Australia, either as residents or citizens.
- Families and individuals affected cannot access housing and Centrelink benefits and they also have no access to TAFE subsidised courses.
- Pacific Islander men and women who have worked many years in Australia and decide to return to New Zealand have limited access to their pension.
- They have no or limited access to disability supports despite living and working and paying taxes in Australia, like every other Australian resident or citizen.
- The lack of access to housing assistance, unemployment benefits and education subsidies has meant that for a significant number of Polynesian migrants the lack of formal education, skills qualification and inconsistent employment often results in work choices that are limited and income that can be suddenly and drastically reduced due to redundancy or industrial injury.
- For those arriving after 2001, if they suffer ill health or injuries, they have no access to subsidised health care (Medicare), adding to families financial problems – while caring for their sick relative.
- Because of this spiral effect of low income leading to poor health and inadequate/inequitable access to community-based healthcare, Pacific Islanders are being represented in greater numbers in hospitals.

Settlement programs

Related to immigration policies and system is Australia's settlement programs. As Australia's immigration policies are skewed substantially toward skilled and humanitarian migrants, many Pacific Islanders fail to fit into these categories and cannot access the migration system.

While recognising that most Pacific Islanders who migrate to Australia do so from a more advantageous position than many other migrant groups who have fled significantly worse circumstances, this situation actually results in a less supportive settlement framework for Pacific Islanders vis-à-vis other migrants.

At a government level, there is a widespread lack of awareness of the South Pacific communities. Despite our geographic proximity, Australia is largely unfamiliar with the languages, cultures and customs of the Pacific Island communities. Pacific Island migrants are generally collectivist communities and experience a lot of difficulty settling into a predominantly Anglo-Celtic individualistic society. Some of the impacts of limited settlement support include:

- Lack of legal assistance,
- Social exclusion and alienation,

- Housing discrimination,
- Unemployment and lack of skills training,
- Lack of awareness and access to health and aged care, and
- Family and community breakdown

Recommendation 1

- 1.1 That the Australian Government repeals its February 2001 bilateral agreement with the New Zealand Government and reverts to pre-26 February 2001 status.
- 1.2 That the Australian Government expands its settlement support to include Pacific Island communities.

Issue 2: Pacific Island youths and the juvenile justice system

Pacific Island children and youths face a highly competitive and individualistic education system that does not reflect their collective experience and shared cultural identity. Furthermore, young Pacific Islanders' interaction with Australian cultural expectations and freedoms often lead to conflict in the home and further complications, including youth gangs. The notion of ethnic youth gangs has become prominent in media reports of youth activities over the past few years. Issues experienced by Pacific Island youths include:

- Changes in their relationship with extended family members. They tend to integrate more easily into mainstream Australian society and this often leads to rejection of parental guidance and the support available from family members and the church.
- Personal and cultural identity issues – their rejection of parental guidance and community support is often not replaced with access to mainstream support, leading to identity issues.
- Pacific Islander young people are a highly visible group: body size, skin colour and physical characteristics are quite different to the majority of Anglo Australians. They are also likely to congregate in public spaces. The high visibility and differences in appearances has led to ready identification, labelling and stereotyping, much of which is negative.
- Dropping out of school early, this could be due to financial problems or peer pressure, gangs or a combination of factors.
- Lack of employment opportunities and job skills.
- Lack of access to social and community services.
- Illegal activities such as drug dealing, burglary/robbery and shoplifting. The most common reason for illegal activities was the need for money.
- Deaths in custody.

Recommendation 2

That the Australian Government provide more targeted initiatives that provide for stronger legal and community-based programs for Pacific Island youths and their families.

Issue 3: Pacific Seasonal Workers Scheme (PSWS) and support for Fiji's inclusion in the scheme

In August 2008, in the lead-up to the 2008 Pacific Islands Forum leaders' meeting in Niue, the Australian government launched what was called the Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme for the Pacific islands or better known as Pacific Seasonal Workers Pilot Scheme (PSWPS). We are pleased to hear that the PSWPS to allow Pacific Islanders to fill seasonal labour shortages in the horticultural industry will be made permanent from July 2012.

PSWPS was designed for Australian employers to get a guaranteed labor force during peak harvest time, while workers have the chance to earn relatively high wages to send home remittances to family and community. PSWPS participants include the Pacific countries of Nauru, Samoa, Solomon Islands Tuvalu, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Vanuatu. Fiji has not been part of the PSWPS since its establishment due to Australia's sanctions against the illegal government in Fiji.

Fiji's inclusion in the PSWS would have a positive significant impact on Fiji Australians. For the purpose of this paper, the term 'Fiji Australians' refer to Fiji-born Australians who may be of Fijian, Indian, Rotuman, Chinese or mixed descent and to Australia-born people who are descendents of Fiji-born migrants. Below is an overview of Fiji's deteriorating economic situation and its impact on Fiji Australians.

Fiji's economy and remittance

Fiji's economy has had a negative to low growth since the coup of 2006. According to the Fiji Bureau of Statistics, more than one-third of Fiji's population still live in poverty. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) in its recent mission in Fiji (November 2011) announced in its February 2012 Report¹ that Fiji has had a retraction in its economy of ¼ % in the last 5 years (worse than other Pacific island countries) including a retraction in growth in the last 2 years. Fiji is now one of the top 10 recipients of remittance in the Asia Pacific region. Since 2000, remittance levels continued to grow to 2006 making it a remittance economy with thousands of the people leaving Fiji to live and work abroad.

Impacts on Fiji Australians

Fiji Australians bear the burden of sending remittance money to Fiji to support close and extended family members and with Fiji's deteriorating economic situation, the level of remittance sent to support family in Fiji has risen sharply.

Allowing Fiji to be part of the PSWS would have the following benefits:

¹ IMF Country Report No.12/4, February 2012

- It would relieve the increasing financial burden on Fiji Australians who would then be able to invest their money on better education/ health care and other needs in Australia,
- It would provide Australia with a high quality labour, particularly in horticulture and tourism. For horticulture there is a large worker base that harvest cane and work in rural Fiji that would do well enduring the long hours and hard labor on farms. For tourism there is also a large trained human resource in Fiji that can assist Australian tourism industry during peak periods. Further Fijians speak good English that would help them to communicate well in Australia and they have a good work ethic.
- It would contribute towards alleviating the poverty level in Fiji while supporting Australia's international commitment to reducing world poverty.

Fiji's participation would not mean that Australia is relieving its sanctions against Fiji's illegal government. Australia can process its PSWPS applications through an NGO that is well versed with this scheme and work within policies under the PSWPS.

Recommendation 3

- 3.1 That the Australian Government allows Fiji to be part of the Pacific Seasonal Workers Scheme in Australia. This would significantly reduce the financial burden of Fiji Australians from sending regular remittances to Fiji.
- 3.2 That the PSWS include work in the tourism as well as horticulture sector.
- 3.3 That the implementation issues identified from the Interim Evaluation of the Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme are addressed in order to improve the effectiveness of the scheme for all Pacific Island communities.

Issue 4: Lack of culturally appropriate care and support for older Pacific Islander community members

Australia has an aging population and is a country built on immigration. Barriers that affect other aging migrant communities are also experienced by older Pacific Islanders, including:

- Lack of knowledge and information about the aged care system. Low familiarity with the service system and lack of information in their preferred language.
- Lack of confidence to seek services. There is a high reliance on family and friends who may not always be available or who may provide them with wrong or biased information.
- Social isolation. Many elders remain at home caring for their elderly spouse or caring for their grandchildren or they continue to support their family. Some even send some of their pension money to support family members in the Pacific.
- Requirements for receiving services are too demanding. The amount of forms to fill out or the type of information requests can seem intrusive.
- Lack of culturally appropriate care.

Recommendation 4

- 4.1 That the Australian Government provide more targeted initiatives or programs that deliver culturally relevant support and services for aging Pacific Island communities.
- 4.2 That the Australian Government allows Pacific Island community members to come to Australia on a special sub class visa in order to provide culturally relevant care for their elderly family members.