

Strengthening Trans-Tasman Economic Relations

Cook Islanders in Australia

17th October 2012

Australian Productivity Commission and
New Zealand Productivity Commission

Dear Commissioners,

I want to pay respect and acknowledge the Indigenous People of Australia on whose soil my people have come with their families to secure their futures. Secondly I also acknowledge the 'Tangata Whenua' our cousins the Maori People of Aotearoa on whose land my people live and where others moved on to come to Australia.

I write this submission convinced that it reflects the views of the thousands of Cook Islanders (New Zealand citizens) who live in Australia. For many the educational, economic and lifestyle opportunities this beautiful country of Australia has to offer encompass their aspirations, particularly for their children. The reality however is that in making the decision to move to Australia many Cook Islanders do not realize the full impacts of the 2001 Trans Tasman Travel Agreement (TTTA) on their plans to reestablish in Australia. I will also offer some suggestions by which this population currently contribute to the economic, social and cultural fabric of Australia. It is also suggested that more can be done at the political level to improve the capacity of Cook Islanders to be highly productive people in the economic and social development of Australia.

I was born in the Cook Islands, completed senior and tertiary education in New Zealand and have spent most of my working life in Australia since 1985 working in State and Local governments.

The Cook Islands due to its special historical and political relationship with New Zealand has since 1965 adopted a self-governing political system in 'free association' with New Zealand that allows for administering its own affairs, maintain New Zealand citizenship and share the same currency. I believe that a similar agreement applies to the Pacific Island nations of Tokelau and Niue.

Most Cook Islanders arrived in Australia on a non-Protected Special Category Visa (NPSCV) after the Trans Tasman Travel Agreement came into effect on 26 February 2001. The vast majority was innocently ignorant of the implications of the TTTA on their lives and the lives of their families. I am one of the fortunate few that arrived before this date and have since been granted Australian citizenship along with my wife. Our four children are Australian born.

As stipulated in the draft report there is certainly a great need in the first instance to provide information to all New Zealand citizens regardless of country of origin if considering moving to Australia the nature of the TTTA and

its effects on them particularly when the need to secure emergency financial support through Centrelink should arise when personal and family support systems become strained or even unsustainable. I am certainly aware of families in such a position where for a long time the extended family provided primary support until financial independence is secured through employment or in another case extended family support continues to meet the financial shortfall due to either casual or irregular employment. It is suggested that a better system of communication and information sharing be established between Australia and New Zealand including the Pacific Island nations whose citizens may be affected by the TTTA. This would better inform peoples' decision when considering a move to Australia and would hopefully deter those wishing to travel without sufficient financial or other support.

It is very difficult to properly ascertain the true figures on Cook Islanders living in Australia. The most recent figures from the ABS 2006 Census is based on country of birth only and provides a figure of 5030 Cook Islands born people in Australia. However, this figure does not reflect the real numbers of Cook Islanders living in Australia who were born in New Zealand (majority), Australia or elsewhere.

In my recent contact with a Cook Islands Community Elder he estimated that upwards of 3,000 Cook Islanders live in Far North Queensland alone. My own knowledge of the South-East Queensland based Cook Islands community and based on anecdotal estimations indicate a marked increase in this population over the past twenty years. The number of Cook Islanders residing in Australia is definitely significantly higher than that indicated in 2006 ABS Census report.

For many Cook Islanders resident in Australia the vast majority live with or within close proximity to already established family networks where accommodation is guaranteed at least for the short to medium term and where there is a high likelihood of employment being secured. Such employment opportunities again are based on established Cook Islands community networks in various fields of employment. The 'village system' and 'kinship system' of 'looking after one another' is paramount in all Pacific Islander communities and the Cook Islands is no exception. In saying this there are also challenges faced by family networks when resources are stretched or exhausted and many sacrifices have to be made.

A reform of prohibitive regulations such as the TTTA is needed to make education, vocation training and employment opportunities more accessible to Cook Islanders. So that all efforts to create a more efficient pathway towards financial independence through securing education at all levels including tertiary, vocational training and employment must be a key consideration in any reform by the Commission. For Cook Islanders a strong work ethic underpins community and family obligations and values. A 'welfare dependency' mentality is certainly not supported nor tolerated, as this is destructive and detrimental to efforts to have Cook Islanders pursue a constructive and positive pathway in achieving economic independence and contributing to the social and economic development of Australia.

As mentioned before Cook Islanders have strong family and community connections and networks. Culturally there is an expectation of duty, obligation and provision to maintaining solid family and community foundations. All these factors combined contribute to the high employment rate amongst Cook Islanders. Cook Islanders have adjusted to economic demand so that where there is work, whether this is in the minefields of Central Queensland, Northern Territory or Western Australia or on various large construction sites around Australia, Cook Islanders would readily seek out such opportunities. Despite this there is much more that needs to be done to enhance skills and knowledge in a diversified field of study and employment and gaining better access to such programs need to improve.

Moving away from family and community networks of course brings about great challenges to family stability, relationships and security, as would be the case for anyone in such a situation.

I would maintain that achieving tertiary education is a vital step towards achieving economic independence. However the current arrangement in place is that students on NPSCV are not entitled to the HECS student loan scheme and must pay their university fees upfront. For the majority of Cook Islander families affected, this is not affordable. So that despite the years of nurture and encouragement to get students through to Year 12 and achieve high OP scores, high upfront costs for entering into university becomes a barrier to the dreams of many of our young people. In many cases as I have experienced in the local Cook Islands Community as Community Leader and Elder, many of these young people end up having to obtain work in low paying jobs whereas if given the opportunity they would have gained tertiary qualifications in a field of their choice improving their chances of obtaining much higher paying positions. A recent meeting convened with Brisbane based Cook Islands Community Leaders and Elders endorsed the need to improve the access to tertiary education for our young people. The current system require immediate reform to provide our young people equal access to education including access to the HECS student loan scheme in order that they could have the same rights as their Australian mates to higher education when of course their parents contributes positively to the Australian economy by paying income tax.

Furthermore, under the TTTA Cook Islanders (as New Zealand citizens) can work, pay taxes and live in Australia indefinitely. However they are not entitled to vote. They have little access to financial assistance should they lose employment so that family and community network is relied upon for support. Potentially the enhancement of the pathway towards gaining Permanent Residency (PR) and Australian citizenship if achieved and shortened would provide a stronger sense of security and belonging for this group. A period of two years residency in Australia for New Zealand citizens is suggested as a reasonable time qualifier in applying for Permanent Residency.

As mentioned above there is a need to increase the intake of Cook Islander students in universities as a way of increasing the numbers of Cook Islanders

working in professional fields. The small number of Cook Islands students engaged in tertiary studies is of great concern to our community so that community conversations are in progress to explore strategies to improve this. I realize that a good number of my generation who are Cook Islander born were fortunate enough to have received good tertiary education in New Zealand. However many Cook Islanders affected by the TTTA face great difficulty in gaining similar educational opportunities. As a community we need to broker and partner with all key stakeholders including government agencies, education and training providers and the business sector to provide better opportunities for our young people by having better access to educational, vocational training and employment opportunities. Efforts to reform the TTTA by the Australian Government would be viewed as a positive step forward, which will be an investment in a population, dedicated to the social and economic growth of Australia.

In Queensland the bulk of Cook Islanders is concentrated in the geographical corridors of Brisbane to the Gold Coast, particularly Logan City, Brisbane to Ipswich and Brisbane to Caboolture. There is clear evidence from community events and feedback that a large portion of this population is under the age of 25 years. There is growing concern that as time progresses where affordability and access to tertiary education is unachievable social problems will start to emerge. These issues has given our community impetus to pursue every avenue possible to create better access to education, vocational training and employment opportunities for Cook Islands children and youth in order that they can positively contribute to the social and economic fabric of Australian society. This can only be achieved with the assistance of the Australian Government in undertaking an overhaul of the TTTA and paving a clearer and shorter pathway for New Zealand Citizens to gaining Permanent Residency or Australian Citizenship.

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