

2006 Senate Inquiry into harvest labour force – Conclusions and excerpts

The Report titled *Perspectives on the future of the harvest labour force* (October 2006) from the Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Workplace Relations and Education has been released.

The Committee was chaired by Senator Judith Troeth (Liberal, Victoria) with Senator Gavin Marshall (ALP, Victoria) as Deputy Chair.

The Committee also comprised: Senator Guy Barnett (Liberal, Tasmania); Senator George Campbell (ALP, NSW); Senator Mitch Fifield (Liberal, Victoria); Senator Ross Lightfoot (Liberal, WA), Senator Anne McEwen (ALP, SA); Senator Natasha Stott Despoja (Democrats, SA).

Conclusions in relation to Australian horticulture and Pacific island contract labour

Basically the Senate Committee concluded:

- **While labour supply is sometimes precarious at the moment, depending on location, the backpacker, 'grey nomad' and other local and itinerant casual labour resources are currently sufficient.** (The committee heard complaints about temporary shortages, and of problems with timing of harvesting. there were a few unsubstantiated estimates of financial losses, but no details about the circumstances in which they were incurred. the committee heard no empirical evidence that more than a few farmers on odd occasions have been faced with leaving vegetables in the ground, or fruit on trees and vines because of labour shortages).
- **However the current labour sufficiency is unlikely to be maintained in view of heavy investment in horticulture and greatly expanded areas under cultivation.** (The current local labour supply is unlikely to increase, and will probably decline. The backpacker supply is precarious and subject to the vagaries of economic and political events abroad. This is scarcely a sound labour market basis for sustaining an industry which has experienced an accelerated rate of investment over the past five years.)
- **Prudence requires the government to make contingency plans for introducing contract harvest labour** as early as five years hence.
- **Should a temporary labour scheme become necessary, this labour should come from the South Pacific**, under the safeguard of treaties with Pacific nations, and with intergovernmental supervision of contracts, work conditions and other arrangements necessary to protect the interests of the seasonal workforce.
- **The report makes no formal recommendation in regard to Pacific island seasonal contract labour.** It does not recommend a trial program because the committee believes much more serious discussion about policy and planning practicalities would need to be done before any trial could be properly evaluated. Nonetheless, the committee believes that the prospect for some mobility of harvest labour from Pacific states may become more likely in future.

The full report is at :

http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/eet_ctte/contract_labour/report/index.htm

Some excerpts from the Report that give background to their conclusions:

- "The inquiry has been affected by the Work Choices debate and by heightened sensitivity about entry arrangements for foreign workers other than those which exist already under skilled migration provisions. Any exploration of policy which includes in other categories of entry a proposal for admitting foreign workers is likely to be vulnerable to populist sentiment at this time." (p.viii)

- "At the present time the committee believes that proposals to use Pacific island contract labour are difficult to consider on their merits". (p.ix)
- "Informal discussions revealed that some proponents of a foreign harvest worker scheme anticipate being able to pay much lower than current wages rates. There is strong advocacy for the use of Chinese labour in some areas, which should ring alarm bells for the reason that labour hire companies in that country often exploit their foreign contract workers, in collusion with the firms which employ them.It is for this reason that the committee believes that should a harvest labour scheme be seriously considered it should be restricted to South Pacific Forum nations and be conducted with high levels of formality and regulation." (p.ix)
- "There is strongly held opinion that the entry of Pacific national workers into the Australian workforce on a seasonal or temporary basis is essential for the economic survival of Pacific nations and to the stability of those societies. The prospect of 'failed states' in the south Pacific is seen by some as a serious challenge to regional security. The committee believes that in the near future an Australian government may need to put aside purely domestic considerations in order to address this problem." (ix)
- "The committee has given more consideration to the current labour needs of growers and producers than to the potential use of Pacific Island labour. The committee had earlier agreed to request government approval for a visit to several Pacific nations. The idea was not pursued because it became apparent that domestic concerns and pressures were paramount in this inquiry. The committee's first priority is dealing with labour and employment matters at home. It is not a foreign affairs committee, and it notes that this issue was admirably dealt with by a Senate committee in a report tabled in August 2003." (pp.xi-x)
- "The committee notes, however, the strong interest shown in the inquiry by Pacific nations, and recognises, as does the government, that pressure for a changed policy response from an Australian government is likely to continue. It also assumes that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is acutely aware of the tensions between domestic political pressures at home and looming problems of instability in some Pacific states that will sooner or later require serious attention." (p.x)