Chapter 7

The politics of ‘coloured labour’ in Queensland, 1883-1886

The decision of Queensland’s sugar planters to press for the right to recruit indentured Indian labour broke the broad ruling class consensus which had hitherto tolerated their use of indentured Pacific Islanders. It was the Indian “coolie” issue that most sharply divided Liberals from Conservatives, and on the one occasion when the issue was put to the test, the Queensland general election of 1883, the Conservatives were defeated. The planters’ push for Indian labourers helped provoke a raft of restrictive labour legislation by the new Liberal government, and this in turn led the planters to gamble on separation for North Queensland. It was in this contest that the real balance of forces within the ruling class was revealed. While the urban-conservatives, represented by the Brisbane Courier, supported the planters in their desire for Indian labour, that support was conditional on a broader political structure which quarantined what they believed would be the effects of racialised labour, and prevented any shift away from a predominantly white Queensland with a modern, free-labour economy and a parliamentary political system. Thus, when
the planters took their demands to the extreme of campaigning for a separate, new colony of North Queensland, the Courier and the southern conservatives abandoned them, and their arguments provide us with a profound insight into the real agendas of a major element of the Queensland ruling class.

The planters’ aggression in seeking labour during the boom years of 1883-4 led directly to a new round of atrocities by recruiting ships, creating such a scandal that the Liberals were forced to pass legislation to terminate the Pacific Islands labour trade after 1890, and accelerate their own plans for a sugar industry based on white labour. Thus the planters faced the prospect of no “coloured” indentured labour at all once the labourers recruited in 1890 were sent home.

Ultimately, as Adrian Graves has argued, the push for “coloured labour” for Queensland’s sugar plantations was undermined by a long crisis in the plantation system of production itself, a crisis that saw a long and painful shift to production based on (white) family farms and central mills processing the cane. Alongside this went a crisis in the indenture of South Sea Islander labour, a crisis which led to Islanders being increasingly employed as higher-paid wage labourers on farms, with a declining number of first-indenture Islanders recruited to work on a declining number of plantations. Graves’ emphasis on the material underpinnings to the ability of the state to abolish Pacific Islands labour represents a welcome rejection of the notion that the White Australia policy was simply about racism,¹ but however important the microeconomics of cane production, politics were just as important. Plantations were retained for

¹ Graves makes this rejection explicit in “The abolition of the Queensland labour trade: Politics or profits?” in EL Wheelwright and Ken Buckley (eds), Essays in the political economy of Australian capitalism, volume four, Australia and New Zealand Book Company, Sydney, 1980, esp. pp. 41-42.
decades longer in Mauritius, Fiji and the West Indies. The strategic and economic vision of key ruling class leaders in Queensland, and nationally, narrowed the options for producing sugar. The fact that this vision also coincided with changes in the methods by which sugar could be profitably produced undoubtedly reduced the level of conflict on the issue, and ensured that Queensland retained a large sugar industry.

By 1887, Queensland had enacted harsh legislation against Chinese immigration and stopped naturalising Chinese residents, it had removed legislation that might have made the indenture of Indian labourers possible, and it had legislated to end the labour trade in indentured Pacific Islanders. The push for North Queensland separation, which many feared would produce a black-labour plantation economy, had been blocked by the united action of liberals, southern conservatives, and the Colonial Office. When the Conservatives won the 1888 Queensland election, they did so on a platform very similar to that which would ultimately become the White Australia policy.

The ‘coolie’ issue destroys McIlwraith

The year 1883 represented the death-rattle of the Conservative government. McIlwraith’s proposal to allow the building of a transcontinental railway on the land-grant principle through outback Queensland from Charleville to the Gulf of Carpentaria threw a major portion of the squattocracy into active opposition to him and profoundly undermined his government. His attempts to secure Indian labour for the sugar planters galvanised the urban and rural liberals against him in what amounted to a new crusade. Even worse, the issues came
together as many speculated that McIlwraith’s real agenda was to build the transcontinental with “coolie” labour. Neither the support of the Brisbane Courier on both these issues, nor the widely-supported annexation of New Guinea in April 1883, could save McIlwraith.

It was the “coolie” issue more than any other which destroyed his Premiership. The letters he received from his closest supporters are eloquent testimony to that. William McIlwraith warned him from Rockhampton in July 1882, as the debate was opening up: “This Coolie question is a bothersome business, and I wish I saw you well rid of it. It is one of the questions in connection with which appeals may be made to the feelings and prejudices of the lower class, & they tell at the ballot-box.”  

The wealthy capitalist William Forrest, warned him from the Melbourne Club, “I much fear that the Coolie question primarily, & the Trns Contl in a secondary degree will kill you at the next election.”

As his key supporters began debating strategy for the 1883 parliamentary session and the election campaign to follow, there were divisions. The leading sugar planter, Hume Black, wanted the Conservatives to take up the “coloured labour” issue aggressively. In May 1883, he toured the far north, and reported good meetings and success in arguing for “coolies”:

At Herberton the miners were enthusiastic, especially as they never thought I would have plunged recklessly into the labour question up there. Somehow I managed to get hold of their attention from the start &

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2 William McIlwraith to Thomas, 25 July 1882, letter no. 464 in McIlwraith papers, Oxley Library, OM64-19/15.

3 Forrest to McIlwraith, 14 Feb 1883, letter no. 565 in McIlwraith papers, Oxley Library, OM64-19/17.
laid such a plain statement of the case before them such as they admitted had never been done before. With regard to the labour question I find far less opposition than I expected. Everywhere along the coast the people are doing no good towards extension of cultivation for want of labour & at the next election it will not be “do away with coloured labour” but regulate it. Even in the Torres & at Herberton they say – Have it on the coast but we won’t have it up here. I have especially pointed out that it is quite impossible to prevent coolie labour being imported but that the danger is in having it without regulations confining its employment.4

John Hamilton, the doctor and sometime miner who represented Gympie, was quite opposed to this strategy:

In the first place its hardly conceivable the prejudice which exists against Coolies — I have noticed it in Gympie, Wide Bay District & Brisbane — It’s useless to explain that the restricted introduction of Coolies will prevent the unrestricted introduction of a worse race [Chinese], their reply is that Coolies are more objectionable.5

For Hamilton, the government was in a hopeless bind on the issue:

If we do face the question next year it won’t benefit the sugar industry. The Indian Government won’t of course assent to the regulations which were sent there and if we in consequence lessen the restrictions Parliament won’t consent to them and the fear of a dissolution or a resignation of the Ministry would not in the last session have the same effect as it had in previous ones in inducing men on our side to vote with the Government on the question. It would have the reverse effect as it

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4 Hume Black to McIlwraith, 15 May 1883, letter no. 584 in McIlwraith papers, Oxley Library, OM64-19/18, emphasis in original.
5 John Hamilton to McIlwraith, April 1883, letter no. 587 in McIlwraith papers, Oxley Library, OM64-19/18.
would be a safe and a good card for them to play at the next election & I’m sure you can spot men in our crowd who would play it.  

John Murtagh Macrossan was in no doubt about the problem the conservatives faced. In his own electorate he said, “Townsville is the enemy’s stronghold. There the anti-Coolie cry will bear the best fruit.” But he also thought they had a chance, if they deflected concern over “coolies” onto the Chinese issue.

The Coolies will be a great thorn in our side but if properly handled between this and the election the Chinese can be made a still greater thorn in Sam’s [Griffith’s] side. Don’t you forget that at Roma The [sic] Chinaman is a more dangerous competitor than the Coolie to the working man.

According to Macrossan, the biggest problem was that the planters themselves were doing too little to win the public argument:

The planters everywhere in the districts up here have been very supine. Men who will not help themselves by the very small duty of looking after the roll are unworthy of the sacrifice we have made and are making for them. I have been tempted more than once to throw them and the Coolie to the devil.

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6 John Hamilton to McIlwraith, April 1883, letter no. 587 in McIlwraith papers, Oxley Library, OM64-19/18.
7 Macrossan to McIlwraith, 25 August, 1883, letter no 636 in McIlwraith papers, Oxley Library, OM64-19/19.
8 Macrossan to McIlwraith, 25 May 1883, in McIlwraith papers, Oxley Library, OM64-19/20. The significance of Roma is that McIlwraith was to give a major electoral speech there on 7 June.
9 Macrossan to McIlwraith, 13 August 1883, letter 641 in McIlwraith papers, Oxley Library, OM64-19/19.
One consequence was backsliding and inconsistency in their own ranks as the pressure mounted. Macrossan complained: “Cooper like the infernal fool he has always been would support colored labor at Cairns and go against it at Herberton.”

In Rockhampton, the Conservative, Ferguson, kept his seat by campaigning as “an uncompromising opponent of land grant railways and coloured labour, and if these subjects are mentioned in the Governor’s Address he will vote against the Ministry and the address in Reply.” William McIlwraith railed privately against this treachery, but when Griffith moved in parliament to put McIlwraith out of office, Ferguson voted with his old leader. However, the Conservatives were routed, and Griffith had a majority of 35 to 20.

Approval for the recruitment of Indian labourers for the sugar industry was finally given by the British Government in India in a letter dated 15 September 1883, just as the McIlwraith government was being destroyed at the polls. When the Indian government finally received a response from Queensland, it was from a new Premier, informing them that there would be no recruitment of indentured labour from India, and apologising for the waste of their time.

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10 Macrossan to McIlwraith, 2 Sept 1883, in McIlwraith papers, Oxley Library, OM64-19/23.
11 Will McIlwraith to Thomas, 21 August 1883, letter no. 643, in McIlwraith papers, Oxley Library, OM64-19/19.
12 Roger B Joyce, Samuel Walker Griffith, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia (Qld), 1984, p. 88. The actual tests of strength between the Conservatives and Liberals when Parliament first met after the election saw Griffith win votes 29-17 (for Groom rather than Scott to be Speaker, ORDLA Qld, vol. XLI, p. 7); blocking McIlwraith’s attempt to get new estimates printed (30-19, p. 11); and adjournment (p. 24). To these numbers must be added the votes of Dickson, who was out of Queensland and made Treasurer on his return, and the two Liberals who won the seats of Cook and Aubigny, after successfully challenging the election of two McIlwraith supporters.
The Liberals triumphant

The new Premier, Samuel Griffith, intellectual and energetic, set about recasting Queensland labour law and restructuring the sugar industry. First he attempted to repeal the *Labourers from British India Act*, but was narrowly thwarted in the Legislative Council; he finally succeeded in 1886. Then Griffith amended the *Pacific Islands Labourers Act of 1880* to restrict Islanders to field work. The *Chinese Immigrants Regulation Act of 1877* was also amended to reduce the number of Chinese people who could come by any ship—even if not travelling to Queensland—from one for every 10 tons of its tare to one for every 50 tons; to increase the entry tax from £10 to £30; and to end the refunding of the entry tax. A *Native Labourers Protection Act*, which prevented the employment of Aboriginal people on ships within Queensland waters, was passed with the aim of reducing abuses associated with bêche-de-mer fishing. It also provided for written work contracts for Aboriginal workers. The *Immigration Act* was amended to provide greater government support for the indenture of European immigrants. In the first year of the Liberal regime it seemed that, apart from the new Land bill, parliament debated little other than labour and immigration law.

The overall effect of this activity was to limit the labour options for sugar planters and the work options for Pacific Islanders. This reflected the Liberal government’s strategy, which I see as one of quarantining the sugar industry, and applying moderate pressure on the planters. They were to be guaranteed “a practical supply of labour”; but no more.\textsuperscript{14} The legislative whirlwind of 1884

\textsuperscript{14} Speech of Garrick, Postmaster General and Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council, on the *Bill to Repeal the Labourers from British India Act*, ORDLC Qld, 1884, vol. XL, p. 56.
was intended to box them in without destroying them and the profits they generated.

With the shortage of labour from the Pacific Islands, planters had taken to employing Chinese people, and in 1883, 2578 had arrived in the colony, the first really substantial intake since the 1877 legislation.\textsuperscript{15} The planters had been prepared to pay the £10 poll-tax.\textsuperscript{16} Griffith responded with the Chinese Immigrants Regulation Act of 1877 Amendment Bill. In the parliamentary debate, leading Conservative, John Murtagh Macrossan, pointed out that it cost £25 each to obtain Pacific Island labourers, and a further £6 to return them to the Islands. Even with a poll-tax of £20, as proposed in the initial draft of the Bill to amend the Chinese Immigration Act of 1877, the Chinese labourer would be cheaper to recruit. Indeed, the planters were prepared to pay £30 to recruit an Indian labourer. “I have no wish to injure the planters,” he declared, “but I have a strong desire to protect the Europeans.” This led to the poll-tax being raised to £30.\textsuperscript{17} Sugar planters were to be strongly discouraged from employing Chinese labourers.

Some sugar planters had experimented with labourers from other sources, including the Malay Peninsula. The Premier was sanguine: “I think the persons who have tried that experiment have already become so heartily sick of the result of it that we need not anticipate any serious attempt to renew it.”\textsuperscript{18} The

\textsuperscript{15} ORDLA Qld, vol. XLI, p. 346.
\textsuperscript{16} Joyce, Samuel Walker Griffith, p. 102; Hume Black in ORDLA Qld, vol. XLI, p. 439. See also letter from Butterfield and Swire to Colonial Secretary, Hong Kong, 14 May 1883, in Qld LA V&P, 1883-4, vol. 2, p. 1422.
\textsuperscript{17} ORDLA Qld, vol. XLI, p. 348.
\textsuperscript{18} ORDLA Qld, vol. XLIII, p. 273. Adrian Graves suggested that part of the problem was a failure to make agreements with foreign governments; see his Cane and labour: The political
government made no move to limit or ban the introduction of labourers from other parts of Asia, but made it clear that they would do so if they thought it necessary. When Swallow and Derham, who owned “Hambledon” plantation, asked about the possibility of importing Japanese labourers, Griffith responded:

> there is at present no law in force prohibiting the introduction of Japanese subjects… If at any future time the introduction of Japanese should prove injurious to the welfare of the Colony I have no doubt that restrictions on their introduction would be imposed by Parliament.¹⁹

Griffith had made the same point in Parliament when Macrossan had argued that restricting the importation of Islanders or Indian labourers would lead to hundreds or thousands of Malays and others being introduced.²⁰ An “almost-white Queensland” policy was being constructed. The government wanted the

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¹⁹ Quoted in Joyce, Samuel Walker Griffith, p. 102.
²⁰ ORDLA Qld, vol. XLI, p. 239.
sugar industry to restructure itself eventually around European labour. Its model was the established and successful sugar industry of northern NSW where European small farmers grew cane for the mills of companies like the Colonial Sugar Refining Co.\(^{21}\)

Given the problems of an immature labour market, the government set out to facilitate the use of white indentured labour. They amended the *Immigration Act* to provide even greater subsidies for the passage of agricultural labourers from Britain, Germany or Scandinavia who agreed to work in Queensland under indenture—subject, like Pacific Islanders and others, to the draconian provisions of the *Masters and Servants Act*. Under the new subsidies, an employer could land a male or female labourer under forty years old in Queensland for £1, a fraction of the cost of recruiting an Islander, and with no obligation to pay for their return. Subsidies were also offered to bring the wives and children of white labourers.\(^{22}\) The planters expressed their utter lack of interest in the legislation. The failure of this legislation to change the nature of labour in the sugar industry was clear in 1886, when just 123 of the 10,630 emigrants who were sent to Queensland by the Agent-General were indentured; and they were mostly farm labourers and domestic servants, with three venetian blind makers.\(^{23}\)

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\(^{22}\) *ORDLA* Qld, vol. XLIII, 1884, pp. 272-5.

\(^{23}\) Agent-General’s report for 1886, see *Qld LA V&P*, 1887, vol. 3, p. 573; Immigration Agent’s report for 1886, *Qld LA V&P*, 1887, vol. 3, p. 600. Earlier, in July 1885, in the Governor’s speech opening the year’s parliamentary session, the government regretted “that little advantage has hitherto been taken of the Act passed by you during last session to facilitate the introduction of indented labourers from Europe.” *ORDLA* Qld, vol. XLVI, p. 3.
The new Liberal government’s position on Pacific Island labour reflected the same strategy. Islanders would continue to be introduced, but for Griffith, “the introduction of these islanders is only a temporary measure”:\textsuperscript{24} When the Government thought the time had arrived for the prohibition of Polynesian labour, they would be perfectly prepared to take the responsibility of doing so. It was their function to do so... He thought himself that the prohibition of the introduction of black labour should be concurrent with the substitution of some other labour to take its place.\textsuperscript{25}

Nevertheless, there were 14,000 Islanders in Queensland; “Those persons are here, and we have to deal with the matter as we find it...we must do something to see that they do not injure the other portions of the community.”\textsuperscript{26} The new \textit{Pacific Islands Labourers Act of 1880 Amendment Bill} excluded them from working machinery, making products marketable, being grooms or coachmen, or horse driving or carting except in field work, and removed them from domestic service. It also aimed to limit time-expired Islanders to field work, and to ban the supply of firearms to Islanders.\textsuperscript{27} According to Adrian Graves, the legislation succeeded: “The tendency to employ more Whites in skilled positions was reinforced after the passage of legislation in 1884 restricting Pacific Islanders to unskilled tasks in sugar cultivation.”\textsuperscript{28} It also had the effect of reducing demand for indentured Islanders in a situation where demand had previously far outstripped supply. Not surprisingly the planters supported the passing of the legislation, since it would reduce competition for time-expired

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} ORDLA Qld, vol. XLI, 1884, p. 134.
\item \textsuperscript{25} ORDLA Qld, vol. XLI, 1884, p. 333.
\item \textsuperscript{26} ORDLA Qld, vol. XLI, p. 133.
\item \textsuperscript{27} ORDLA Qld, vol. XLI, pp. 134-5.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Graves, Cane and labour, p. 37
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Islanders.\textsuperscript{29} Graves also argued that an expanding European population also facilitated the employment of whites in the sugar industry.

Kay Saunders saw a profound contradiction in the Liberal position. The policy of limiting Islanders to field work:

> ensured the very structure they [the liberals] strove to destroy… [B]y insisting that contracted Melanesians work only as servile tropical agricultural labourers, Griffith’s legislation was preserving the hegemony of the planters; it stopped the Melanesians from being recruited into more remunerative capacities either within the sugar mills or outside the sugar industry altogether.\textsuperscript{30}

Saunders was formally correct; the legislation weakened the position of the Islanders as against their employers, seemingly in contradiction to the professed anti-slavery politics of the Liberals. But this missed the bigger point. The Liberals were largely indifferent to the position and problems of the Islanders; their primary concern was the impact of sugar plantations and “servile labour” on the economic structure and politics of Queensland society as a whole. They were concerned to ensure a modern industrial capitalist future guaranteed in part by parliamentary democracy; not one as a backward plantation colony.

This contradiction in the Liberal position was picked up by the conservatives, who threw all the liberal rhetoric about freedom back at them. As originally

\textsuperscript{29} Speech of Hume Black, \textit{ORDLA Qld}, vol. XLI, p. 140; also p. 242: “he was especially anxious the Bill should pass”.

\textsuperscript{30} Kay Saunders, \textit{Workers in bondage: The origins and bases of unfree labour in Queensland 1824-1916}, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia (Qld), 1982, p. 65.
moved, the legislation would have forced current time-expired Islanders back onto the plantations, and forced future time-expired Islanders to stay on the plantations, their only alternative being to return to their island. The Conservatives’ new leader, Boyd Morehead, affected outrage: “Is this man and brother, with whom we have shaken hands, to be turned into a slave? Is it to be considered sinful to employ such a man?”

[I]t had been traditional amongst Englishmen that as soon as a man touched English soil he was a free man. But it seemed to be a different state of affairs in Queensland. Not only was he not a free man when he touched this shore—which he was not under the Bill—but even years after, when he had carried out all the conditions under which he was engaged, he was, after years of freedom, to be seized and told, “You shall only do so-and-so or you shall be deported from the colony.”

This line of argument was not congenial to the planters. They were on the defensive, and were happy to make whatever concessions they could to maintain the existing system—or at least its essentials. Hume Black believed:

that no doubt the whole trouble in connection with the kanaka labour had been brought about by time-expired kanakas remaining in the country and becoming a perfect nuisance in the towns and municipalities. He believed that it was the wish of the working men especially to see the time-expired labourer legislated for. Those labourers came here with the distinct understanding that they should return home at the expiration of their agreements.

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32 ORDLA Qld, vol. XLI, p. 238.
33 ORDLA Qld, vol. XLI, p. 240.
And Griffith pointed to the disservice the Conservatives were doing to the planters’ cause:

They were told the other day that the planters were pining for a supply of kanaka labour, and that they could absorb any number of them, and yet when they proposed by the Bill that some 900 or 1,000 kanakas should be available for them they came down and cried out about doing an injustice to the poor black.34

Despite this, the Conservatives’ agitation was effective.35 The government backed down and proposed that the clauses forcing time-expired Islanders to do agricultural field work not apply to those who registered by 1 September 1884, with proof they had been in the colony for five years. This special class of Islanders formed the core of those who were able to resist deportation in 1906.36

34 ORDLA Qld, vol. XLI, p. 318. The “900 or 1000 Kanakas” referred to the time-expired Islanders who would be forced back onto the plantations under the legislation as initially proposed.

35 It would be interesting to investigate the motives of the squatters in campaigning for this clause, which deprived the sugar planters of the forced labour of the 900 or 1000 time-expired Islanders then in Queensland. Was it a belated payback for the planters’ support for the 1880 legislation which deprived the squatters of Islander labour? See the bitter speech Morehead made about the planters in chapter 6.

36 Clive Moore, Kanaka: A history of Melanesian Mackay, Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies and University of Papua New Guinea Press, Port Moresby, 1985, pp. 274-85. The Pacific Island Labourers’ Act (Cwealth) of 1901 ended the labour trade from March 1904, and gave the new Federal Government power to deport Islanders found in Australia after December 1906 who did not have the certificates of exemption granted in Queensland’s 1884 legislation. It was one of the major legislative manifestations of the new Commonwealth’s White Australia policy. By the end of 1906, some 691 Islanders held the certificates of exemption which protected them from deportation. After a Royal Commission, the Commonwealth also decided to exempt several hundred more. See Myra Willard, The history of the White Australia policy to 1920, Melbourne University Press, Carlton (Vic), 1967 (first pub 1923), pp. 182-5; Moore, Kanaka, pp. 274-92 and esp. pp. 284-5.
Griffith’s Pacific Islanders labour policy also faced a challenge from more intransigent Liberals, an element that had grown dramatically with the general expansion of the urban and small farmer population in Queensland, and which had a sizeable presence in parliament after the Liberal triumph of 1883. The hard Liberal parliamentarians were rich farmers, manufacturers and urban businessmen who wanted to hasten the destruction of the labour trade. They chose to test their strength by introducing an amendment that would limit the working week for Islanders to nine hours a day, six days a week. This time, there was none of the mischief dished up by the ultra-squatters in 1880 when they had attempted to wreck the McIlwraith ministry’s legislation by imposing an eight-hour day; this time the Conservatives all voted against the amendment, to protect the planters’ interests. The hard Liberals were defeated 13 votes to 26, with eleven of their Liberal colleagues, including most of the Ministry, voting against them.

The hard Liberals took their stance on the basis of a report by two doctors, Wray and Thompson, who had reported in 1880 on the appalling mortality of Islanders, arguing that it was caused by being overworked by greedy planters; just one more element of the plantation system that made it reek of the abuses of American slavery. The planters’ response was weak, challenging the

37 Moved by Grimes, ORDLA Qld, vol. XLI, 1884, p. 334.
38 The vote is on a change of wording, but it clearly reflects the substantive sentiment on the issue, ORDLA Qld, vol. XLI, p. 345. Brookes was the only Minister in the Legislative Assembly to support the amendment. Seven of the thirteen voting for Grimes’ amendment had been elected at the 1883 election; two more had been elected in by-elections the year before. Of that nine, all except Higson (Rockhampton) represented electorates in the Liberal heartland, the populous south-east corner of the colony.
mortality figures as exaggerated, and arguing that sometimes in agriculture long hours were needed.\(^\text{40}\)

The repeated assertion that Queensland’s anti-“coloured labour” legislation was driven by a desire to protect white working men is challenged both by the Liberals’ support for the laws promoting the indenture of white labourers, and by the response to Grimes’ nine-hour day amendment. John Ferguson, the anti-“coloured labour” conservative, suggested that legislating a nine-hour day for Islanders would affect white employers:

> How would it work if the shopkeepers were compelled to work their employés only eight hours? The sugar planters could not be expected to restrict their hours of labour to nine in the crushing season. It would be right enough for some seasons of the year to work only six or seven, but during the crushing season the work must be done the same as on Saturdays in Brisbane, where shopkeepers had their employés working sometimes in the morning from 9 o’clock till 11 o’clock at night, though on other days they might be at work only eight hours.\(^\text{41}\)

Griffith, supposedly the champion of working-class racial exclusion, voted against the hours amendment, fudging the issue by claiming that the factory acts in Britain had very complicated clauses on working hours. He argued that the planters would not overwork them out of self-interest—a self-interest that had not been effective to date—and that the over-riding issue was the need to restrict the number of Islanders and their social impact.\(^\text{42}\) James Foote, the


\(^{41}\) *ORDLA* Qld, vol. XLI, 1884, p. 337. Ferguson was a conservative who had campaigned for Rockhampton at the 1883 election on a platform opposed to “coloured labour”. He supported McIlwraith as Premier, but also Griffith’s labour legislation.

\(^{42}\) *ORDLA* Qld, vol. XLI, 1884, pp. 337-8.
wealthy Ipswich shopkeeper and businessman, agreed with the hard Liberals that Islanders needed to be protected, but was confident that with careful administration by the new government, the abuses of the past would be stamped out. “He was not one of those who were desirous of hampering the planter too much in dealing with the labour”, a view most large employers shared about their own industrial relations.\textsuperscript{43} William Salkeld, the Ipswich auctioneer, attempted to defuse this argument, pointing to the vulnerability produced by long contracts of indenture. “White people generally engaged from day to day, or from week to week, or at the most from year to year; and they were far better able to look after themselves than the Polynesians”;\textsuperscript{44} itself an interesting piece of liberal mythology that illustrates how little this legislation had to do with protecting white workers.

The politics of ‘coloured labour’ immigration in Queensland

The four major debates on labour and race in the Queensland Parliament in 1884 give an excellent overview of issues surrounding “coloured labour”.\textsuperscript{45} What they show is that these issues cannot be understood simply as a conflict between the supporters and opponents of “coloured labour” in general. Certainly that was one point of division, with some Conservatives unqualified

\textsuperscript{43} ORDLA Qld, vol. XLI, 1884, p. 340.
\textsuperscript{44} ORDLA Qld, vol. XLI, 1884, p. 342.
\textsuperscript{45} There were in these debates some relatively sophisticated speeches which ranged across a wide range of relevant issues; for instance Griffith, introducing the Pacific Island Labourers Bill, ORDLA Qld, vol. XLI, esp. pp. 133-4.
advocates of “coloured labour”,\textsuperscript{46} while Liberals in general were concerned about either “slavery” or “semi-slavery” resulting either from the labour trade, or a possible future preponderance of “coloured labour” in the north. By contrast, Conservatives by and large dismissed this concern. But most Liberals and most Conservatives also distinguished between different types of “coloured labour” because in their minds, there were other issues involved—pre-eminently the related issues of colonisation and strategic control.

Chinese labour was rejected by most in the ruling class, with strategic concerns dominating. For Conservative leader, John Murtagh Macrossan, “Our great danger is from the Chinaman. We experience little danger from the kanakas, and the Government has taken care that there shall be no danger from coolies…”\textsuperscript{47} His Conservative colleague, John Hamilton, saw 400 million Chinese as “infinitely more dangerous than coolies or any other coloured labour”.\textsuperscript{48} When Griffith introduced the 1884 bill to increase restrictions on Chinese immigration, the most substantial debate was over whether or not the restriction on the number of Chinese allowed should apply to Chinese people planning to come to Queensland, or to all Chinese people on a boat stopping at a Queensland port, people who might be traveling to another colony altogether. Real interests were involved here; the latter, harsher position would discourage shipping companies from stopping at northern ports on their way south, and this would disadvantage those ports. So the vote was not for or against Chinese

\textsuperscript{46} For example, WH Walsh, \textit{ORDLC} Qld, vol. XL, pp. 86-89, 113. O’Doherty had an interest in a large plantation. He thought the problem was not the \textit{Coolie Act}, but whether “the people would not day by day and month by month see that the best thing they could do for themselves and their children was to encourage cheap labour in the best manner they could.” \textit{ORDLC} Qld, vol. XL, p. 52.

\textsuperscript{47} \textit{ORDLA} Qld, vol. XLI, p. 347.

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{ORDLA} Qld, vol. XLI, p. 348.
immigration, but how much sacrifice would be imposed on North Queensland in order to maintain a high level of restriction. In the Legislative Assembly, the latter, harsher position was supported 32-9, with six conservatives included in the 32.\textsuperscript{49}

Pacific Islanders were the most acceptable—or least unacceptable—“coloured” labourers because their small numbers in the Islands presented no strategic danger to British control of Queensland. By contrast, the greater resistance to Indian labour by the Liberals reflected their fears for white domination in the long term. James Garrick, Postmaster General and Liberal leader in the Legislative Council, summed this up:

\begin{quote}
The introduction of coloured labour from the South Sea Islands is very different from the supply of coolies from British India. In one case we bring labourers from islands scattered over a large sea and inhabited by comparatively few people, and it is easier to manage those islanders who come in small numbers than it would be to control the vast hordes that might be brought into the colony from India.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

…or, he might have added, from China. The veteran “anti-slavery” campaigner William Brookes made a similar point when discussing the Pacific Island Labourers Bill:

\begin{quote}
Debate on this point can be found in ORDLC Qld, vol. XL, pp. 116-20, where the Legislative Council voted 11-6 to amend the Bill to make the tonnage restriction apply only to Chinese people destined for Queensland; ORDLA Qld, vol. XLI, pp. 619-21, where the Legislative Assembly voted to remove that amendment 32-9; and ORDLC Qld, vol. XL, pp. 124-132 where the Legislative Council finally accepted the Legislative Assembly’s position. This final debate in the Council ended bizarrely, with a series of votes taken and the Legislative Assembly’s position finally accepted on a vote of 11-9 when two conservatives left the chamber and two Liberals returned. One of these, Kevin O’Doherty, commented that, “by voting as he did he probably was instrumental in averting a crisis.” p. 132.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{49} ORDLC Qld, vol. XL, p. 40.
The Legislature had decided to exclude coolies mainly because they existed in such large numbers that they might overrun the colony. For the same reason they objected to the Chinese. But they did not object to kanakas, because they could not defend themselves.\(^{51}\)

John Murtagh Macrossan objected to the Liberal government’s *Pacific Island Labourers Bill* because in his mind, Islanders were simply not an issue. “He did not think the Kanaka question was before the country at all during the elections. It was the Coolie question that was then before the country.”

It was not a question of kanakas, but a question of coolies, and of Chinese more than of coolies in his electorate; and it was also more a question of Malays than of coolies, and the kanakas were left in the background altogether. There was a sort of tacit admission, not only in his electorate but, so far as he could observe, in all the other electorates, that the Kanaka question should be kept out of view altogether.\(^ {52}\)

Conservatives generally rejected the idea that Indian labourers were a danger. Norton saw Indians as acceptable, while Chinese were a “real danger to the State”.\(^ {53}\) Macrossan argued that, “Chinamen and Malays...are the real danger to the working classes, not the coolies”.\(^ {54}\) Gordon Sandeman turned the popular stereotype of the Chinese sojourner on its head and applied it to Indian labourers instead:

> He could say that, from what he knew of the Indian labourer, his desire was not, like the Chinese, to settle down in a foreign country. There was

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\(^{51}\) *ORDLA* Qld, vol. XLI, p. 238.

\(^{52}\) *ORDLA* Qld, vol. XLI, p. 326.

\(^{53}\) *ORDLA* Qld, vol. XLI, p. 57.

\(^{54}\) *ORDLA* Qld, vol. XLI, p. 58.
no class of people in the world who had a greater objection to foreign countries. Their only object was to make a little money and then return to their native village, and live upon what they had earned.  

This analysis enables us to see that there were real and genuine lines of division between the Liberals and Conservatives on the issue of “coloured labour”, but the division was more complex than one between advocates and opponents of “coloured labour”.

Similarly, a close examination of the debates and conflicts over “coloured labour” shows that it is impossible to understand it as one of working-class pressure against capitalist greed. Certainly, some politicians attempted to give it such a character. When the Liberal minister, James Garrick, did this in the Legislative Council, the immensely wealthy William Forrest, punctured

the lofty scorn with which the hon. gentleman treated capitalists. It had appeared to him that the Postmaster-General was somewhat inconsistent; for was he not one of the largest capitalists himself that we had? — and did he not own terraces of houses in George street?

It is certainly true that the Liberals, at times, identified themselves as the champions of working men, but this does not mean that there was any proletarian agenda involved in their actions. Indeed, a central part of Griffith’s labour strategy was white indentured labour from Europe, something politically active workers had generally opposed. Indeed, Griffith himself

55 ORDLC Qld, vol. XL, p. 47.
56 ORDLC Qld, vol. XL, p. 59.
57 Richard Fletcher quotes Persia Campbell (in *Economica* No 1, Jan 1921) as arguing that “A hatred of squattocracy and convictism, and of indenture systems had left an indelible mark on
admitted that, “The principal argument against the introduction of European labour—the argument that has always been brought against it—is that its introduction will lower the average rate of wages.” He disputed this, but no party that was genuinely responding to working-class agitation would have introduced such a measure.

The labour trade condemned

The Pacific Islands labour trade had been surrounded by controversy from the beginning, but the recruiting scandals of 1883-4 destroyed the credibility of the labour trade, and drove the Liberal government to legislate to end the indenture of Pacific Islanders permanently—though this radical move would be reversed

the Australian consciousness”, and that this influenced trade union attitudes towards the Chinese, in his “The role of the immigration question in gaining for the labour movement recognition by society in the period 1877 to 1890 in New South Wales”, MA, University of Sydney, 1964, p. 31. The introduction of the Agreements Validating Bill into the NSW Parliament by Sir John Robertson was strongly opposed by the Sydney Trades and Labour Council. The bill enforced agreements made between employers and workers that saw the employer pay for them to come to NSW to work for them, and included penalties up to two years solitary confinement. The TLC forced its representative, Angus Cameron, to abstain from voting for the bill; this was one of the major incidents leading to a rupture in relations between Cameron and the TLC; see Sydney TLC minutes, 3 February, 10 February, 17 February, 13 April, 20 April 1876, Trades and Labour Council of New South Wales papers, Mitchell Library, A3828. The legislation was subsequently used to recruit strikebreakers during the coal dispute in the Hunter Valley in late 1879, and leading trade unionist, Thomas White, told the Sydney Trades and Labour Council, “hoped that the Agreements Validating Act would be struck out of the statute book.” SMH, 22 Aug 1879, p. 6, col. 2.

ORDLA Qld, vol. XLIII, p. 273

There are very few situations in which genuine working class sentiment was gauged on the issue. See report of John Douglas’ election meeting at the large Union Foundry in Maryborough, 12 Nov 1878, Maryborough Chronicle, 14 Nov 1878. There is opposition to assisted immigration, and discontent at Douglas’ answer to a question on the issue. See also the advertisement on the issue in that issue of the Chronicle.
The scandals erupted as a result of a new wave of aggressive labour “recruitment” from islands around New Guinea, areas previously untapped for plantation labour. This new recruitment began in April 1883 and was driven by the increasing difficulty of finding labourers in the established areas of the New Hebrides and Solomon Islands, and the pressure from planters for more and more recruits as the sugar boom reached its peak in 1883-4.

The New Guinea Islands were a gold mine for the recruiters; they could pick up their fill of labourers in a fraction of the time it had been taking. Recruitment soared, with 5797 Islanders coming from the New Guinea Islands in just eighteen months. However, unlike the communities and young men of the established recruitment areas, the young men from New Guinea had no idea how long they were being taken for, and what they were expected to do, in part because the recruiters were unable to communicate with them. Violent clashes marked the new recruitment from the very beginning. Once in Queensland, many of the new recruits resisted their labour obligations, and significant numbers deserted in desperate attempts to get home.

Ominously, the new labourers began dying at a colossal rate, probably because of their minimal resistance to the new disease environment. On one Mackay plantation, Homebush, 85 new recruits died in the nine months to February 1884. By May, Griffith had banned any further recruitment from New Ireland and New Britain; the recruiters responded by focusing on new islands, but the high death rate continued. In Mackay in the year 1884, some 823 labourers died

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out of a total of 3697, a rate of 22%, and it was predominantly the new recruits who died.

Revelations about the methods used in recruiting led to a series of well-publicised trials. The most notorious case was that of the *Hopeful* and its recruitment voyage from May-July 1884 to the D’Entrecasteaux, the Louisiades and other islands around New Guinea. Its recruiting agent, Neil McNeil and another crew member were both convicted of murdering Islanders who resisted recruitment and sentenced to death, a sentence which was commuted to life imprisonment after a vociferous and massive campaign by the Conservatives. The captain of the *Hopeful* and its Government Agent, the man supposedly charged with protecting recruits and ensuring the integrity of recruitment, were both convicted of kidnapping and sentenced to life imprisonment. Three others were also jailed for their part. An amendment to the *Oaths Act* in October 1884 allowed Islanders (and other “blackfellows”) to give evidence in court, using the *British Kidnapping Act* as its model.

The scandal had reached such a proportion by December 1884 that Griffith set up a Royal Commission to investigate. Its investigation was historic in its comprehensiveness. The commission looked into eight voyages and interviewed 480 of the 625 labourers recruited. Its report was chilling in its indictment, describing the *Hopeful*’s voyage as “one long record of deceit, cruel treachery, deliberate kidnapping, and cold blooded murder.” It found that only nine of the 480 recruits had known what they were signing up to.

The report found that most of the Islanders wished to return home, and the government immediately announced its intention to repatriate them, and compensate the planters for their loss of labour, which ultimately cost over
£20,000, a colossal sum. The Acting Head of the Pacific Islands Branch of the Immigration Department, Charles Horrocks, was sacked, and legislation introduced in September 1885 to ban the issuing of recruitment licenses after 31 December 1890. The bill passed both houses of parliament with virtually no resistance.

The political impact of twelve months of scandal was enormous. The revelations undermined Britain’s proud but increasingly hollow boast about its role in suppressing slavery. The German government protested against the labour traffic and asked Britain to help “prevent any transgression of the limit which divides the lawful traffic in Polynesians from slave trading.”[^61] The labour recruiter, WT Wawn, who was stripped of his recruiting licence and denounced in the Royal Commission, wrote:

> The atrocities committed by the crew of the *Hopeful*…together with the verdict of “guilty” against the offenders, proved a sore blow to the labour trade. Very naturally, the unsophisticated public began to ask if it was possible that the stories told by missionaries and other opponents of the trade, about kidnapping and murders, might not be founded upon facts.^[62]

Even in the heart of the sugar industry, Mackay, a promotional pamphlet for the town published in 1888 felt obliged to note that the “series of atrocities” revealed in 1884-5


shocked the whole civilised world... Thus the whole system of coloured
labour was condemned; and throughout Australia and Britain it was
boldly declared, that North Queensland was fast becoming a slave
colony, and rivalling in cruelties and tyranny the Southern states of the
American Union.63

For the Brisbane Courier:

the labour trade is condemned by the almost unanimous consent of
Australia and is a scandal to the Empire... The labour trade must cease.
Even if its continuance in its present maimed condition were likely to
save the sugar industry—which we do not believe—it would still have to
be stopped.64

The paper attempted to blame Griffith for the scandals, claiming that recruiting
in new areas always led to abuses, and that Griffith, as minister controlling
immigration, had personally authorised all the worst voyages, despite
knowledge of how labour recruiting had been done. This line was dutifully
followed by the Melbourne Argus, which declared that “Australia is pretty well
tired of this South Sea labour traffic. Scandals seem to be inseparable from it.”
But the equally conservative Sydney Morning Herald considered the Queensland
government “free from all complicity in these transactions”.65 For both the
Argus and the Courier the scandal was an opportunity to demand once again
that the Queensland government replace Islander labour with indentured
Indians, a position supported by the liberal Queensland Governor, Sir Anthony

63 George J Perkins, Mackay. An essay upon the rise, progress, industries, resources, and prospects of
the town & district of Mackay, HB Black & Co, Mackay, 1888, pp. 33-34.
64 Brisbane Courier, 26 May 1885, p. 4, col. 4.
65 Argus, 13 May 1885, p. 6, cols. 4-5; 14 May, p. 5, cols. 1-2; Brisbane Courier, 7 May 1885, p. 7, col. 1.
Musgrave. For their part, the planters had silenced themselves as part of their tactics for pursuing the separation of North Queensland.

There is an arguable case that abolition of the labour trade was not what Griffith wanted, but that he was forced to legislate by the enormity of the crimes committed around New Guinea and the political backlash. As early as February 1884, Governor Musgrave had declared himself “shocked at what has come to light since I have been here... The Kanaka labour traffic is a slave trade”. He reported that “Griffith has told me that he had no idea it [the labour trade] was half so bad.” This was long before the worst of the scandals had even occurred, much less come to light, yet Musgrave believed the conduct of recruiters so bad that “I doubt that anything but the radical cure of stopping the trade & making it piracy will be of any avail.”66 Despite this undoubted opportunity to ban the labour trade, Griffith chose to rely on more stringent regulation and administration. Griffith had long insisted that he would ensure sufficient labour for the sugar planters. Musgrave declared his confidence that Griffith was “honest in his desire to do what can be done to prevent these iniquities”; yet his efforts failed as the atrocities continued during 1884. Certainly, the Courier did not believe that Griffith was about to legislate abolition; in fact it taunted him, arguing that his policy of closer regulation of the labour trade had been the price for vetoing the use of Indian labour, and challenging him “to take the step which should have been taken years ago—the total prohibition of the labour trade.”67


67 Brisbane Courier, 4 May 1885, p. 4, col. 5. The Courier declared it had always been opposed to the labour trade, a staggering dishonesty.
With abolition unavoidable, Griffith faced the difficult choice of seeing the sugar industry decline, backing down and accepting indentured Indian labour, or finding a way to restructure the industry on the basis of white labour. This was the most “experimental” and risky of the alternatives, but he pursued it with some vigour. In 1885 he introduced proposals to subsidise the erection of central sugar mills to be owned by co-operatives of local sugar planters, on condition that their cane was grown with white labour. Three such mills were erected, and were soon in financial difficulties; nevertheless, as a result of a mixture of political and economic pressures, this was the way in which the industry was ultimately restructured.68

Separation: The planters try to divide Queensland

As Queensland’s sugar planters faced obloquy over the treatment of Islanders and defeat at the hands of Griffith and the new Liberal government over “coloured labour”, they turned in a mixture of desperation and overconfidence to a campaign for the division of Queensland and the formation of a new colony of North Queensland. Northern separation was a major issue in Queensland politics for much of the period from 1885 to 1894,69 and became a proxy issue through which much of the struggle over labour was continued in Queensland.

68 Graves, Cane and labour, pp. 23-48, 57-9.
The public face of the separation movement emphasised the raw deal the developing north supposedly got from southern politicians who dominated the Brisbane parliament a thousand or fifteen hundred kilometres away, who took too much in revenue from the north, and spent too little of that money building its urgently needed infrastructure. Certainly Edward Shann, writing in the 1920s, believed they had a strong case.\(^\text{70}\)

There had already been some agitation in the north for separation, especially at Bowen, and the beginnings of a significant separation movement in Townsville in 1882 supported by both Liberals and Conservatives, but this had been paralysed by the bitter party struggle of 1883. The movement revived in September-October 1884, with a wave of public meetings across northern towns arousing interest in separation in early 1885. In April 1885, a convention of delegates from eleven North Queensland towns was held in Townsville to agree on a petition to the Imperial Government for separation from Queensland, and to decide on the politics of the movement. The convention was a considerable success; the mining centre of Charters Towers being the only significant town not represented. The separation petition was also successful, gathering over 10,000 signatures, from an area whose adult male European population was just 19,000. Even the Premier—who disputed the validity of many of the signatures—admitted that perhaps 6000 residents had signed it.\(^\text{71}\)


\(^{71}\) Griffith’s letter challenging the validity of the 10,006 signatures is to the Governor of Queensland, 19 January 1887, and published in Qld LA *V&P*, 1887, vol. 1, the relevant sections being pp. 420-21. Griffith claimed that only 3393 were found on electoral rolls for year 1886 as at July, out of total 12,687 of Northern Districts. He then claimed to have sent the lists of signatures and the districts they claimed to live in to police officers to check. The result was that 3860 could not be identified as having been at any time residents in the districts set opposite to their name,
The petition was sent to the Colonial Office in London in June 1886,\textsuperscript{72} and supporters of separation and delegates sent from North Queensland managed to secure a number of interviews with Colonial Office officials, including the Secretary of State for the Colonies, to press their case. Today the movement is but a footnote in history, but the Liberals of the time were sufficiently worried to devote considerable resources to fighting it.

For the sugar planters, the idea of a separate northern colony held out the prospect of “sensible” legislation guaranteeing them “coloured labour”, and cheaply. In a soon-to-be-famous letter, the sugar planters, John Ewen Davidson and Sir John Lawes, wrote to the Colonial Office in London in January 1885, supporting the separation movement on the grounds, \textit{inter alia}, that:

\begin{quote}
There is an absolute diversity of interests between the inhabitants of tropical and temperate Queensland on the subject of coloured labour.

There are millions of acres of rich land along the north-east sea-coast covered with tropical jungle of no use for pastoral purposes, and which can only be utilized for tropical production by the means of coloured labour.

This coloured labour, which is absolutely necessary for tropical agriculture, is denied to the inhabitants of the North by the representatives of the South or temperate portions of the Colony, and the development of one of the main sources of prosperity in the Colony is thereby completely stopped. The inhabitants of Northern Queensland are anxious to obtain coolies from India under proper regulations and supervision, and so put an end entirely to the Polynesian labour traffic,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{72} The text of the Separation petition can be found in Qld LA \textit{V&P}, 1886, vol. 1, pp. 440-41.
which is a fertile source of omnes troubles and complication. This is refused by the South, who last year repealed “The Indian Coolie Act”.73

Of course, the interests of the sugar planters were not the only motivation for separation. Townsville businesspeople had their own motives, one of which was the desire for their town to be the capital; no doubt this too was one of the motives for the long-standing separationist agitation in Bowen. In 1886, the Northern Miner, the dominant newspaper in the north’s greatest mining centre, Charters Towers, and the group of capitalists around the paper, switched from opposition to Separation, to support, in the wake of a dispute with the Premier over the latter’s attempts to contain wild speculation in northern mining stocks. The switch in Charters Towers briefly added to the credibility of the movement, but the exact relative weight of the interests behind the separationist movement is not at issue here. Whatever the motives of anyone else, the sugar planters had decided to dissolve their struggle for bonded, racialised labour into the movement for separation, and this gave the separation movement a certain significance in the development of the White Australia policy, and damned it in the minds of those opposed to “coloured labour”.

The entire logic of events, from early 1884 until August 1886, was towards a greater and greater polarisation around the issues of northern separation and “coloured labour”. The planters were first radicalised by the collapse in sugar prices during 1884, which produced a widespread crisis in the sugar industry

73 Letter from Davidson and Lawes to Colonial Office, 14 January 1885, in Qld LA V&P, 1885, vol. 1, pp. 377-8. Davidson and Lawes were, of course, wrong about the Labourers from British India Act having been repealed.
that got worse as the year progressed.\textsuperscript{74} The raft of labour legislation, restricting their ability to recruit “coloured labour” and increasing its cost, led them to fear that the very future of their now unprofitable industry was threatened. As soon as it became clear that Griffith was going to put an end to planter plans for indentured Indian labour, the parliamentary leader of the sugar planters, Hume Black, warned that the government’s course of action might lead to North Queensland separating from the south.\textsuperscript{75} When arguing against clauses in the new \textit{Pacific Island Labourers Act Amendment Bill} that would keep Islanders from working in sugar mills, he claimed to see “nothing but the southern portion of the colony represented” on the ministerial benches: “It was essentially a Brisbane Government.” At that stage he “deprecated any such idea as that of separation”, but thought that a Brisbane parliament could not legislate indefinitely for the north.\textsuperscript{76} Two weeks later, Black was more frustrated: “it became more and more apparent how impossible it was in Brisbane to legislate for the varied conditions of the colony.”\textsuperscript{77} The position of the Liberal government seems to have hardened even further against the planters when some small farmer representatives from north of Brisbane attempted to gain the right to hire time-expired Islanders, and Black supported them.\textsuperscript{78}

The polarisation deepened markedly when the leading financial house in the sugar industry sought British approval for indentured Indian labour without

\textsuperscript{74} Graves, Cane and labour, pp. 41-2. Drawing on the evidence of EB Forrest at the 1889 Royal Commission, Graves shows that top quality sugar fell from £28-34 per ton in 1883, to £18-20 per ton in 1885. The prices of lower quality sugars fell similarly, with the biggest price falls in 1884.

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{ORDLA} Qld, vol. XLIII, pp. 27-8; also Morehead, p. 29. The issue was also raised by FT Gregory in the Legislative Council, \textit{ORDLC} Qld, vol. XL, p. 42.

\textsuperscript{76} \textit{ORDLA} Qld, 1883-4, vol. XLI, p. 137.

\textsuperscript{77} \textit{ORDLA} Qld, 1883-4, vol. XLI, p. 253.

\textsuperscript{78} See \textit{ORDLA} Qld, 1883-4, vol. XLI, pp. 311-14.
regulations being enacted in Queensland. In April 1884, RJ Jeffray, Chairman of
the Melbourne-based brokerage firm, W Sloane and Co, began moves to seek
permission to import privately indentured Indian labourers into Queensland,
which Jeffray believed to be possible under Queensland legislation. He drew up
a letter/petition to the Colonial Office, dated 9 July 1884, which was signed by
around thirty sugar planters and capitalists with investments in Queensland
sugar.79 When Griffith received a letter from the Colonial Office asking his
attitude to the proposal, he was surprised and clearly angry. Any move by the
Indian government to authorise unregulated indenture would, he replied, “be
regarded by this Government as a most unfriendly act.”80 Jeffray had believed,
on the basis of informal approaches, that the Queensland government would
accept such a privately run system. A tense exchange of letters saw the wealthy
and powerful Jeffray tell Griffith that the Melbourne-Mackay Sugar Company
was closing down three of its five sugar mills, and backing the move towards
separation:

there is a diversity of interests in the enormous extent of country now
known under the name of Queensland, and that what may be good for

79 See Qld LA V&P, 1884, vol. 2, pp. 827-8, for the text of the letter to the Colonial Office; the
only public signatures to the letter were those of Jeffray and J Ewen Davidson, managing
director of the Melbourne-Mackay Sugar Co, a subsidiary of Sloane’s. See Mackay Mercury, 8
October 1884 for report of the letter, including number of signatories. See ORDLA Qld, vol.
XLIII, pp. 778-9, for discussion in Parliament of the letter after it had been published in the
Brisbane newspapers. Sloane & Co were deeply involved in the sugar industry, later merging
with another firm to become the Union Mortgage and Agency Co. See CP Taylor, “Business and
(and footnote). When Hume Black first stood for parliament for the seat of Mackay in the 1878
election, the conservative incumbent, FT Amhurst, wrote bitterly to Sir Arthur Palmer that
Black’s candidacy could let a third candidate — presumably a Liberal — get the seat, and that,
“Hume Black is nothing less than Sloane & Co’s nominee”. Letter to AH Palmer, 23 September
1878, no. 424, in McIlwraith papers, Oxley Library, OM64-19/45.
80 Letter from Griffith to the Queensland Governor, 30 September 1884, in Qld LA V&P, 1884,
vol. 2, p. 929.
the Southern districts is not necessarily good for the great and as yet partially developed territory of the North. That there cannot be a homogeneity of interests in a country stretching from temperate regions right through twelve degrees of tropical latitudes (along a coast line of over 1,000 miles) is apparent enough...81

Late September 1884 saw the public rejection of the Jeffray scheme by the government, and the end of any hopes the planters had that the government would seriously assist them with “suitable” labour. In August 1884, when Hume Black debated the Immigration Act Amendment Bill, he claimed that the government had promised the planters a complete labour scheme to replace “coloured labour”, and all they got was a few clauses to make white indenture slightly cheaper. The government had even refused to take responsibility for finding indentured labour in Britain and Europe, telling the planters to do it themselves. In a markedly more bitter speech than previously, Black declared:

The whole progress of the North was being checked, and checked to such an extent that there would be a feeling of irritation, unless better counsels prevailed, that there would be one unanimous cry for separation throughout the whole of the North... He would far rather see federation than separation; but when he saw such determined attempts made to ignore the difference of climate between the North and South, he said that the present Queen-street Ministry had not the slightest consideration for anything north of Rockhampton.82

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81 Letter from Jeffray to Griffith, 20 November 1884, in Qld LA V&P, 1884, vol. 2, p. 939. From the collection of papers published here, pp. 925-40, it is apparent that Jeffray began by writing on 10 April 1884, from Aden, to ask his office to informally approach the Queensland government as to its attitude to his proposed private indentures. Wrongly advised that the government would accept them, he approached the Colonial Office who then wrote to the Queensland Governor on 31 July 1884 seeking a response from Griffith; who dealt with the issue in Parliament on 25 September and attracted a letter of explanation from Jeffray dated 4 October.

82 ORDLA Qld, vol. XLIII, p. 276. See also editorial in Mackay Mercury, 14 January 1885.
It is from this point that the real beginnings of a Northern Separation movement can be dated. By October 1884, the movement had won the allegiance of John Murtagh Macrossan, the north’s most significant politician, and the first public meeting to promote Northern Separation in Mackay was held on 28 October. The newspaper most closely aligned with the sugar planters, the *Mackay Mercury*, listed the Griffith government’s restrictions on “coloured labour”, its Immigration bill, and its new land legislation as reasons that separation had become necessary. As northern ruling-class agitation for separation intensified, the Townsville based committee for Northern Separation met in mid-October 1884, and its chairperson focused on the treatment of the sugar industry — rather than the general mistreatment of the north — as a primary reason for taking up the issue anew.

Late 1884 and the early months of 1885 saw the establishment of Northern Separation leagues in many northern towns. Mackay MLA, Hume Black, undertook an extensive speaking tour of the north in March and April 1885, forming leagues and agitating for separation. His tour ended in Charters Towers a week after the Convention, where a separation league was formed.

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83 *Mackay Mercury*, 18 October 1884.
84 *Mackay Mercury*, 29 October 1884. The meeting was held in the afternoon, ensuring that it was dominated by those businesspeople who could afford to attend during a weekday.
85 *Mackay Mercury*, 15 October 1884. It is worth noting that two months earlier, 2 August, the paper was promoting a petition to the government to change its policies; and a month earlier, 17 September, the paper was arguing about the government’s policy, rather than promoting separation as a solution.
86 *Mackay Mercury*, 18 October 1884. This paper is partly damaged, and the name of the Chairperson, and the details of the time and date of the meeting, are lost. But it would undoubtedly have been within ten days of publication. No Townsville newspapers from the period survive.
despite the hostility of the town’s dominant newspaper, the *Northern Miner*, which denounced Black:

> It is a shameful thing that a member of the Legislature should be permitted go about the colony preaching disunion and treason when the Russians are at our doors. We advise the miners and working men to roll up to-morrow night and tell this emissary of slave drivers that we are opposed to Separation and Coolies.\(^{87}\)

When the Convention met at Townsville, from 9 to 11 April 1885, the majority were either sugar planters, or strongly sympathetic to them. However, some delegates pointed out that the ambitions of the planters were a serious problem for the movement, as were those of the capitalists of Townsville who looked forward to making their town the new colonial capital city. The petition adopted at Townsville, the first item on the Convention’s agenda, made no mention of either the sugar industry, or indentured labour. Thus, from April 1885 onwards, the movement for Northern Separation consistently and assiduously denied that it had any interest in gaining indentured “coloured labour” for the sugar planters.\(^{88}\)

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\(^{87}\) Quoted in *Mackay Mercury*, 18 April 1885. April 1885 saw the height of tension between Russia and Britain over Russian military advances into Afghanistan, to the point where reserves were mobilised in Britain, Australian colonial governments desperately shored up local defences, and Australian newspapers were saturated with concern over a possible Russian attack.

\(^{88}\) See, for instance, William Coote, “Proposed new colony of Northern Queensland”, *Victorian Review*, May 1885, pp 58-70. Coote was Secretary of the Executive Committee of the North Queensland Separation Council.
The embarrassing and stupid fictions this produced have misled some historians.\(^9\) They also distorted the public debate over northern separation. Hume Black claimed to have told his fellow planters,

> that if any of them expect by this movement to secure coloured labour, from my experience of politics I consider that they are basing their hope upon a very false foundation indeed. They will be no nearer getting coloured labour in the event of separation taking place than they are now.\(^9\)

This position was ridiculed by the widely respected liberal, Henry Jordan:

> Our friends in the North have now determined to take this for their motto, “No coolies—no black labour.” So, then, after all, the Premier, Sir Samuel Griffith, has not sacrificed the interests of the northern part of the colony by his black labour policy—by keeping out coolies, by regulating Polynesians, by stopping kidnapping, murder, and all the other

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\(^9\) Christine Doran writes that IN Moles saw “separationism and the movement to supply coloured labour for sugar cultivation” as “distinct”, in her Separatism, p. xvi. Unfortunately, Moles’ BA Hons (penultimate thesis), “A brief history of the separatist movements in North Queensland”, Queensland University, 1955, is missing. When I approached the History Department of Queensland University in October 2005, I was told that this thesis could no longer be found; nor was it available through the university library. Neither was B Hart’s “New state movements in Queensland since 1885”, 1950, available. Moles’ published article, “The Indian coolie labour issue in Queensland”, *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland*, vol. 5, no. 5, 1957, pp. 1345-72, does not make this argument in its brief discussion of separatism. Among those who see separation as a predominantly pro-planter movement are Edward Shann, An economic history, pp. 247-59; Kay Saunders, Workers in bondage [book], p. 55; Graves, Cane and labour, p. 69.

\(^9\) *ORDLA* Qld, vol. XLIX, p. 539. In fact, what Hume Black had actually said to his fellow planters, when reporting on his tour of the north from February-April 1885, was this:

> In the North there was an intense antagonism against coolie labor, and if the planters thought they could get that labor against the wishes of the people they were mistaken. But the planters were willing to leave their fate to the decision of the people of the North. He regretted if his remarks should discourage the planters, but he held out the hope of a rational discussion of their interests. They would have an intelligent representation of the requirements of individual industries... When asked if they intended the tropical sugar industry to perish the meeting shouted no. (*Mackay Mercury*, 25 April 1885, p. 2, col. 4.)
atrocities… They have discovered in the North at last that the Premier is the saviour of his country.91

Black told Parliament that,

what the majority hope is that, in the event of separation taking place, the agricultural industry in Northern Queensland will be considered sufficiently important to justify the new Government of the North in giving it a fair consideration, fair treatment—treatment which it has never received from the Government of the South.92

Black’s demand for fair treatment would become the focus of Liberal attacks. What, asked Treasurer, James Dickson, was this “fair play” the planters wanted that they were not getting? When he answered his own question—saying it was “black labour”—Hume Black did not respond.93 The conservative squatter and investment banker, Ernest Stevens, asked Black what he meant

when he asks that the planters should have fair consideration? It cannot be in the direction of getting white labour at a payable rate, because that was offered them and they would not take it. They could not see their way to employ any sort of white labour. If that is the case it must be in the direction of black labour. Well, I think that is sufficient ground for members representing the part of the country which is not interested in black labour, and does not believe in it, to oppose the movement for separation to the full extent.94

91 ORDLA Qld, vol. XLIX, p. 635.
92 ORDLA Qld, vol. XLIX, p. 539.
The separation movement’s attempt to bury the “coloured labour” issue did not wash with the *Brisbane Courier*, which had consistently supported the campaign of the planters to be allowed both Islander and indentured Indian labour.⁹⁵ It ridiculed the insistence of the separation movement that separation would not produce a black north:

> The Northern sun will not shine the less fiercely; the languors which the unchanging heat of the tropics induce in the European constitution will not be abated, because the separation leaders have managed to persuade their bearers that the laws of nature will be turned aside for their benefit. In the North, as in every other tropical country under the sun, manual labour will sooner or later devolve upon coloured men; and it will be sooner, we are convinced, if separation takes place.⁹⁶

The real motive of the planters in pushing for northern separation is clear. In January 1885, the Separation movement in Mackay launched a petition to the Imperial Government asking that the colony be divided. After a paragraph that showed the size and importance of the North, compared with Queensland at the time of separation from New South Wales in 1859, the petition addressed the grievances of the North. They were, it claimed, the relative lack of representation in the legislature, that government borrowings were used to benefit the South, that they were remote from the seat of government, and the different needs of tropical colonies, especially where sugar was a major industry:

> the Government of the said colony has not only failed to supply suitable labor for the requirements of tropical agriculturalists, but has prohibited

⁹⁵ *Brisbane Courier*, 28 August 1886, p. 4, cols. 5-6.
⁹⁶ *Brisbane Courier*, 21 August 1886, p. 4, col. 6.
them from taking steps to procure such labor for themselves; that large acreages have in consequence been thrown out of cultivation; that there is every reason to apprehend that in a short time those properties will, in consequence of the action of such government, have to be abandoned; that the sugar industry is the only one which has caused extensive settlement on the Northern Coast lands…

When the Separation Convention discussed the Mackay petition, Power from Cooktown insisted that it had nothing to do with the petition they had adopted, and Rutherford from Port Douglas warned delegates they should be very careful how they dealt with the petition of the Mackay people. For his own part he saw nothing in it objectionable, but seeing that several people in the North imagined the principal industry of Mackay was a prominent feature in their desire to obtain Separation, it was doubly important the petition should have careful consideration before being adopted by the Conference.

When the Mackay, Walkerston and Eton delegates returned to Mackay to report to the local committee of ruling class figures, they had determined that in their own interests, the planters and their supporters had to publicly bury the labour issue. The sugar planter and pastoralist, ES Rawson, reported on reaction to the Mackay petition for separation:

The Convention agreed to its being sent home by a majority of 9 to 5, but the delegates from the district, on consideration resolved in the circumstances that it was advisable to ask permission to withdraw the petition, which was accordingly done. Mackay was the only district

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97 Mackay Mercury, 17 January 1885.
98 Mackay Standard, 17 April 1885.
99 Walkerston and Eton were towns within a short distance of Mackay.
which wished to send a separate petition, and as an undue significance would be attached to the requirements of labor for tropical industries in connection with the Separation movement, he was sure the meeting would approve of their action in the matter (Hear, hear). 100

Hume Black also addressed the meeting, reporting on his extensive speaking tour of the north, warning that “there was an intense antagonism against coolie labor”, but “if the Coolie item was excised they were Separationists to a man”. 101 The planters would have to bury the issue in the short term and trust in their ability to win the argument in a new parliament. Given the support of the key figures in the Townsville separation movement for the sugar planters, this seemed a risk worth taking. 102

Thus from April 1885, the debate over indentured “coloured labour” was subsumed into the struggle over Northern Separation. This further polarised opinion on the issues, and was no doubt one reason why the Liberal Government moved in 1885 to end the recruitment of Pacific Island labour at the end of 1890 and then in 1886, moved successfully to repeal the Coolie Labour Act. When it did these things, there was little more than perfunctory debate in parliament, in sharp contrast to the long and bitter debates of 1884. For the

100 Mackay Mercury, 25 April 1885.
101 Mackay Mercury, 25 April 1885.
102 This support can be seen in the comments by Dr Ahearne, the Townsville-based chair of the Separation Convention, the subsequent role played by individuals like Townsville-based Robert Philp, and the attitude of the Townsville press, to the extent we are aware of it. The Mackay Mercury, 7 March 1885, a month before the Convention, quoted the Townsville Herald thus: “It is becoming plainer every day that unless planters are allowed to obtain labor of a suitable kind, within the next twelve months the sugar industry of Queensland will completely disappear. Whether that is preferable to the admission of Indian coolies under restriction, is open to argument as a political question; but there can be no escape from the economical fact of the certain extinction of the sugar industry without coolies.”
North, the issue was no longer reforming Queensland but leaving it; as a result, the southern Conservatives could no longer fight over these on the basis of the needs of the North.

**Separation blocked**

The movement for North Queensland separation was contained, by northern liberals and by a mostly hostile southern ruling class, over a decade and a half, from 1885 to federation. During the 1890s, the rise of the labour movement in North Queensland was to invest separation with the appalling prospect that a separated colony might be controlled, not by “sensible” businessmen, but by the Labor Party with their extreme opposition to any “coloured labour”. Many devout separationists quietly lost their stomach for the cause.\(^{103}\)

The movement suffered two crucial setbacks in 1886-87. The first was in the Queensland Parliament on 2 September 1886, when a motion for separation moved by Macrossan was not only defeated—that was expected—but defeated by 40 votes to 9, with every non-northern politician, Conservative as well as Liberal, voting against it. The movement, however, had never recognised the authority of the southern parliament to decide the issue—that was the prerogative of the Imperial Government. But when the movement finally won an audience with the Secretary of State for the Colonies in April 1887 in

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\(^{103}\) Shann, An economic history, p. 258.
London, he rebuffed them. The Queensland election of 1888 punctured the image of a north united for separation. In an election which the Conservatives won in a landslide, five of the sixteen northern seats went against the southern trend to anti-separation Liberals, up from just one of eight in 1883.

Many reasons have been given for London’s rejection of the northern separation movement. Griffith had warned the Colonial Office that if the British Parliament decided to divide Queensland, it would have problems dealing with the Queensland debt, which was around £21 million in 1887. Who would guarantee the security held by the bondholders? Clearly, the Queensland government could not be expected to guarantee the whole amount, if nearly half its territory and more than half its exports were removed from it. Neither would the bondholders be satisfied if they were expected to accept the security offered by the new colony—a circumstance which had not been considered when they lent their money. The separationists were never able to satisfy the

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104 Sir Henry Holland’s rejection of the separation petition is contained in both a letter to the Queensland Governor, 14 June 1887, and a transcript of his interviews with the North Queensland separationist delegation of Hume Black, Isidore Lissner (MLA Kennedy) and Tory MP Harold Finch-Hatton; see Qld LA V&P, 1887, vol. 1, pp. 441-52.

105 There were eight northern MPs in the general election of 1883. Subsequently, in 1885, two new northern members were added to redress the most stark imbalances. One of these came from the division of Townsville and the creation of a new electorate, Musgrave, out of the rural areas surrounding the town. The second came from making Townsville electorate a two-member constituency. See Griffith’s speech introducing the Additional Members Bill of 1885, ORDLA Qld, vol. XLVI, p. 88. Hence, in the vote on Northern Separation in 1886, the north had 10 MPs, one of whom, Rutledge, voted against it. The first member for Musgrave was the Townsville-based Robert Philp, who played a major role in the northern separation movement, and subsequently became Premier of Queensland. There was a subsequent and more comprehensive electoral reform in 1887, which then produced a much enlarged parliament elected in 1888. These changes reflected the rapid population growth of Queensland.

British government on this extremely sensitive point,\textsuperscript{107} although in 1890, when London-based supporters of separation approached the major colonial and London banks, they appeared indifferent to the problem and even supportive of the impact of separation on the security of their loans.\textsuperscript{108} The Colonial Office was also wary of using imperial powers to divide a colony with nearly thirty years of self-government, against the wishes of the overwhelming majority of its elected members of parliament.\textsuperscript{109}

In Queensland, the rejection of the separationist petition also involved broader issues. The leading pastoralist, John Donaldson, spoke against any further reduction in the size of the local market.\textsuperscript{110} The demography of northern Australia became a significant part of the only sophisticated element in the debate over separation. It had earlier been discussed in an important article by Carl Feilberg, in the \textit{Victorian Review}, in 1880.\textsuperscript{111} Feilberg argued that traditionally, when Europeans lived in tropical areas, they were able to organise and extract enormous wealth but not produce a strong community:

\begin{quote}
a race that is dependent on the physical exertions of an alien people for the supply of its every-day needs has but a feeble hold on the land… Colonisation, in the true sense of the word, is only possible where colonists, taking possession of a tract of wilderness, are able to carry out with their own hands all that their brains can plan.\textsuperscript{112}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{107} Doran, Separatism in Townsville, pp. 42-3.
\textsuperscript{108} Letter from Harold Finch-Hatton to Lord Knutsford, 17 December 1890, in Rawson Collection, Oxley, 2967/04.
\textsuperscript{109} Qld LA V&P, 1887, vol. 1, p. 442.
\textsuperscript{110} ORDLA Qld, vol. XLIX, p. 638.
\textsuperscript{112} Feilberg, The future of north-eastern Australia, pp. 707-8.
But North Queensland promised to be different, because miners were the dynamic element in the North Queensland economy. This meant that the growth of mining would lead to a preponderance of miners among white settlers; they would put down roots as agriculturalists and settlers; and would retain their traditional hostility to “coloured labour”. Thus, “in Northern Queensland, everything tends to prevent the occupation of the country after the usual tropical fashion, by white men directing the labour of coloured workmen”.113 Should the miners dominate, and produce a society of white selectors, graziers and labourers, North Queensland

would be a community of a quite different sort from the feeble societies which, in Mauritius or the West Indies, direct a swarm of coloured labourers, with whom they can find no bond of sympathy except in the common degradation of vice. It would be full of the rough vigorous life of a democracy, a society kept pure by the constant interchange of social relations, in which the continual upward and downward currents removed effete particles from the top of the structure to supply their places by stronger material from the bottom.114

Leading Townsville separationist, WV Brown, turned to Feilberg’s argument in the parliamentary debate on separation, in an attempt to prove the movement was not about black labour. Feilberg’s article proved, he argued:

that separation will make it more difficult for the planters to get coloured labour than it is now, because the miners will then have more influence. At the present time a large section in the south of the colony are not very much opposed to coloured labour, and they go with the planters to a certain extent, but the miners will always oppose coloured labour, and

114 Feilberg, The future of north-eastern Australia, p. 708
there is not the slightest chance of planters getting coloured labour in the colony of North Queensland.\textsuperscript{115}

The \textit{Brisbane Courier} rejected this argument. Since Feilberg had written, mining had not grown as fast as it might, while capitalists had rushed into the sugar industry. “The balance of power has shifted,” it wrote, “and the influence of the planters in the North would be much greater now than seemed likely then. Sugar cultivation, if the capitalists eager to go into it have their way, would go ahead at a rate that would leave no time for the slow development of an acclimatised European community of farmers.”\textsuperscript{116} The question for the paper was therefore to protect the democratic and liberal quality of Australian society and politics:

Political severance from the great bulk of the European population of Australia will intensify the social effect of the change [in population]. We do not refer to the possibility of slavery, or any nonsense of that sort, talked by people who ought to know better; but to the obvious effect of labourer and employer being separated by the broad bar of colour and race. A Northern aristocracy—a race aristocracy—will confront the Australian white democracy, and no strong effort of imagination is needed to picture the result.\textsuperscript{117}

Danger therefore lay in an Australia in which north and south developed along radically different political lines. The spectre of the American Civil War lay heavily over its argument:

\textsuperscript{115} ORDLA Qld, vol. XLIX, pp. 552-3.

\textsuperscript{116} \textit{Brisbane Courier}, 28 August 1886, p. 4, col. 6.

\textsuperscript{117} \textit{Brisbane Courier}, 21 August 1886, p. 4, col. 6.
if tropical Australia is politically severed from the South—for the movement started in Northern Queensland will not stop there—we may leave to our children such a legacy of evil as that from which America only rid herself by the most terrible fratricidal war which the modern world has seen.\textsuperscript{118}

The \textit{Courier}'s argument led to a sharp rebuke from the \textit{Townsville Bulletin}, which accused the Brisbane paper of peddling the old lie about slavery.\textsuperscript{119} The \textit{Courier} responded sharply, insisting that it did not refer to the issue of slavery. The question was the political impact of class relations:

Our contention is that in a purely tropical colony field work, at least, and probably all manual labour, will ultimately fall into the hands of coloured men, and if the white community inhabiting such a colony is politically severed from the rest of Australia, and thus cut off from constant intercourse with the great body of the Australian democracy, it will undergo a social change, and harden into a caste-race aristocracy. If on the other hand separation does not take place, the employment of coloured people in the Northern portion of the colony will not affect the bulk of the white population, who will remain, in any case, in the South, and the influence of the democratic majority will predominate. In other words, if separation does not take place, the Northern whites, though employing coloured labour, would remain in touch with the great body of their Australian countrymen; whereas, if they do separate, they will lose touch and drift apart.\textsuperscript{120}

It is important to emphasise that this was \textit{not} the Liberal position, but it shared many of its assumptions. A modern, progressive, liberal and democratic society required both racial homogeneity, and crucially, a social link between those

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{118} \textit{Brisbane Courier}, 21 August 1886, p. 4, col. 6.

\textsuperscript{119} See also \textit{Townsville Herald}, 28 Aug 1886, p. 9.

\textsuperscript{120} \textit{Brisbane Courier}, 3 September 1886, p. 4, cols. 5-6.
\end{footnotesize}
who worked and those who exploited. In Australia, with its vast tropical territory, this meant an almost-white Australia would be necessary, a nation in which the south politically dominated the north. This was the ruling class settling its internal differences, and contrary to the mythologists, the broader labour movement was largely uninvolved. The weekly meeting of the Brisbane Trades and Labour Council held a few days after Macrossan moved the separation motion in the Queensland Parliament did not even discuss separation, much less mobilise on the issue.121

In the southern colonies, the two major conservative papers had little to say on separation. The Melbourne Argus did not run a single editorial on the issue during (or shortly after) the great events which marked the movement: the April 1885 convention, the June 1886 presentation of the petition of 10,000 signatures to the Acting Governor, nor the August-September 1886 parliamentary debate on the issue. This is a silence worth investigating. The paper did publish reports from its Brisbane correspondent who dismissed the agitation:

I do not think there is any real bottom to the movement except in Townsville, which reckons on being the capital, and among the sugar planters. Meanwhile the latter go on with the farce of pretending that they are anxious to separate for quite other reasons than the desire to obtain what black labour they require, and the others “make believe” to credit them.122

121 Brisbane Courier, 25 August 1886, p. 5, col. 5.
122 Argus, 17 April 1885, p. 6, col. 2.
In January 1887, their Brisbane correspondent claimed that outside Townsville and the sugar towns, there was little more than acquiescence in separation; “very few people would be concerned if it never came”. The owners and managers of the Argus had a particularly close relationship with financial institutions and individuals with large investments in Queensland, and the paper strongly advocated the recruitment of indentured Indian labour, but it is probable that the paper’s Victorian supporters included both large-scale investors in Queensland sugar, and others whose interests were pastoral and urban, and who were therefore deeply divided on the issue of separation. Such a division on a sensitive Queensland issue may have led to caution by the paper’s editors.

Unlike the Argus, the Sydney Morning Herald was very sympathetic towards Queensland’s Liberal Premier. It described Griffith as having demolished the case for separation put by Davidson and Lawes on behalf of the planters in 1885, and backed Griffith’s social and political objections to large-scale “coloured labour”:

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123 Quoted in North Queensland Telegraph and Territorial Separationist, 1 February 1887.
124 Editorial, Argus, 18 April 1885, p. 9, col. 3.
125 In 1881, as Premier, Thomas McIlwraith had used RJ Jeffray, Chairman of the Melbourne broking firm, W Sloane & Co, to complain to the Argus about its treatment of McIlwraith in the famous “steel rails” scandal. Gordon Evans replied to Jeffray that McIlwraith’s complaint was with the Australasian, and that, “I have frequently spoken to its Editor & tried to impress upon him that he should be careful in dealing with Queensland questions. I have reminded him again that all our friends in Victoria, who hold interests in Queensland, are supporters of the McIlwraith Ministry, and that on that account he should be quite sure that he is in the right before indulging in unfavorable criticism. I have also spoken to the Argus people in the same strain”. Gordon Evans to Jeffray, 5 July 1881, in McIlwraith Papers, Oxley, OM64-19/9. The letter was sent to McIlwraith by Jeffray.
Mr. Griffith does not stand alone in his opinion as to the conditions under which coloured labour on a large scale may be employed without social or political embarrassment. A suggestion similar to that quoted above was made in these columns some years ago; but the applicability of the scheme to the actual circumstances of any part of Australia is a doubtful matter.126

Thus it seems there was, at best, only modest sympathy for the planters and their separation movement from those in the south most likely to support them; and intense hostility from liberals. The vast majority of the ruling class in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland had made up its mind. Most were against the use of “coloured labour”, but even those sympathetic to it, limited their sympathy to the needs of sugar capitalists, and wanted to make sure it was regulated and controlled by the priorities of modern, urban capital.

What was resolved by 1888?

By 1888, an observer could be forgiven for thinking that the “coloured labour” debate in Queensland had been resolved. The colony’s parliament had passed strongly restrictive laws against Chinese immigration in 1884, and as a result of the Inter-colonial conference on Chinese immigration in June 1888, its representative committed the government to pushing through the virtually prohibitive measures decided upon at the conference. Indentured labour from India had been decisively rejected at the 1883 election, and its leading proponent, Sir Thomas McIlwraith, was returned to office in 1888 declaring the

126 SMH 22 April 1885, p. 8, col. 6 and p. 9, col. 1.
issue dead. The Liberal government had legislated to end the recruitment of Pacific Island labourers from the end of 1890, and that too had been publicly (if not privately) accepted by the Conservative party which won the 1888 election. The attempt by the sugar planters to divide Queensland so that they could avoid all these restrictions had been rebuffed in both Brisbane and London. Both major political parties had embraced the ideal of a “White Queensland”.

Looking back from 1901, an observer might draw the opposite conclusion: that nothing had been really resolved by 1888. The Pacific Islands labour trade had been re-legalised in 1892 and, as a result, Queensland embroiled in another decade of “coloured labour” debates. There had been renewed agitation for northern separation, and a resolution to that effect had even passed the Brisbane Assembly in 1897, albeit on the casting vote of the Speaker.

Indeed, it had taken federation and the actions of the new Protectionist government, backed by both the conservative Freetrade party and Labor, to resolve the Queensland conflict on the basis of the long-established national ruling-class consensus. Non-white immigration was stopped, Pacific Islander recruitment banned from 1904, and the majority of Islanders deported in 1906. The national ruling class resolved, very firmly, that sugar would be grown by white labour, and the economic disadvantage involved would be compensated.

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127 Brisbane Courier, 14 May 1888.
128 Shann, An economic history, p. 258.
A large tariff would protect Australian sugar from imports, while a substantial bounty would reward growers who used white labour only.129

But while the divisions and campaigns of the 1890s were bitter, the argument had narrowed dramatically. The Royal Commission into the sugar industry in 1889 had argued that the industry could not survive without the reintroduction of Pacific Islands labour, yet the conservative governments of 1888-90 made no move in that direction, despite the presence of the planters’ leader, Hume Black, in those governments. Robert Philp, who had emerged as another leader of the sugar planters, saw modern machinery, rather than indentured labour, as the future. In 1888 he told parliament:

I am not one of those who believe that it is by the wholesale introduction of coloured labour that the sugar industry will be set on its feet… I believe it is by the importation of machinery and by all kinds of labour-saving appliances that that industry will be firmly established… why should this Government not offer inducements to investors to try and invent machinery that will do away with a great deal of the labour now required by the sugar planter?130

The turn back to Islander labour came after the great strikes of 1890 and 1891, and during Griffith’s second Premiership, 1890-93, in coalition with McIlwraith. Liberals and Conservatives buried their differences in the face of economic depression and labour movement mobilisation. Griffith’s revival of Pacific Islander recruitment in 1892 was presented as a temporary expedient while the


sugar industry continued its restructuring towards family farms supplying central mills, all employing white labour. Without this concession, argued Griffith, a major industry would collapse as mills were closed and their equipment moved to plantation colonies. In his (in)famous “Manifesto”, Griffith reaffirmed the political objections to “coloured labour” he had argued as Liberal leader in the 1870s and 1880s and presented the sugar industry as a very different one from that of 1885. The plantation system based on gang labour was in decline, the planters were keen to hand over growing the cane to small farmers, and sugar cane grown by white labour could be profitable.\textsuperscript{131}

Adrian Graves’ discussion of the massive restructuring of the sugar industry in the 1890s, explains the economic underpinnings to the planters’ ultimate “acceptance” of the broader ruling class insistence that white labour must dominate the sugar industry.\textsuperscript{132} After 1892, employment relations in the Queensland sugar industry were very different from the pre-1885 period. Griffith’s vision of white labour growing sugar would not be realised until after 1906, but through the 1890s, the majority of Islanders were either wage labourers, or on short-term indentures, and this gave them a measure of bargaining power, which they used.\textsuperscript{133} After Griffith was elevated to the Queensland Supreme Court in 1893, the coalition, Nationalist, government continued to assist the restructuring of the industry around small, white-owned farms, using modern central mills for crushing.\textsuperscript{134} It also allowed them to use

\textsuperscript{131} Griffith’s “Manifesto” was published in the daily newspapers on 12 February 1892, and read by him into Hansard, 29 March 1892, in ORDLA, vol. LXVII, pp. 8-9.

\textsuperscript{132} Graves, Cane and Labour, esp. pp. 57-73.


\textsuperscript{134} Megarrity, ‘White Queensland’, p. 8.
Islander labour. However this was a structure designed to guarantee that Islander labour would be a small minority in the north. Gone were the dreams of vast plantations and agricultural industries staffed by large numbers of indentured Indian labourers, ruled by a tiny number of rich whites.

The majority of the ruling class in Queensland had determined on an almost-White Queensland in a White Australia. For all the noise and bluster, the change wrought by federation was at the margins—unless you were an Islander.