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Discussion Paper



**Patterns and trends in the spatial  
diffusion of the Torres Strait Islander  
population**

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## **ABSTRACT**

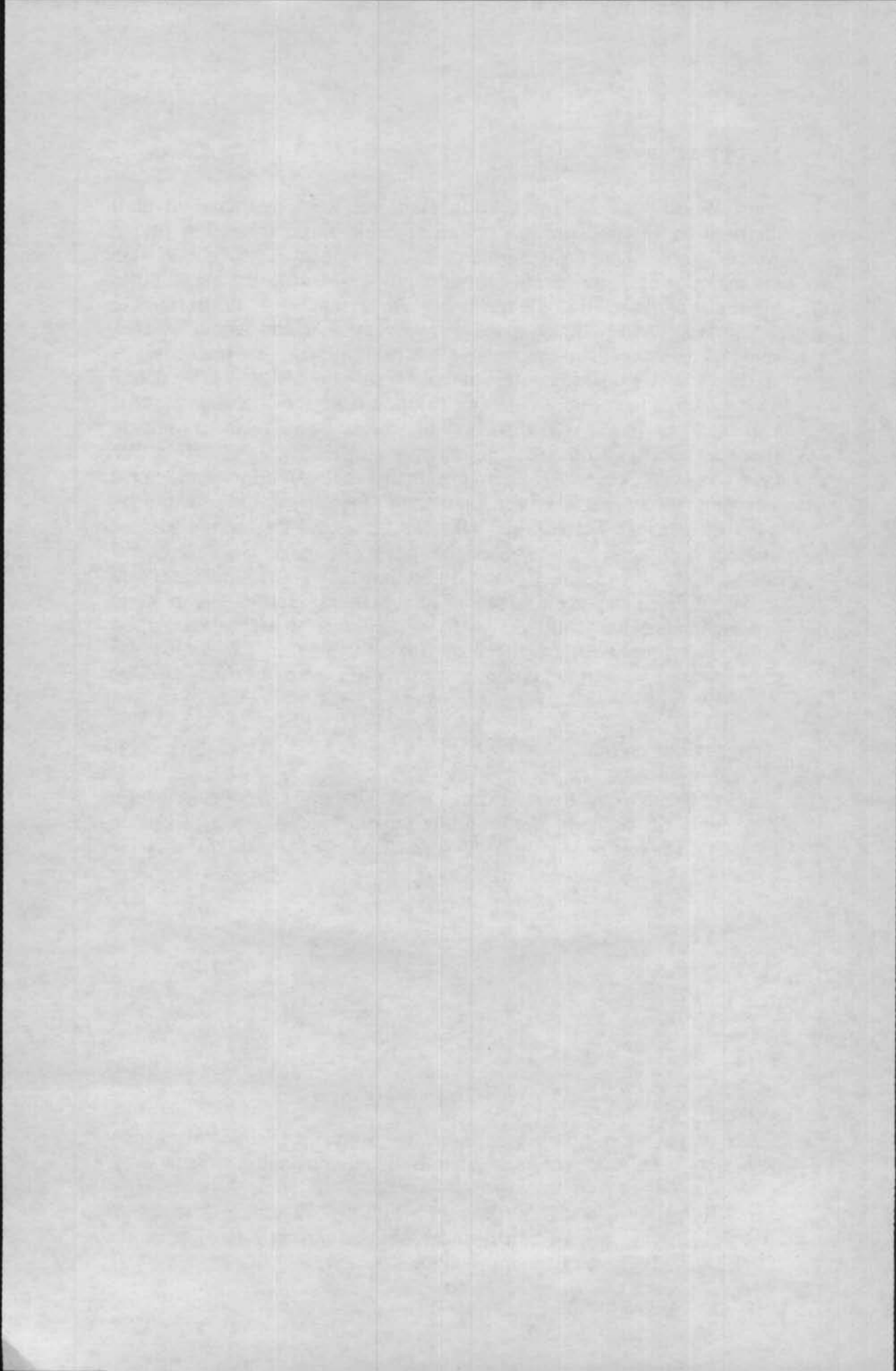
Until World War 2, Torres Strait Islanders were restricted in their distribution to the Torres Strait. Since that time, migration to the Australian mainland has contributed to a significant redistribution with the majority of Torres Strait Islanders now resident in the major cities of eastern Australia. Despite the importance of migration in determining Torres Strait Islander involvement in the labour market, study of their population movement has been limited, and such analysis as does exist is unsystematic, spatially restricted and generally dated. This paper is therefore an attempt to draw from the literature what is known about the spatial diffusion of Torres Strait Islanders and to supplement this with the most recently available internal migration data from the 1986 Census. While it appears that the search for employment was an important stimulant for migration in the past, this is less so now, not least because Torres Strait Islanders now find themselves located predominantly in places where labour markets exist. No evidence is found from the 1986 Census to support the idea of sustained redistribution away from areas of long-standing settlement in north Queensland. This contrasts with distribution patterns based on preliminary counts of the 1991 Census and the extent to which this discrepancy is due to migration or census error raises a critical issue in the analysis of Islander population change.

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The tendency in discussions of economic policy regarding indigenous Australians has been to consider Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders as a single group.<sup>1</sup> This stems partly from their shared historic experience of marginal attachment to the mainstream economy, as well as common administrative arrangements developed over time to deliver welfare and social programs. While Aborigines and Islanders are similarly disadvantaged in broad socioeconomic terms, when compared with other Australians, there are, nonetheless, sufficient differences between them in terms of culture, geographic distribution and in the manner of incorporation into wider institutional structures to warrant some degree of separate consideration for economic policy analysis.

Until the end of World War 2, Torres Strait Islanders were restricted by law and administrative arrangements to residing in the Torres Strait. This is despite notable exceptions, such as those Islanders who ventured further afield across northern Australia as crews on pearling luggers. Prior to 1945, there is little evidence of any permanent movement out of the Torres Strait, although during World War 2 a number of Islanders were evacuated to the mainland. Due to subsequent out-migration, however, and the natural increase of the Islander population on the mainland, this pattern of distribution is now almost completely reversed. In 1986, an estimated 79 per cent of all Torres Strait Islanders were resident on the mainland (Arthur 1992), while preliminary place of enumeration data from the 1991 Census suggest that this proportion may be higher still today. Furthermore, the pattern of settlement which has emerged from this redistribution is quite distinctive, being focused primarily on the State of Queensland, and the larger urban centres of North Queensland in particular, or otherwise biased towards metropolitan areas, especially in the eastern States. By virtue of their original location in a single place, the incorporation of Islanders into the wider economy has engendered, if not a culture of migration, then at least a general perception that Islanders are a highly mobile group. The extent to which this has been, and still is, the case forms the basis of enquiry here.

Despite the obvious importance of migration in determining Islander involvement in the labour market, study of their population movement has been limited. Existing analysis is unsystematic, spatially restricted and generally dated. Furthermore, knowledge of Islander migration has all too often been derived as a by-product of some other inquiry into social and economic issues (Beckett 1987; Caldwell et al. 1975; Fisk et al. 1974), with no researcher making it the primary focus of their investigation. What follows, therefore, is an attempt to draw unconnected threads together and to supplement these with the most recently available data from the 1986 Census.

In addressing these issues, the first section of this paper considers the institutional, social and economic background to migration away from the Torres Strait Islands. The main features of Islander population movement have been outlined in the ethnographic literature, and these are reconstructed here for the period from European settlement to the mid-1970s. The second section of the paper seeks to establish the current spatial structure of labour migration among the Islander population. It makes use of 1986 Census data to describe the volume and pattern of net and gross flows of working-age Islanders through the national settlement system. In this exercise, a distinction is drawn between movements occurring in remote and in closely settled parts of the country. The concluding section outlines the policy implications of this movement for the involvement of Islanders in the mainstream labour market.

Given the pattern of migration associated with the redistribution of Islanders in the post-war period, essentially away from a remote rural environment towards larger urban places, it is pertinent to consider whether this movement is still in evidence and, if so, whether the balance of net migration continues to redistribute the population upwards through the settlement hierarchy. In particular, is the pattern of spatial interaction between the Torres Strait and the main urban centres of North Queensland still dominant, or does the migration of Islanders now extend to other parts of the country and to settlements of varying size? Given that much of the initial movement to the mainland was stimulated by employment opportunities, what evidence is there that current movement is associated with increased labour force participation and/or employment?

### **Factors influencing Islander migration**

A distinctive pattern of population movement from the Torres Strait has evolved due to the combined influence of particular industries introduced to the Islands and the processes by which Islanders were incorporated into the Australian nation-state. Prior to contact with Europeans, the relatively independent island groups interacted with each other, with the inhabitants of Papua New Guinea and with the Aboriginal people of Cape York. The socioeconomic world of the Islanders was limited to the general region of the Strait. Although the Spanish navigator Torres had visited the region in 1606, it was the incursions of *bêche-de-mer* and pearl-shell fishers from Europe and other parts of the world in the second half of the nineteenth century that made a significant impact on Islander society. Largely through coercion, Islanders became heavily involved in these fisheries. This introduced a cash economy and disrupted Islander self-sufficiency, which had been based on the natural resources of the region. By the 1890s, the pearl-shell catches in the Strait began to drop. To meet

demand, the pearling fleets based at Thursday Island ventured further afield. They began to exploit the Great Barrier Reef as far south as Cairns, Townsville, Mackay and Rockhampton (Singe 1989: 150), and it was as crewmen on the pearl-shell luggers during this period that Islanders first travelled outside the Strait and made contact with the towns along the north Queensland coast (see Lowah 1988: 41). However, it was not until immediately after World War 2 that Islanders were to make any kind of permanent move to the mainland, establishing a pattern of migration that has persisted to the present.

Although all of the Torres Strait Islands became part of the colony of Queensland in 1879, early administration of the area was left in the hands of the London Missionary Society (LMS). For some 43 years from the late nineteenth century, the LMS introduced their own brand of Christianity to the Strait and organised Islanders into village communities under a strict form of administrative control. Even as the Queensland Government began, from the turn of the century, to assume greater overall responsibility for the management of the Islanders, a strict and intrusive form of administration remained a feature of Islander life. For example, the State Government determined the wages paid to Islanders in the pearl-shell fishery, it controlled the finances of individuals through a pass-book system, and it strictly limited the movement of Islanders both within and outside the Strait (Beckett 1987). Island councils were set up by the government to be involved in the day-to-day running of communities, and although these councils could be viewed as a tool for island self-management, they were identified by many Islander communities with the restrictive government administration.

Under this system of administration and up to World War 2, Islanders received wages far below those on the mainland and were prohibited from moving outside the Strait. Thus they were, in effect, isolated from the wider economic and social world of Australia. This relative social and economic isolation was broken by World War 2 when Islanders came into contact with servicemen mobilised from the south. Such contact gave Islanders a greater appreciation of the differences between their life in the Strait and that of other citizens on the mainland, and increased their dissatisfaction with their situation (Beckett 1987: 61-86).

By the 1950s, although wages had improved, they were still well below levels on the mainland (Beckett 1987: 68). Also, as the productive sector in the Strait at that stage was based solely on the exploitation of natural resources, predominantly pearl-shell, expansion was limited and the industry was incapable of absorbing the growing population and labour force. In the post-war years the pearl-shell industry went into rapid decline. Although it provided employment for almost the entire male labour force in 1951, by 1961, the proportion of those employed between



the ages of 15 and 40 had fallen to only one third (Beckett 1987: 70). An increased public sector in the Strait provided some additional employment opportunities, but could not absorb all of those wanting jobs. Furthermore, because those who did find such employment had few skills, they were given lower status jobs and with wages appreciably lower than those in similar positions on the mainland, thus forming a predominantly 'Islander segment' of the local public service. Islanders began to realise that their living conditions, including their wage levels, could only be improved by moving to the mainland (Beckett 1987).

The factors inducing migration out of the Torres Strait can thus be summarised as follows: a limited industrial base; a fall in local labour demand; an expanding labour force; and a growing recognition that personal freedom, the standard of living, wage levels and employment opportunities were lower in the Strait than on the mainland. All of these were identified in the findings of a survey in Cairns and Townsville in the early 1970s, which asked the residents of 50 Islander households their reasons for migrating. Forty per cent of those sampled said that they had moved to better their chances for employment, 14 per cent said they had moved to obtain better education and 8 per cent to increase their personal freedom, which they thought was limited by the operations of the state and the island councils in the Strait (Fisk et al. 1974: 39; Beckett 1987: 127). It appeared from the survey that at that stage migration had fulfilled at least some Islander expectations. For instance, employment was higher for both men and women than in the Strait, with 43 of the 50 households sampled having one or more wage earners, and wage levels were approximately three times those in the Strait. On the other hand, Islanders found the cost of living higher in Townsville than at home (Fisk et al. 1974: 48-50).

### **Islander pathways into the mainland economy**

As indicated earlier, Islanders were not to make any significant permanent move to the mainland until after World War 2. In 1947, the Queensland Government permitted a group of eighty Islanders to work in the Queensland cane fields to meet a demand for unskilled labour (Beckett 1987: 71). Although this signalled a change in the earlier policy of restricting Islander movement from the Strait, working conditions in the cane industry were poor and wages low. Islanders were, in effect, filling jobs that white Australians did not want, much as they had in the early days of the pearl-shell fishery. It can be argued that this marked the transfer of an 'Islander segment' of the labour market from the Strait to the mainland.

Some of the cane workers returned to the Strait at the end of the of cutting season, but others remained. These were joined by young men absconding from the trochus and pearl-shell luggers from Thursday Island which made port at Cairns and Townsville, and in this way the mainland population was slowly built up (Beckett 1987: 72). As cane cutting became mechanised, the industry shed unskilled labour and Islanders moved into the Queensland State railways as fettlers. Although this work was also unskilled and short-term, it provided Islanders with wages six times greater than those available in the Strait. Accordingly, it was the railways, rather than fishing, that provided Islanders a niche in the mainland labour market (Beckett 1987: 72; Fisk et al. 1974: 37). Some indication of the Islanderisation of this segment of the labour market in North Queensland is indicated by the fact that 50 per cent of working males surveyed in 1974 in Cairns and Townsville were employed on the railways (Fisk et al. 1974: 49). This early form of labour market segmentation is still apparent, as 1986 Census data show Islanders to be clearly overrepresented in the rail transport industry, compared to the workforce in general (Taylor 1992).

### **Where have Islanders moved to?**

The Islander population on the mainland is unevenly distributed between the states, but as one might expect, given the location of the Strait and the pattern of movement already described, the bulk (61.1 per cent) of those on the mainland enumerated in the 1986 Census were resident in Queensland (Table 1). However, preliminary place of enumeration data from the 1991 Census point to substantial change in this distribution, with the proportion located in Queensland declining considerably during the intercensal period, and more than half the Islander population now located elsewhere in the country, mainly in New South Wales and Victoria. In demographic terms, the only possible explanation for such a dramatic shift in distribution is substantial net migration out of Queensland. However, other factors are more likely to be responsible. These have been reviewed by Gaminiratne (1992), including the possibility of an underenumeration of Islanders in 1986, plus the likelihood that more of those who were present in 1986 identified themselves as Torres Strait Islanders in 1991, a phenomenon which occurred among the Aboriginal population in successive censuses up to 1986. Also likely are census enumeration and processing problems, such as the possibility that Pacific Islanders may be included as Torres Strait Islanders in the count (Arthur 1992). Research in 1975 indicated that the majority of Islanders who moved to the mainland were going no further than to the mainland of Queensland (Caldwell et al. 1975: 34). This was still generally the case in 1986, but whereas 66 per cent of migrants were to be found in Queensland centres in 1975 (*ibid.*), in 1986, this figure had

dropped to 52 per cent, indicating an increasing tendency to move to other states.

The tendency has been for Islanders to settle in coastal urban centres on the mainland, with relatively few migrating to small country towns and rural places. Of the 2,998 Islanders on the Queensland mainland in 1971, an estimated 71 per cent were located in the northern coastal towns of Cairns, Townsville and Mackay. A further 11 per cent were in the Brisbane area, with only 18 per cent identified in the remainder of the State, including small rural locations (Fisk et al. 1974: 3). The north coastal towns of Queensland have continued to be important centres of Islander population (Beckett 1987). For example in 1986, the larger coastal settlements accounted for 67 per cent of the Islander population found on the mainland of Queensland, while a further 27 per cent were located in the Brisbane metropolitan area. Historically, Islanders did spend time in smaller rural centres, but this appears to have been mostly during the initial phases of migration when single men would travel to isolated inland areas to work on railway construction (Fisk et al. 1974: 36). It was common for Islanders to work in gangs composed of men from the same community in the Strait, and no doubt this kin-based employment structure provided an effective conduit into mainland industry for new migrants. At a later stage, when men were joined by their wives, other relatives or girl friends, they would most often settle again on the coast where they received assistance from relatives and their

**Table 1. Distribution of Torres Strait Islanders by State and Territory, 1986 and 1991<sup>a</sup>.**

	1986		1991	
	Numbers	Per cent	Numbers	Per cent
Queensland	13,170	61.1	13,351	46.6
New South Wales	3,339	15.5	6,709	23.4
Victoria	1,871	8.7	3,846	13.4
South Australia	993	4.6	1,849	6.5
Tasmania <sup>b</sup>	887	4.1	1,240	4.3
Western Australia	679	3.2	922	3.2
Northern Territory	542	2.5	582	2.0
Australian Capital Territory	60	0.3	125	0.4
Total	21,541	100.0	28,624	100.0

a. 1991 Census of Population and Housing preliminary counts.

b. The relatively high percentage in Tasmania is thought to be due to Bass Strait Islanders incorrectly identifying in the Census (Arthur 1992).

respective church groups (Beckett 1987: 229; Duncan 1974: 100; Fisk 1975: 89). Thus, the Islander connection with more rural and remote areas reflects their association with a particular industry, the railways, and marks a stage in the process of Islander chain migration (Fisk et al. 1974: 33-50; Fisk 1975: 89).

Association with specific industries has also influenced the distribution of Islanders elsewhere in the country, contributing to their concentration in coastal locations. For example, of the 679 Islanders recorded by the 1986 Census in Western Australia, 243, or 36 per cent, were in the northern coastal towns of Port Hedland, Broome, and Wyndham. Broome is the centre of a pearl industry, and although local Aboriginal people were historically involved in this industry, Islanders with relevant skills were recruited from the Strait during the 1960s to work on the newly established pearl culture farms in the area (Beckett 1987: 72-3). Likewise, the 1986 Census counted 182 Islanders in the Pilbara coastal towns of Port Hedland and nearby Roebourne. The presence of Islanders in this area is explained by the fact that, following their work on the Queensland railways, Islander railway gangs were recruited to assist construction of rail lines from the inland iron-ore mines to the ship-loading facilities at Port Hedland in the 1960s (Beckett 1987: 202).

### **Contemporary movement from the Torres Strait**

By the early 1970s, few migrants maintained regular contact with the Torres Strait, whether by correspondence or by remitting money to relatives at home. It was concluded at that time that, although some migrants might visit the Strait occasionally, it was unlikely that many would decide to resettle there permanently (Duncan 1974: 101; Fisk et al. 1974: 27, 42). In 1974, it was estimated that if the rate of net out-migration continued, 83 per cent of Islanders would live outside the Strait by the year 2000 (Caldwell et al. 1975: 40). As already noted, preliminary Census figures from the 1991 Census suggest that this may already be the case. Thus, the general trend appears to be one of sustained and permanent out-migration from the Strait, with little prospect of a return net flow. While the actual volume and pattern of net flows is considered later, some anecdotal evidence is presented here to indicate that this scenario for the Torres Strait, derived from research conducted in the 1970s, may warrant some reconsideration.

Residents of the Strait believed that migrants would return if living conditions, such as employment and education, improved (Fisk et al. 1974: 31); this remained the opinion of some Islanders in 1989 (see Arthur 1990). Also, in 1975, it was thought that if unemployment benefits became widely available in the Strait, which they were not at that

time, then these, together with subsistence activities, could provide an attractive option to the incomes available on the mainland, possibly encouraging some migrants to return (Fisk 1975: 88). This argument has even more weight at the present time, as Islanders can now access the relatively lucrative rock lobster and trochus fisheries, as well as receive benefit from the full range of social security entitlements and other government programs such as the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme (see Arthur 1991).

Furthermore, it was also thought that Islanders who were unable to find employment on the mainland could be worse off there than if they had remained in the Strait, as rents and other living costs would be higher in mainland towns, and migrants would be without access to additional subsistence income (Fisk et al. 1974: 46). This was indeed the experience of some Islanders, who were unable to find employment on the mainland in the late 1980s, apparently because of a down-turn in the labour market and an associated decline in demand for unskilled labour. These Islanders had returned to the Strait, indicating that it was easier to meet their financial commitments there than on the mainland when they were unemployed (Arthur 1990).

The changing availability of jobs in the Strait may also influence migration. For instance, the number of jobs available to Islanders in the public sector in the Strait has increased in recent years (Fisk 1975; Beckett 1987; Arthur 1990). Although this job market cannot expand indefinitely, it is less affected in times of recession than the private sector (Altman and Daly 1992: 13). Furthermore, many new public sector jobs, such as those associated with island administration, are virtually reserved for Islanders. Again, some Islanders have stated that the recent increase in jobs in the Islander segment of the public sector has influenced their decision to return to the Strait from the mainland (Arthur 1990).

Caldwell et al. (1975) saw little evidence of any circular movement between the mainland and the Strait. However, Beckett described what appears to be an early form of circular movement when he stated that although most Islanders migrated permanently, many would travel back and forth several times to the mainland looking for well-paid jobs so as to save for a specific purchase, such as a house or boat (Beckett 1987: 146). The degree of this movement was such that Beckett (1987: 180) suggested that the Strait and the mainland had 'become a single field'. A visitor to the Strait today would have little difficulty accepting this view, as flights between Cairns and Thursday Island always include a significant number of Islanders. Few islands had airstrips, and even getting to Thursday Island from other islands was difficult and time-consuming (Fisk et al. 1974: 44). Duncan proposed that the extent of movement between the Strait and the mainland might well change if the transport system were

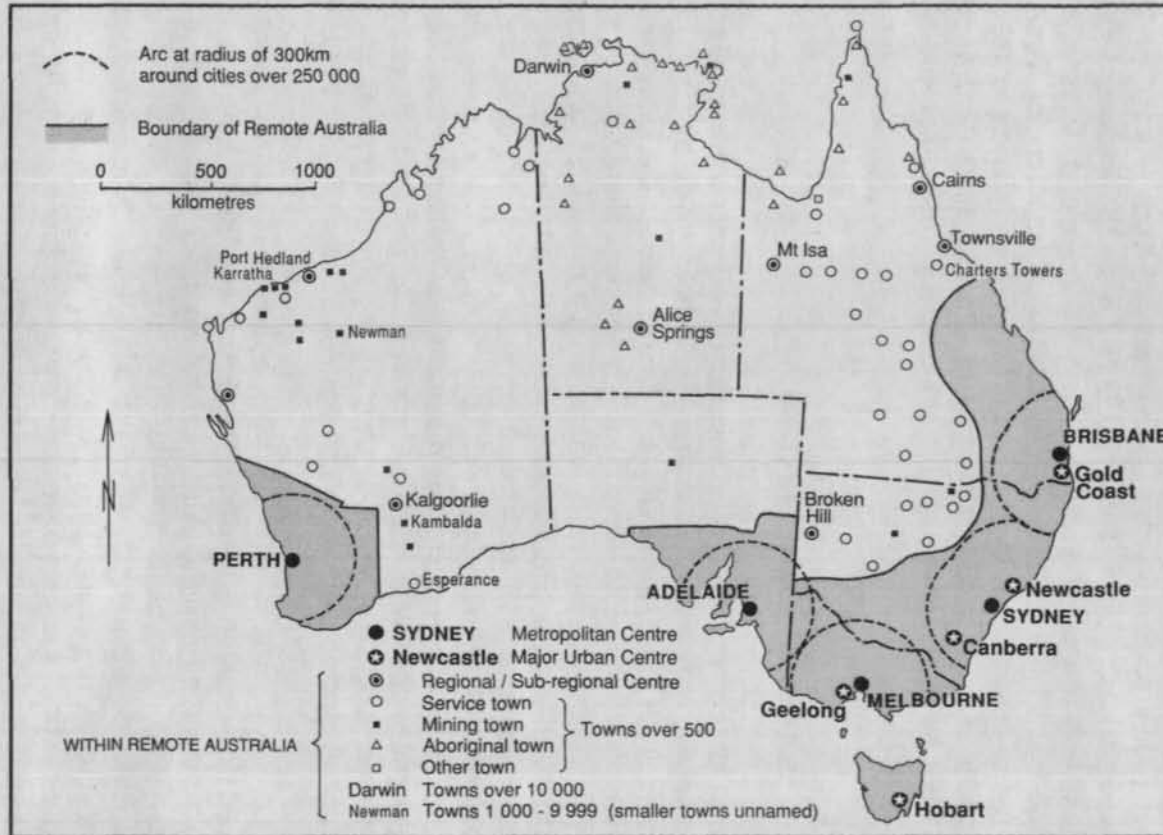
improved (1974: 102), and this appears to have occurred. There have been significant changes to the transport system; almost all islands are now linked to Thursday Island by air, a regular domestic schedule is provided between Thursday Island and Cairns, and a light plane service also links Cairns to one of the central islands. It has been noted with respect to Aboriginal people that chain migration produces frequently traversed routes or pathways, variously termed 'runs', 'beats' or 'lines' between significant places (Sansom 1982). Given the increased ease of movement between the Torres Strait and the mainland, there is every likelihood that such a relationship has developed between the Strait and the coastal towns of north Queensland. However, in relation to access to the labour market, it is also important to consider the extent to which people may be moving out of this domain and into other social and economic arenas.

### **Islander migration status, 1981-86**

The only attempts aimed at comprehensively describing migration patterns among indigenous Australians have been made by Gray (1989) and Taylor (1991) using disaggregated census data. In the latter case, the controlling factor used to identify migration was the extent to which individuals stayed within locales which, from a theoretical labour market perspective, offered a similar range of opportunities. The converse represented the extent of movement between different places and into situations offering greater or fewer opportunities. The relevant marker against which such movement was measured was settlement size, because of the generally positive correlation between this and the scale and range of available employment and training opportunities, as well as employment outcomes, for all indigenous Australians (Taylor 1991: 4).

A second factor, which was less well-defined but no less significant, concerned the variation in social and economic conditions between remote and sparsely settled parts of Australia and the more closely settled zone (Holmes 1988). This spatial division reflects a number of economic and cultural realities, including those of spatial mobility. These are discussed in detail elsewhere (Taylor 1991), but briefly include a general lack of mainstream labour markets over large parts of remote Australia and the spatial isolation of those that do exist. It also distinguishes between indigenous people living in urban areas who have long been removed from maintaining a traditional lifestyle, and those living in localities where traditional culture is still a major influence on everyday life. On the whole, the former are found in what may be referred to as 'settled Australia', while the latter predominate in 'remote Australia', to use Altman and Nieuwenhuysen's (1979) terminology. This division is also of relevance in the analysis of Islander migration and is employed here. For

Figure 1. Remote and settled Australia.



Source: Taylor (1991).

example, it is pertinent to consider the extent to which net population movement has occurred away from the areas of long-standing Islander settlement in remote parts of the country, essentially North Queensland, towards more settled areas.

The boundary employed to distinguish these two areas is shown in Figure 1. This was derived by selectively allocating Statistical Divisions and Statistical Local Areas to either side of a line which reflects a consensus of boundaries used to delineate the space-economy by Logan et al. (1975), Faulkner and French (1983) and Holmes (1988). The main exception to the general rule is that Townsville and Cairns are included in remote Australia. This is in recognition of the strong link that exists between the population of the Torres Strait and the two main population centres of North Queensland. As already noted, this has emerged from the dovetailing of employment opportunities and geographic proximity to form a single area of residence and mobility for many Islanders. Townsville and Cairns also serve as regional foci for much of the remote northern interior (Anderson 1986; Courtenay 1982; Taylor 1989).

The Islander working-age population is almost equally divided between remote and settled Australia, with the balance slightly in favour of the latter. However, the proportion of Islanders located in different settlement size categories varies considerably (Table 2). Almost half of the Islander population in settled Australia lives in metropolitan areas

**Table 2. Settlement size distribution of the Torres Strait Islander population aged 15 years and over in settled and remote Australia, 1986.**

	Settled		Remote	
	Population 15+	Per cent	Population 15+	Per cent
Metropolitan	3,124	43.9	n/a	n/a
Major urban	472	6.6	n/a	n/a
Regional centre	310	4.3	2,005	31.3
Sub-regional centre	1,628	22.8	193	3.0
Local centre	959	13.4	876	13.7
Rural	642	9.0	3,326	52.0
Total	7,135	100.0	6,400	100.0

Rural localities and some local and sub-regional centres, as defined here, are not necessarily discrete places. They comprise those Statistical Local Areas where more than 50 per cent of the Islander working-age population is located in a settlement or settlements of a given size category.



with a further concentration in sub-regional centres. A similar polarisation is apparent in remote Australia, with the bulk of the population found either in large regional centres or in rural areas with very few in places of intermediate size. In remote Australia, this reflects the early dominance of Townsville and Cairns as centres of Islander settlement, as well as the relatively large numbers still resident in the Torres Strait. It is interesting to note that this distribution contrasts significantly with that of the Aboriginal population in remote Australia, which is far more in evidence in medium- and small-sized country towns across the Australian outback (Taylor 1991: 8).

**Table 3. Islander retention and migration prevalence by settlement size category in settled and remote Australia, 1981-86.**

	Retention		Out-migration to other category	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
Settled Australia				
Metropolitan	85.3	88.1	14.7	11.9
Major urban	90.0	86.5	9.1	13.5
Regional centre	81.9	77.1	18.1	22.9
Sub-regional centre	80.3	83.0	19.7	17.0
Local centre	78.2	75.3	21.8	24.7
Rural	73.1	71.3	26.9	28.7
Total	82.1	83.1	17.9	16.9
Remote Australia				
Regional centre	81.1	86.0	18.9	14.0
Sub-regional centre	73.6	70.3	26.4	29.7
Local centre	74.8	77.0	25.2	23.0
Rural	87.6	87.5	12.4	12.5
Total	83.5	85.2	16.5	14.8

Retention prevalence is calculated using as base population the number of survivors of the 1981 population of the area. Those retained in each category include those in the same settlement size category in 1981 and 1986, and who did not move from their urban centre or Statistical Local Areas to another of the same size category. Prevalence for out-migration is also calculated using the 1981 population of each category size as the base.

The task here is to focus on movements of population between these categories, as these are considered to be significant from a labour market perspective. In assessing the volume of migration in this way for the period 1981-86, movement is defined here as a change of residence which

involved a transfer from one settlement-size category to another. According to this restrictive definition, a total of 2,246 Islanders, or 16.6 per cent of those enumerated in 1986 aged 15 plus, migrated between 1981 and 1986. Conversely, 83.4 per cent remained either in the same locality or in another locality of equivalent size. Of those moving, the majority of 882 (39.3 per cent) moved within settled Australia, 658 (29.3 per cent) moved within remote Australia, and 706 (31.4 per cent) moved between settled and remote areas. Among the last, a net balance in the direction of flow was observed with as many moving from remote areas to settled (356) as in the opposite direction (350). Thus, there is no evidence from the 1986 Census to suggest a significant net transfer of Islanders from their traditional settlement base in north Queensland towards the more urbanised parts of the country. Rather, such migration between labour markets as does exist appears confined to discrete regions either within remote Australia or within settled Australia.

The relative migration status of the Islander working-age population is shown in Table 3. This indicates the prevalence for survivors of each size category of the 1981 population to remain in a place of the same size category, or to transfer to a place in another size category elsewhere in Australia. The prevalence for movement to another place of a significantly different size appears to be a function of the size of the place of residence in 1981. Gender is not a factor influencing mobility, as those moving were more or less evenly divided between males and females (51.1 and 48.9 per cent, respectively), while the proportion of adult males who moved between 1981 and 1986 was only slightly higher than the proportion of females (17.3 per cent as opposed to 15.8 per cent). Within settled Australia, larger places display a greater tendency to retain population, a pattern again common to both males and females.

The point to note is that Islanders resident in metropolitan and major urban centres in 1981 displayed the least prevalence to move away from such places by 1986. In all smaller places in settled Australia, the prevalence of out-migration was up to twice as great as other size categories, and the tendency was for this to increase as the size of the place of residence decreased. Thus, in settled Australia, the prevalence for out-migration was maximised in rural places. By contrast, in remote Australia, this pattern was reversed as both males and females resident in rural places (notably in the Torres Strait) displayed the least tendency to have migrated, although migration out of remote regional centres (notably Townsville and Cairns) was also relatively low, particularly among females.

This pattern of retention and movement has implications for the involvement of Islanders in the labour market. The majority of adult Islanders are resident in places (remote rural areas, remote regional

centres and metropolitan areas) which display the highest levels of retention and relatively low prevalence for out-migration. Thus, they are either located in places where labour markets exist (metropolitan and regional centres), or they are located in the Torres Strait where, as already noted, conditions may be increasingly conducive to longer-term residence among many Islanders. Once again it is interesting to compare this distribution with that of Aboriginal people who are much more likely to reside in rural localities and country towns where labour markets are poorly developed or in decline (Taylor 1991: 8). This suggests that the overall need for migration as an adjustment to labour market conditions may be less urgent for Torres Strait Islanders than for Aboriginal people.

### The age pattern of movement

One important element of Islander migration, which is not revealed by analysis of the prevalence for movement, is the net direction of population flows through the settlement hierarchy. This indicates whether flows between places of particular size assume dominance and, if so, in what direction. According to migration theory, for example, the tendency is for smaller places to lose migrants to the next largest places with a resultant step-wise movement up the settlement hierarchy. Among the Australian workforce as a whole, this pattern of movement is found to be age-specific, with those in the younger working-age groups moving to larger places, particularly metropolitan areas, and a net reverse movement to smaller places occurring in older age groups (Hugo 1986; Jarvie 1989). The extent to which such movement results in an overall redistribution of the population is of secondary importance to the spatial

**Table 4. Age distribution of Islander migrants and direction of net flow in settled and remote Australia.**

	Number of movers in each age group (years)				Total
	15-24	25-34	35-54	55+	
<b>Settled Australia</b>					
Movers up	205	114	86	27	432
Movers down	160	168	97	24	449
Total per cent	41.4	32.0	20.8	5.8	100.0
<b>Remote Australia</b>					
Movers up	190	110	89	34	433
Movers down	95	63	60	18	236
Total per cent	42.6	25.8	22.3	7.8	100.0

shifts that occur for different age groups and between particular places, since these are the factors more likely to be of policy relevance from a labour market perspective.

In Table 4, migrants are classified according to whether they moved from a smaller place to a larger place and vice versa. The age distribution of each category of movers is also shown. In settled Australia, movements up and down the hierarchy more or less balance, whereas in remote Australia the net flow is clearly in the direction of larger places. At the same time, the net movement up the hierarchy in remote Australia is relatively small and is due largely to a net flow of 129 persons from rural places (Torres Strait) to regional centres (Townsville and Cairns). Not surprisingly, the majority of movers, whether up or down the hierarchy, show a clear tendency to be in the younger age groups (less than 35 years of age). In settled Australia, a clear age pattern of migration is apparent with a net movement up the hierarchy occurring among those in the youngest age group (15-24 years). Given that the cut-off age of 15 refers to age at the time of enumeration in 1986, members of this group could have migrated at any time between the ages of 10 and 24. At the time of migration, this could therefore include individuals who were attending a school or tertiary institution, first-time employees, job seekers or workers who had been in the labour market for up to ten years. In the young adult age group (25-34 years), the pattern of net migration is reversed, with a greater tendency for individuals to be moving down the hierarchy in similar fashion to that observed by Gray (1989: 137). In remote Australia, this reverse flow down the hierarchy is absent, as all age groups display a net movement towards larger places.

The pattern of movement between places in settled and remote Australia is shown in Table 5. It is clear that Islanders did not shift in large numbers away from remote parts of Australia towards more closely settled areas in the first half of the 1980s. Not only was the level of gross movement between remote and settled areas relatively low, such movement as did occur was of equivalent magnitude in each direction. This longer-distance migration was fairly simple in structure. The vast majority of Islanders moving out of remote Australia moved up the settlement hierarchy irrespective of age. This movement was primarily from rural areas, such as the Torres Strait, and from Townsville and Cairns to metropolitan centres, such as Brisbane and Sydney. Those moving in the opposite direction out of settled Australia represented an exact counter-flow to this as the bulk of net movement for all age groups was down the settlement hierarchy from metropolitan centres towards Townsville, Cairns and remote rural areas.

**Table 5. Age distribution of Islander migrants and direction of net flow between settled and remote Australia.**

	Number of movers in each age group (years)				Total
	15-24	25-34	35-54	55+	
<b>Remote to Settled Australia</b>					
Movers up	129	85	54	20	288
Movers down	16	15	8	5	44
Total per cent	43.7	30.1	18.7	7.5	100.0
<b>Settled to Remote Australia</b>					
Movers up	27	22	16	7	72
Movers down	82	70	63	7	222
Total per cent	37.0	31.3	26.9	4.8	100.0

### Migration and labour force status

One drawback in the use of census data for migration analysis concerns the ascriptive nature of social and economic characteristics for those defined by the census as movers. For example, the labour force characteristics of migrants are specific to the time of enumeration and do not necessarily reflect the status of migrants at the time they actually moved, which could have been at any time up to five years previously. As McKay (1984: 3) notes, a statement such as 'the migration of process workers' correctly refers to 'the migration of those people who at the time of the census were employed as process workers'. Thus, census data are only suggestive of an association between particular features of the population, such as labour force status, and the fact of having migrated or not. Nonetheless, this still provides a basis for enquiring whether those who have migrated are more or less likely to be employed or display higher/lower labour force participation than non-movers.

The labour force status of Islander males is shown in Table 6, according to whether they moved up or down the settlement hierarchy in settled and remote Australia. This is compared with the labour force status of those who did not move. In settled Australia, employment rates were highest among non-movers, although males moving from larger to smaller places had the highest participation rates and a slightly greater tendency to be in employment compared to those moving up the hierarchy. This general pattern is exaggerated in remote areas, where movers down the hierarchy are much more likely to be employed or in the labour force than non-movers or those moving up the hierarchy. Thus, Islander males moving

from places like Townsville, Cairns and Darwin to smaller places, such as remote country towns and the Torres Strait, are more likely to be employed than those moving in the opposite direction. In contrast with male migrants, the movement of females up the hierarchy in settled Australia is associated with substantially enhanced labour force status (Table 7). In remote areas, the pattern of female migration more closely parallels that of males, except that females who did not move in remote areas are the most likely to be employed and participating in the labour force.

**Table 6. Labour force status of Torres Strait Islander male migrants in settled and remote Australia.**

	Employment/ population ratio	Labour force participation rate
Settled Australia		
Movers up	56.4	75.4
Movers down	59.5	81.8
Non-movers	64.5	78.9
Remote Australia		
Movers up	38.6	65.3
Movers down	60.5	74.2
Non-movers	50.0	67.1

**Table 7. Labour force status of Torres Strait Islander female migrants in settled and remote Australia.**

	Employment/ population ratio	Labour force participation rate
Settled Australia		
Movers up	40.8	58.7
Movers down	25.1	37.7
Non-movers	38.3	47.0
Remote Australia		
Movers up	14.5	33.5
Movers down	18.7	33.0
Non-movers	26.1	36.1

**Table 8. Labour force status of Torres Strait Islander male migrants between settled and remote Australia.**

	Employment/ population ratio	Labour force participation rate
Remote to settled Australia		
Movers up	44.3	69.8
Movers down	43.7	75.0
Settled to remote Australia		
Movers up	40.6	59.3
Movers down	43.3	73.3

**Table 9. Labour force status of Torres Strait Islander female migrants between settled and remote Australia.**

	Employment/ population ratio	Labour force participation rate
Remote to settled Australia		
Movers up	30.6	46.0
Movers down	11.1	22.2
Settled to remote Australia		
Movers up	21.6	43.1
Movers down	18.4	31.6

The general associations described here between direction of movement and labour force status are no different for those migrants who move between settled and remote Australia. Males moving up the hierarchy and away from areas of long-standing Islander settlement, for example from Townsville and Cairns to Brisbane and Sydney, display lower employment and participation rates than those moving in the opposite direction (Table 8). Thus, the pattern of improved male labour force status with movement down the hierarchy appears to be widespread and may reflect the age selectiveness in movement, plus the fact that migrants relocating up the hierarchy may be doing so for immediate reasons other than employment, such as for education, training and housing.

Among females the reverse pattern once again emerges; those moving out of remote areas towards metropolitan centres display higher employment and participation rates than those migrating in the opposite direction

(Table 9). As with male migrants, the fact of changing residence between settled and remote Australia appears to be a less important correlation with labour force status than the actual direction of movement whether up or down the hierarchy.

## Conclusion

The distribution pattern of the Torres Strait Islander population has shifted in focus over the course of the last forty years away from small settlements in the Torres Strait towards large urban centres, primarily in eastern Australia. Research conducted in the 1970s demonstrated that much of the migration associated with this redistribution was driven by a search for employment and predicted that, as a consequence, the proportion of the total Islander population located in mainland centres would exceed 80 per cent by the year 2000. Preliminary data from the 1991 Census suggest that this may already be the case, although questions have been raised regarding the accuracy of census-based time series for Torres Strait Islanders, owing to the unusually high growth in the Islander population between 1986 and 1991 and the likelihood of significant respondent error in either census (Gaminiratne 1992). Whatever the true scale of redistribution, there are reasons to suspect that the pace of urbanisation among the Islander population may now be slowing.

The post-war trend towards increased urbanisation has potential implications for the involvement of Islanders in the mainstream labour market. The majority of adult Islanders are now resident in places which, according to data on Islander population movement between 1981 and 1986, display the highest levels of intercensal population retention and relatively low prevalence for out-migration. These include remote rural areas, remote regional centres and metropolitan areas. Significantly, these are either places where mainstream labour markets exist (metropolitan and regional centres), or they include the Torres Strait where conditions may now be more conducive to long-term residence than in the past.

It is interesting to compare this distribution with that of Aboriginal people who are much more likely to be in rural localities and country towns where labour markets are poorly developed or in decline (Taylor 1991: 8). This suggests that, by comparison, the overall need for further migration as a potential adjustment to labour market conditions may be less pressing for Torres Strait Islanders than for Aboriginal people. At the same time, it remains to be established whether relocation in larger urban centres has led to relatively enhanced labour force status for Islanders as a group.



The relationship between the migration status of Islanders and their labour force status is not straightforward, as the links vary according to age, gender and location. Broadly speaking, net migration up the settlement hierarchy, from rural areas and small country towns to regional and metropolitan centres, is predominant in the youngest working-age group. In remote Australia, the direction of this net flow up the settlement hierarchy is consistent across all age groups, while in settled Australia a reverse net flow down the hierarchy occurs in older age groups. This pattern of movement is partly reflected in variable labour force status, although significant differences emerge between males and females. For example, males who moved up the settlement hierarchy from small to large centres have lower employment and labour force participation rates than those who either did not change the size category of their place of residence or who moved down the hierarchy from large to smaller centres. In contrast, the labour force status of female migrants shows quite the reverse association; those who moved up the settlement hierarchy had the highest employment and participation rates while those moving down displayed a greater tendency not to be in the labour force. Further research is needed to identify the factors responsible for this gender difference, although it is clear that migration occurs for reasons other than just employment.

In terms of the spatial diffusion of the Torres Strait Islander population, opposing tendencies in the pattern of movement suggest that the level of net redistribution during the most recent intercensal period, between 1986 and 1991, is likely to have been minimal. Other tendencies also suggest that continued redistribution seems unlikely. If migration to larger population centres improved the employment status of Islanders in the past, then this is clearly less so now for males, although it is still the case for females. Overall, however, the employment stimulus for movement is reduced to the extent that the population is already located in places where labour markets exist. Certainly, there is little evidence in the 1986 Census of sustained migration away from areas of long-standing settlement in north Queensland during the first half of the 1980s. At the same time, preliminary data from the 1991 Census are clearly suggestive of a significant southward shift in the overall distribution of the Torres Strait Islander population, and the extent to which this is due to migration or census error remains a critical issue for any further analysis of Islander population change.

#### Note

1. Throughout this paper, the term 'Islanders' refers to Torres Strait Islanders.

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