
Spectre of Pauline will haunt Australia

Haydon Manning
The Australian
 16 January 2002

Many of the uncertainties that gave rise to the Hanson movement remain unresolved, suggests

Less healthy is the sense of legitimacy given to attacks on political correctness

IN bowing out of politics on Monday, Pauline Hanson said she "managed to get rid of political correctness".

"People can say what they think now without being ridiculed or called names," she boasted. That's probably true but for some time John Howard, and more recently Tony Abbott, have made determined efforts to attack the so-called chattering class elites for their promotion of political correctness. Their vehemence reflects one of the many ways the former One Nation leader managed to set aspects of the political agenda over the past six years.

Hanson has now left the political scene but Hansonism is far from dead as a political movement. After all, the origins of her electoral appeal over the past six years remain.

Studies of voting behaviour by Clive Bean using the Australian Election Study, and other scholarly contributions, indicate that One Nation's electoral appeal defies explanation as merely a vent for hostility towards Asian and Aboriginal Australians. Its sources of support are rooted in economic insecurity, cynicism towards politics and nostalgia for the certainties of the 1950s. In brief, government failure to address growing social inequality was the source of Hanson's appeal.

Howard's first instinct was to approve Hanson's attack on liberal humanism and its demonisation of the elites and special interest industries. It took time for the PM to recognise the economic dimension of her message. Thus, the enduring legacy Hanson leaves is the warning shot she, and her supporters, presented to economic rationalism.

I recall the boldness of a statement The Sydney Morning Herald's Margo Kingston made at a forum in Adelaide, about three years ago. She said words to the effect: "We may come to thank Hanson for giving voice to those who feel disenfranchised and the warnings this signaled." It is well known that Margo is no fellow One Nation traveller! Nor am I, notwithstanding having risked this conclusion for uttering much the same sentiment after interviewing most of the One Nation's Queensland MPs in early February 1999.

My interviews indicated that while opposition to Aboriginal rights and multiculturalism was part of the picture, it was concern for the withdrawal of government from the economy, particularly privatisation, strident opposition to multinational corporations and globalisation in general that most concerned One Nation MPs.

Hanson presented an odd ideological mix; right-wing populism on race, left-wing opposition to the political economy of globalisation and a predilection for the agrarian socialism of the old Country Party. In many respects she embraced the Australian settlement: White Australia; tariff protection; arbitration and a benevolent role for government. This reflects an older Australian penchant for a rough egalitarianism and the fair go, and with this a dislike of minority group interests.

Indeed, in some respects Hanson was a crude utilitarian. That is, she believed the role of government is to deliver the greatest happiness to the greatest number. She appealed to fertile ground. Since the mid-1980s, when the economic reform agenda was kick-started, egalitarian traditions have been shaken. Earlier, inclusive politics mattered less to our political elites, now less keen on the politics of nation building. Nation building may be an anachronism today but the social cohesion it promoted is vital to successful competition in global markets -- this was one lesson the Hanson phenomenon alerted us to.

It took Howard some time to appreciate the sense of loss being felt in parts of regional and outer urban Australia. Howard recognised that the fruits of economic change were not being distributed fairly or evenly. He also noted that the National Party was at risk of disintegration due to the trauma One Nation caused in its electoral heartland. We now learn, courtesy of the auditor-general, that the economic rationalist Howard Government is the biggest taxing commonwealth government in history and Treasurer Costello the biggest spender in 15 years. Thus, it was not solely Hanson's xenophobic message, often the centrepiece for critiques of Howard's 2001 electoral strategy, that guided the Coalition's electoral strategy.

Finally, the Hanson phenomenon prompted many Australians to depart the port of party loyalty. This is a healthy thing for our democratic life. At least two parties, Labor and the Nationals, are subsequently reviewing their structures. And at the state branch level the Liberal Party faces similar issues. This shake-up is an important development. Less healthy, however, is the sense of legitimacy now given to attacks on alleged proponents of political correctness.

Sure, Hanson's departure from politics may cool down the temperature in political circles. But Hansonism, the political movement, won't disappear as long as social and economic inequalities continue to grow within the regions, and between the regions and the cities.

Haydon Manning is a senior lecturer in the school of political and international studies, Flinders University, Adelaide