

Pauline the patriot for indigenous rights

By Noel Pearson

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Pauline Hanson's principled call for a presidential pardon of Julian Assange shone an important light on the selective standards of many Australians and particularly the freedom-loving right of Australian politics.

Hanson's statement wasn't fully accurate. Assange is not currently a political prisoner. If he hadn't become a suspect of unrelated alleged crimes he would still be safely travelling around the world. But Hanson is right about the main point: Assange deserves a pardon by the President of the United States for crimes against the US Espionage Act for which he has been indicted. Assange is an Australian who has stood up for the public's right to know, for freedom of information.

Some actions by Assange and WikiLeaks were wrong, such as exposing personal details of innocent or politically unimportant individuals. But the released information about wrongdoing by governments is so important that Assange's services to freedom and democracy warrant a pardon, regardless of his mistakes and unrelated allegations — which should be dealt with seriously but separately.

Australian mainstream political silence and inaction on Assange sits in stark contrast to Hanson's plea for his pardon. The government may think it necessary to prioritise Australia's alliance with the US but, on this issue, Hanson may well be right and the government wrong.

While those on the right who see themselves as principled defenders of freedom have usually declined to speak in defence of Assange, Hanson has identified the key issues at stake: the people's right to know and Australia's duties to its citizen. Hanson's stand on Assange is principled and patriotic.

What does this mean about Hanson as a politician?

And what could this mean, contrary to the intuitions of many who have feared — as I have — that Hanson's ascendancy may be harmful to Australia, about the possibility that her influence and ideas might also be good for Australia?

There are many problems with Hanson's policies. But it is not just the policies of particular parties that are important. It is also the dynamic between the parties and individual players and the pressure they put on each other that can propel productive change. It is through discourse, argument and negotiation between competitive policies and philosophies that the right outcomes can be located. Creative tension is how great ideas are born. For all her faults, Hanson is delivering a creative tension much needed in Australia, which could drive the discourse in productive directions.

How apt that an anti-establishment activist of the left may find his greatest champion on the far right, in the anti-establishment politics of Hanson. Yet it has often been the case that those shunned in our community find their most passionate allies on the edges of the political spectrum.

If the political centre guards the establishment, it is often those on the fringes who challenge the power structures and propel productive structural change. We are used to seeing support for the underdog on the left, but it also periodically rises on the right. Both play an important role in standing up for the powerless, forgotten people, whether asylum seekers, indigenous people or those left behind by globalisation — those Hanson might call the "Old Australia".

That indigenous Australians can find great champions on the far right can be surprising, but it is often the case. The practical right tend to understand the need for substantive change and are less likely to be sucked into symbolism and feel-good statements. Often, among the good-hearted right the strongest support for meaningful recognition and reform emerges.

Salt-of-the-earth National Party types — practical people with indigenous Australians in their electorates — are most open to honest discourse with their indigenous countrymen. Where the average inner-city liberal has met few indigenous Australians, let alone sought to understand their hopes and dreams, country people have lived and worked with them.

Like indigenous people, these Australians share an intimate love of and connection to their country. As patriots, they usually understand that the indigenous heritage of this land is their heritage too.

On Assange, Hanson has demonstrated an ability to be principled, and to stand up for what's right. She has demonstrated fierce loyalty to an Australian countryman in need. Her national loyalty surpasses any left-right politicking. She could bring the same principled patriotism to her engagement with indigenous people seeking a fair place in this country.

Hanson is understandably a defender of the Old Australia: our treasured British inheritance which influences deeply our contemporary national life. Given the opportunity, she may also come to see the integral, ongoing importance of Ancient Australia.

Our shared indigenous heritage is the inheritance of all Australians. Together, we must find a way to cherish the Ancient, the Old and the New. Hanson is to be commended for her patriotic stand on Assange. My hope is her patriotism will extend to indigenous Australians. There is common ground yet to be found.

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