
Hanson the architect of her sad fate

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Pauline Hanson leaves politics as she entered -- surrounded by a great controversy of her own making. In the years from 1996, when she entered the House of Representatives for a single term, she spoke for a million-plus Australians who were enduring a long season of discontent. Hanson said things that many Australians wanted said -- people who thought trade reform was destroying jobs, that there were too many immigrants, especially from Asia, and that Aborigines received rights denied to other Australians. She was wrong on all issues, but people listened when she spoke and for four extraordinary years she set the agenda in politics. Her agenda shaped Liberal strategy and alienated many core working-class constituents from the Labor Party, perhaps forever. And yet she was never a politician. She seemed to think the rules of the toughest game in the country somehow did not apply to her, and that speaking her mind would protect her from the party professionals who hated and feared her -- and from the operation of the law. But she was wrong on the second count, as she discovered on Wednesday when a Queensland court imprisoned her for three years for electoral fraud.

Hanson was brilliant in pitching her message to people looking for simple answers to complex problems, but never much good at the detail of policy or politics, and it is her failure to stick to the rules that has ended her extraordinary career. She believed the major political parties were making things more complicated than they needed to be. But one of the complicated things that Hanson, and her close associate David Ettridge, decided did not matter was the law on electoral funding. To register for electoral funding in Queensland, a political party needs a member of state parliament or 500 party members. When Hanson's One Nation applied it had neither, but submitted a list of 500 members of a supporters' group instead. This meant she had no right to the \$500,000 in public funds flowing from the party's success in the 1998 state election, and this is the reason she is in prison.

Hanson's friends say the difference between "supporters" and "members" is lawyers-language, and that she had every right to receive electoral funding because the party she led won the votes that generated the money fair and square. They argue there were always good reasons to keep party membership tight, to reduce the risk of infiltration by ideologues. But like so many of One Nation's solutions, such suggestions are strong on rhetoric and weak on substance. Perhaps Hanson did not understand what was being done in her name. But there is another, less charitable explanation why membership was restricted to Hanson and her immediate advisers. The smaller the membership, the fewer the people who could keep an eye on how the party's money was spent. One Nation may not have been created to enrich its leadership clique -- but its structure gave them an excellent opportunity to prosper.

Short of a successful appeal, claims of Hanson's innocence must fail on the facts. But her supporters -- and even politicians and journalists who are no supporters of her

views -- are suggesting her three-year custodial sentence is too severe. It is an issue that goes to the heart of Hanson's appeal. Three years looks very tough when compared with the serial of financial fraud Australia has endured, notably the disaster created by the greed and incompetence at HIH, committed by men who are not in prison tonight, as is Hanson. And Queensland Labor apparatchik Mike Kaiser, a confessed branch-stacker, has just been rehabilitated to become the ALP's deputy national secretary. To people who believe the rules of the game are applied selectively, and that Hanson has been singled out for harsh treatment, it looks crook. But whether the punishment fits the crime, Hanson was convicted by a jury of her peers -- ordinary Queenslanders, the very people she said she was in politics to help. The people of Queensland know what happens when politicians think they are above the rule of law -- they do not have to be all that old to have experienced the rank corruption that flourished in the Bjelke-Petersen years. Queensland's former chief magistrate, Di Fingleton, is now serving a year in prison over what was little more than an office dispute. And former Labor politician Bill Darcy is serving 10 years for sex offences committed in the 1960s.

Perhaps Hanson is in prison for breaking a law she did not understand -- if so, it demonstrates the fatal flaw that was always likely to destroy her career. Just as she never appeared to understand trade and tax policy or why immigration and indigenous affairs could not be easily altered to her prescription, she did not realise that improperly registering One Nation could destroy her.