Taking the International Spotlight:
Pauline Hanson and Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party

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In 2001 I was invited to give a public lecture at the Centre for the Study of the History of the Twentieth Century, a scholarly research institute within the University of Paris. The invitation was extended by Professor Stephane Dufoix, who writes on the internment of enemy aliens in World War II, one of my academic specialisations. However, I was not asked to speak about this area of expertise. Indeed, it turned out to be a ‘Don’t mention the war’ event. Rather, Professor Dufoix and his colleagues were fascinated by Pauline Hanson and were interested in an Australian perspective on the rise of extreme right-wing populism and the Down Under equivalent of the French les laissés-pour-compte (‘those left behind’) or les paumés (‘the losers’).

Many in the audience were concerned about, and had researched, the rise of the xenophobic politics of Jean-Marie Le Pen and his supporters. In 1995, Alain de Benoist, it seems, had somewhat prematurely declared the death of the Left/Right in French politics.¹

These intellectually and culturally sophisticated Parisians found Hanson an engrossing — indeed, bewitching — subject. Though not entirely sure about her accent, they recognised her — through other class markers, such as her public presentation in gaudy, highly sexualised clothes, so full of masculine aggression and coquettish femininity — as une paumée. This might translate into American English as ‘trailer trash’. Worryingly, they familiarly referred to her as ‘Pauline’, though Le Pen was never referred to as ‘Jean-Marie’ but always as ‘Le Pen’. Outside of Kylie Minogue and Nicole Kidman, she was an Australian woman they all recognised. I told the audience that I came from the same state as Hanson, and that she and I lived within 30 kilometres of each other. Explaining this apparent anomaly took some dexterity.

My other talk on the ‘Tampa Crisis’ of August 2001 was not as popular, even though it was closer in dates to the analysed events. The issue of border protection, the treatment of asylum seekers, the manner in which the federal government politicised the armed forces, the flouting of the international law of the sea, and the
recent re-election of the Howard government were well known. Their extensive
coverage on BBC world television, CNN and other international news services had
suddenly thrown Australian politics into worldwide discussion. For this particular
audience, the heated analysis was critical and acute.

The following year, when I was visiting Amsterdam, adverse coverage of
Australian policies towards refugees — especially those who were Muslim — was
muted. The assassination of populist Pim Fortuyn in August shook Dutch politics
to its core. The Pim Fortuyn List, a strange coalition of disgruntled candidates
united by their intense nationalism and hostility to Muslim refugees, emerged as the
second largest party in the Dutch elections in May 2002. The new political force
with 26 MPs, not unlike Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party (PHONP), with its
identification of a charismatic leader who disturbed the traditional political balance,
was so successful that it joined a coalition government under the leadership of
Christian Democrat Jan Peter Balkenende.

We may ask why an ill-educated, inarticulate candidate who, even more
surprisingly, was elected only once to Parliament, has had such a hold on both
national and international attention. Elected in the March 1996 elections, which
swept Labor under Paul Keating from power, Pauline Hanson stood unsuccessfully
for the federal House of Representatives seat of Blair in October 1998, for the
Senate in the 2001 and 2004 elections, and for a New South Wales Legislative
Council seat in March 2003. Phrases like ‘please explain’ have entered the popular
lexicon, along with Kath and Kim’s ‘look at Moi-ee, look at Moi-ee’. The latter is
a satirical comedy; the former the most well-known Australian woman since that
other internationally recognised Queenslander, Sister Kenny, achieved fame in the
1940s for her controversial treatment for poliomyelitis. The Australian Financial
Review of 28 September 2001 rated Hanson as one of the 10 most powerful
Australians, alongside John Howard, Rupert Murdoch, Kerry Packer and Reserve
Bank Chairman Ian MacFarlane. Indeed, she came in at number four.

Like other female cultural icons such as Marilyn Monroe, Madonna and Kylie
Minogue, Pauline Hanson is known by her first name, and there is instant recognition.
From the irreverent masks and puppets in the 1998 Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi
Gras, to her Doppelgänger satirist, ‘Pauline Pantsdown’, singing a version of ‘I’m
a Backdoor Man’ (in this case, desexualised and overtly political in its references
to her support from militant gun advocates with alleged Ku Klux Klan inclinations),
to her video to be shown after her predicted assassination, and her more recent
incarnation as ‘Dancing Queen’ on the popular television program Dancing with
the Stars, she continues to hold an unimaginably secure place in national and
international popular culture. Her red hair, intense green eyes, bright red lipstick,
provocative and brightly coloured clothes — the antithesis of the sensible suits,
white skirts and matronly court shoes favoured by most women parliamentarians —
mark her as exotic, defiant and unimpressed by bourgeois notions of women’s
professional demeanours and public presentation. The t-shirt with ‘Red necks’
substituting for the supporter’s slogan of ‘Redheads’, with the added caveat of
‘Made in the 50s’ and ‘Av. Content: ignorance’, did little to challenge her
‘iconographic fashion’ sense. Her success as a celebrity belies her political
antagonism to globalisation. Those very processes of media concentration and instant relay of news globally secured her position as a ‘first-name-only celebrity’. Much of the mainstream press coverage of Hanson’s political career is remarkably negative and vituperative. Consider the titles of some of the international articles and coverage: ‘Hanson Rumble’, ‘Smash and Grab: The One Nation Dossier’, ‘Dead Woman Walking’, ‘The Perils of Pauline’s Politics’, ‘House of Horrors’, ‘Back to the Bad Old Days?’, ‘White Noise’ and ‘Hanson Savaged, Cheated by Relentless Media Ridicule’. Even conservative journals like Quadrant contained highly derogatory satires of Hanson. Christopher Akehurst’s ‘Pauline’s Diary’ of September 1998 has its target going to The Jolly Cane Toad Cafe and asking her confidant, David Ettridge, whether she should launch the Golden Retrievers, ‘a gold-clad party united behind its leader in retrieving our nation’s fortunes!’ With some undisguised misogyny, Hanson’s persona muses: ‘Later I heard Mr Ettridge guffawing and whispering something to David [Oldfield] that sounded something like “Golden Retrievers is just the name for a party lead by a D-O-G”. What can he have meant? This party’s led by me. I must ask David.’

Tom Switzer, in an article written in 2003 after Hanson was sentenced to three years’ gaol for electoral fraud, noted that the respected newspapers, the Age and the Sydney Morning Herald, linked Hanson’s name with Hitler or Nazism in over 190 articles between 1996 and 1998. Yet clearly she had support in specialised print areas. Newspapers such as New Australia: A Magazine Promoting a New National Vision and Old Fashioned Values, which lent support to Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party, also contained favourable articles on apartheid and fundamentalist home-schooling, alongside advertisements for the Australian Men’s Party, Family First Party, Right Now! (‘Britain’s most outspoken right-wing magazine’), creation research, Welcome Home Australia! (‘A magazine for married Christian women who want to obey God in all areas of their lives’) and Anthropophagitis in the Antipodes or Cannibalism in Australia. That Hanson is an agnostic, twice divorced, a single mother with acknowledged sexual liaisons outside of marriage, tolerant towards homosexuality and women’s right to choose abortions — values that run totally counter to those of many of her supporters — is in itself both difficult to understand and to explain.

Pauline Hanson’s political career in some ways defies conventional interpretation. Despite a plethora of critical studies such as Robert Manne’s edited collection of essays, Two Nations (1998), which contains articles by commentators with diverse political beliefs such as Tony Abbott, Michael Wooldridge, P.P. McGuinness, Graham Richardson, Malcolm Fraser, Ron Brunton and Judith Brett, the interpretative schemas do not capture the complexity and illusiveness of her career. Indeed, her journey from a maverick Liberal candidate in the strong Labor seat of Oxley in South Eastern Brisbane in 1996, to successful independent MP, followed by the establishment of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party in 23 February 1997 and its electoral success in the Queensland state election in June 1998, when it won 11 seats with the support of one in four voters, right down to her humiliation when sentenced to gaol in August 2003, has no precedent in recent Australian politics.
Some academic commentators, such as Judy Lattas, Ghassan Hage, Jennifer Rutherford, Judith Brett, Andrew Fraser, Rae Wear and Ian Ward, rely upon analysing PHONP as a right-wing populist movement. Anne Ellison with Iva Deutchman, endorsing Gerard Henderson’s attribution ‘The Perils of Pauline and the Lunar Right’, compare Hanson to other Far Right activists such as Pat Robertson, Pat Buchanan, Jean-Marie Le Pen, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, Graeme Campbell and David Duke. Some analysts claim that PHONP was a cult, rather than a political movement with an ordered hierarchical process of decision-making, accountability and members’ involvement. Hanson’s role as a charismatic leader idolised by supporters (largely men swept away by globalisation’s aggressive transnational economic policies) is unprecedented in postwar Australian politics. The leader and the party were totally identified, with Hanson’s name incorporated into that of the organisation when PHONP won 11 of the 89 seats in the Queensland Legislative Assembly in June 1998. Malcolm Mackerras astutely reported: ‘There is a single issue and that’s Pauline Hanson.’ This new party attracted 439,121 votes (22.7 per cent of the total), more than the established Liberal and National Parties. Ken Crooke, the Queensland National Party director, told Time International of 1 May 2000 that he ‘was amazed by the fervour of her supporters ... it was like a cult’. Dorothy Pratt, the member for Barambah and one of those 11 new MPs, stated: ‘She was like Joan of Arc’.

The rise was soon followed by a dramatic decline, replete with public acrimony, bitterness and feuding as the new party fell apart. As Malcolm Mackerras observed: ‘One Nation rose dramatically and fell dramatically. I’ve never seen anything like it.’ In the October 1998 federal election, PHONP won only one Senate seat in Queensland. Heather Hill was subsequently disqualified from taking her place as a senator for failing to relinquish her British citizenship; she had previously stood for the seat of Ipswich against Treasurer David Hamill in the June 1998 election. In an article in Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Update Magazine, simply signed ‘Heather’ in an attempt to emulate the leader’s first-name celebrity, she reported that, despite this setback to her political career, she would work as ‘Len’s Senior Advisor’. They would ‘create what Len [Harris] referred to as “Double Trouble”’. The Queensland election of June 1998 threw a hand grenade into mainstream politics, with the ALP losing six seats and the National–Liberal Parties five seats to totally inexperienced PHONP candidates. Dorothy Pratt won the seat of Barambah from sitting National Party minister Tom Perrett, who had succeeded Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen in this National Party stronghold. In a speech on the Appropriation Bill on 17 September 1998, she stressed her identification with the ‘ordinary, honest, hard working people’ of her electorate and claimed that she was ‘not a polished politician’. Endorsing nationalist rhetoric, she proposed that parliamentarians throw aside party differences ‘to work collectively for the betterment of Queensland’. Her philosophy of a ‘penny earned is a penny saved’; her endorsement of small business; and her repeated references to her husband, Tom, and to discipline, self-reliance and responsibility showed a sincere, if politically naive, parliamentarian in action. Her stay in PHONP was short, for she became an Independent on 6 February 1999. She went on to win the seat of Nanango in 2001 and 2004 as an Independent. Her
most noticeable and memorable action occurred on 30 May 2000, when she and former One Nation Party MP Shaun Nelson threw milk over the steps of Parliament in protest against dairy deregulation. They were barred from the House for 28 days and refused readmission until they apologised. Premier Peter Beattie likened this event ‘to painting graffiti on Parliament House’.

When Nelson likened himself to Obi Wan Kenobi and Premier Beattie to Darth Vader, the sheer infantile understanding and inexperience of this former PHONP parliamentary representative was exposed.

This penchant for inappropriate parliamentary behaviour extended to other One Nation MPs. Elisa Roberts, a former soldier in the Australian Defence Forces, was described in Woman’s Day as a ‘33 year old blonde MP’ who had been ‘accused of disrupting parliament with bedazzling array of figure-hugging summer suits’. Her response was quick: ‘This was no more that a storm in a B-cup.’ She accused Labor women of thinking that ‘I come here and try to be this glamorous young thing’. The caption of the coloured photograph was ‘Vote 1 for sex appeal’.

Clearly Hanson set a tone for some women MPs who admired her provocative style of dress.

Roberts’ actions and sense of propriety were again questionable when she told Wendy Edmond, the Minister of Health, to ‘shut up and just listen’, reminding the minister that staff at the Gympie Hospital thought her ‘a fool’. Undoubtedly Roberts, who termed herself ‘an ex-army chick’, may have observed abusive language from all sides of the House. Portraying herself as ‘straight-talking’ when rebuked by speaker Ray Hollis in March 2003 for telling Police Minister Tony O’Grady that a remark he made was ‘bullshit ... that’s crap’, she maintains an abusive stance in her professional career. She insisted that Hansard record her words as spoken. She had previously weathered a public interrogation of her use of the terms ‘my pet coon’ and ‘my own little Abo [sic]’ to an electoral officer. It was alleged that she asked if she could measure his penis to see ‘if it was average length’. Her other alleged epithets are so crude and distasteful that they do not bear public scrutiny. Like Dorothy Pratt before her, her first speech to Parliament presented a collage of local issues alongside her commitment to ‘Queen and country’, to her British heritage, her opposition to Reconciliation, and to a ‘commonsense’ non-party commitment to united action. ‘Independents don’t owe anybody anything — it’s all about the people,’ she stated.

Rae Wear comments that One Nation aligns itself to other extreme right-wing political traditions that ‘many rural and regional Queenslanders have found attractive for decades. ONP’s policies and rhetoric were neither fresh nor original’. Roberts’ aggressive style, her earthy mode of address, her hostility to authority as indicated by her defiance of the Speaker’s authority, her military background, and her confused array of grievances presented as the authentic voice of ‘the people’ exemplify a dangerous departure for democracy.

Like Roberts, Rosa Lee Long, MLA for Tablelands, entered the Queensland Parliament as representative of ONP in the 2001 election after the original PHONP imploded when three MPs quit the party on 5 February 1999, followed in December by parliamentary leader Bill Feldman and four others. They formed the City-
Country alliance (CCA). The PHONP was beset by a series of disasters right from the start: Hanson failed to win the federal seat of Blair in the October election; One Nation MLA Charles Rappolt resigned the following day from the Queensland Parliament; on 1 December 1998, legal action challenged senator-elect Hill’s eligibility; on 19 August 1999, ONP was officially deregistered as a political party in Queensland due to irregularities in its membership categories and the line of decision-making. The party was reregistered as One Nation on 23 January 2001, winning three seats in the Queensland elections on 17 February 2001.

What is surprising is that any candidate stood for office after this series of public revelations of scandals and impropriety. Rosa Lee Long has not cast herself in the hard aggressive mould of Hanson or Roberts. Her first public speech in Parliament was far more conciliatory and thoughtful than those of earlier One Nation MPs. She attempted to dispel the notion that the party was racist by reference to her deceased husband’s Chinese-Australian heritage. But, like others, she saw herself as standing for ‘the little Aussie battler’ who was pummelled by the forces of globalisation where ‘the government is subservient to it’.28 Her analysis of the world economy, globalisation and the role of regional and national governments was naive and simplistic. Her demeanour as a conservatively dressed widow and mother of three daughters, her acknowledgment of the support of her electorate, and her concerns about health and waiting lists in public hospitals present a far softer image than those of Hanson and Roberts, however.

Lee Long stood for re-election in the February 2004 election as a ONP candidate. Considering that its leader, Pauline Hanson, had been gaoloed for electoral fraud, and that it imploded acrimonously and publicly as a force within the Queensland Parliament within eight months, it is astounding that any candidate stood under its banner. Even more unbelievable is Lee Long’s victory. She won twice as many votes as either the ALP or National Party candidates, and increased her primary vote substantially,29 a testament to her proficiency as a solid local member. Bill Flynn, ONP parliamentary leader, lost his seat of Lockyer to NPA candidate Ian Rickuss.30 A year into her re-election, Lee Long mused whether she would stand in future as an Independent. She conceded that ‘the party is in crisis’, citing in particular the resignation of New South Wales Upper House member David Oldfield from ONP and the upcoming federal election that saw Len Harris defeated at the ballot box.31

Considering its spectacular rise and demise, ONP held an extraordinary place in the Australian and international media from March 1996, when Hanson was elected to the House of Representatives. There has been a veritable industry of commentary from academics and senior journalists like Marion Wilkinson. Just as Queensland produced the only Communist Party of Australia MLA, the success of PHONP — albeit temporarily — confirms the national suspicion that somehow this state is different, a strong hybrid within the Australian democratic landscape. What still remains both elusive and fascinating is why a poorly educated, inarticulate, gaudily attired woman could mobilise such fervent devotion and attention.
Notes

1 I should like to thank Brad Blashak for research assistance in the preparation of this article. Professor Peter Cryle assisted in the correct French terms. Alain de Benoist, ‘End of the Left/Right Dichotomy: The French Case’, Telos 102 (1995).


8 C. Akehurst, ‘Pauline’s Diary’, Quadrant, 42 (1998): 44–45. It should be noted that the Court of Appeal overturned her conviction in 2004.


10 The New Australia, 5, no date.


Courier-Mail, 1 June 2000.


Sunday Mail, 16 November 2003.

Sunday Mail, 16 March 2003.

Sunday Mail, 16 March 2003. She was admonished 16 times in 12 months for bad language.


Cairns Post, 3 January 2005.