
Hanson's legacy lives on in Canberra

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The One Nation founder has quit but her ideas are here to stay, writes John Wanna.

Pauline Hanson is leaving the political stage after being one of the most influential but divisive personalities in recent years. Her political fortunes may have waned, and her ambition to undermine the major party duumvirate remains unfulfilled, but she still commands media interest both here and overseas.

She will always be remembered as someone who lit a raging bushfire through the complacency of Australian party politics in the mid to late 1990s, which only abated in 2001 after the events of September 11.

The timing of her resignation as president of One Nation comes at a strange juncture. Under pressure from criminal investigations and fraud charges, she has decided to stand down from the leadership of One Nation. Yet many of her policy agendas have been tacitly accepted by the Howard Government and some of the State governments. We now have a tougher stance on boat people and queue-jumping refugees, greater prominence for national security and the scrutiny of international treaties, more direct spending on rural and regional services; work-for-the-dole is accepted policy and

we impose tougher tests for dole cheats; there is less automatic bipartisanship on immigration, more attention to abuses and crime in indigenous communities, and more political emphasis on job retention than economic restructuring.

Some States are also treading more softly on gun control. Her electoral challenge forced governments to begin "listening up" to the community to use a phrase of which Tim Fischer was fond.

The disaffected suddenly found they had a powerful voice in politics and could use the weapon of the vote to unseat governments. And Hanson achieved this level of policy influence without ever sitting in government (unlike other right parties in Austria and Denmark).

Hanson also had novelty value. Her journey from a fish-and-chip shop owner to a populist, anti-elite leader and fashion icon was celebrated in the media. Many media outlets portrayed her as a peculiar interloper and some even as a breath of fresh air among the spin-doctored politics of Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

Image often got her further than substance. (On one day in February, 2001, her photograph appeared on the front page of virtually every major newspaper in Australia.) Elite put-downs simply played into her hands, providing evidence of the establishment attempting to muzzle her. She often had testy relations with journalists and media outlets, occasionally banning them from interviews or press

conferences she gave. But this did not initially damage her standing among her own supporters. Less well acknowledged was her background as a local councillor, Liberal politician, businesswoman, land-owner and communicator.

The rise and fall of One Nation showed that the old parties did not have a stranglehold on politics and need to mediate their policies according to community expectations. Up to one quarter of the electorate now does not vote for one of the major parties down from the levels of 90 per cent-plus in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. As Chris Schacht stated recently, more people are members of the Adelaide Crows than the ALP.

Hanson's main achievement was to demonstrate that right-of-centre populism has the potential to change the political landscape. In Queensland her party took provincial and rural seats from both the terrified Nationals and the uncomprehending Labor party. Yet paradoxically, in 2001 it was the Liberals, who had earlier flirted with One Nation in 1998, that were annihilated in Beattie's rout.

In the 1998 federal election, One Nation lower house candidates polled around 1 million votes Australia-wide without winning a single seat. In Western Australia, One Nation, along with other protest groups, helped unseat a conservative government in 2001, allowing Hanson to bask in the reputation as king-maker. Only Victoria and Tasmania were relatively unmoved by her message.

Some of her former colleagues and party supporters will be sad to see her go as she held a charismatic magnetism over them, but others who were once close, such as David Ettridge, will have fewer qualms.

There has been much in-fighting and personality clashes within One Nation especially as the spoils disappeared and there was less money and fewer jobs to go around. But without her at the helm, One Nation will attract far less media attention and the remaining officials will find it harder to put their views across. After all, Graeme Campbell was saying the same sorts of things long before Hanson and achieving almost no profile.

With Hanson gone, the remnants of One Nation could regroup and remain a thorn in the side of the mainstream parties. They still have members of Parliament in four jurisdictions, but are losing direction and momentum. The further fragmentation of the populist Right vote may see One Nation play the same role as the Greens on the other side of politics not enough votes to form a threat but enough to determine a few seats on the margin.

Many of them appear to have been won back to the conservative side by a Government anxious to appease populist sentiment.

Hanson was arguably the main architect of the policy changes, but others have been left to implement the details. It would be a mistake, though, to consider Hanson's influence at an end.

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