
Battered & bruised

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The fish and chip shop owner turned politician has had enough, writes Craig Johnstone

'I've been open slather for everyone to defame me, to lay charges against me'

THESE days, it seems, political careers in Australia end not with a bang but with a whimper.

Since Paul Keating was shoved off the national leadership stage by an unappreciative electorate in 1996, few have chosen to exit public life in a blaze of camera flashes and rhetoric.

Of all the federal politicians for whom the November election was probably their last, only Kim Beazley and Cheryl Kernot approached anything near what could be termed emotional farewells.

The rest -- Michael Wooldridge, Peter Reith, John Fahey among them -- chose to quietly issue statements and hold sober final press conferences before slipping into political retirement.

Now, the most incendiary -- and arguably the most influential -- politician in a generation has called it a day, and it took more than 24 hours for most of Australia to discover she had done so.

Pauline Hanson quit as president of the party that bears her name at the weekend, and has since cited many factors for the decision, most frequently the sheer pressure of being in the public eye.

"I just feel that the position I have held in this party, I've been open slather for everyone to defame me, to lay charges against me," she said during one of several TV and radio interviews yesterday.

"I suppose I am at a stage now, I'm tired, I just want a break from it."

It is not the first time a politician has blamed the thing that contributed most to their influence as the reason why they wanted no more of public life. Hanson's ability to hold much of the general public in her thrall was the essence of her political appeal. As soon as she or the One Nation party began articulating detailed policy, the spell was broken.

For the disaffected and desperate among the Australian electorate, Hanson was a lightning rod for their concerns. She spoke like them, was as angry as them, and, like them, reacted with visible fury when confronted by the established political culture in Australia.

For the intellectual class, she was no less an object of infatuation. No other Australian politician has been the subject of as many books, lectures and earnest essays attempting to find the answer to her appeal.

Yet for the bulk of Australians, what Hanson represented most of all was an opportunity to protest against the complacency of the major political parties. This has been the case ever since that night in February, 1996, when the former Ipswich councillor was disendorsed as the Liberal candidate for the federal seat of Oxley after expounding on her views about Aboriginal welfare which she previously had expressed in a letter to Ipswich's Queensland Times newspaper.

The fuss the Liberal Party made over Hanson not only ensured she would have a national profile, but would be regarded as an underdog.

But it was only after her maiden speech to parliament, influenced by her first political adviser, John Pasquarelli, that she won the public fascination she now regards as so much of a burden.

"I believe we are in danger of being swamped by Asians," is perhaps one of the most risible expressions of political feeling uttered in Australia.

Yet it was also one of the most profound, in the sense that it tapped a mood of resentment and frustration in Australia that mainstream politicians had done little to soothe. That it was spoken by someone so unlike the parade of polished politicians Australians had seen passing by them on the nightly news gave Hanson's speech a durability that eventually allowed her to form her own political party.

And despite the astounding success One Nation had in the 1998 election, the formation of the party ended up ensuring her political downfall.

The 1998 state election was the zenith of One Nation's success partly because of a confluence of political events, of which the nascent party's presence on the ballot paper was just one. Others were optional preferential voting, the failure to resolve native title issues in Queensland, and the decline in the political authority of the National Party under Rob Borbidge.

But One Nation's success was also due to the extraordinary media appeal of Hanson herself, which did not require much to fuel it beyond her showing up. Hanson cannot deny she revelled in the attention: What other explanation can there be for the notorious "If you are watching this, I have been killed" video in 1997?

STILL, that a party without any tried and tested policy positions -- and almost universally reviled by mainstream politicians and media -- could win 11 parliamentary seats spoke not so much of its appeal as it did of the low regard the electorate had for the major parties.

But, having legitimised itself in the eyes of the electorate, One Nation promptly began its decline, hit by scandals involving its finances and the extent of its flirtation with the extreme Right.

The immediate future of Hanson will depend on the outcome of the fraud case against her, due to begin in the Queensland courts in April.

She will not reject suggestions of a comeback but her comments yesterday suggested she had had her fill of the public spotlight.

As for the future of One Nation without her as its public face, there appears to be little argument.

Having been legitimised by the electoral process, it was hemmed in by it, through the major parties decision to direct preferences away from it.

In the November 10 election, One Nation polled about 498,000 votes -- about 4.3 per cent of the total vote -- meaning its support has halved since 1998. The Greens and the Democrats won greater support in the electorate, and many of the votes there had been for One Nation in the previous election proved to be "soft": that is, they went back to the major parties.

Yet none of the mainstream parties has emerged from the era of One Nation unaffected, and one -- the National Party -- has been fundamentally damaged.

Yesterday, Hanson said she would like to think her legacy would be that she ensured an end to political correctness. But her electoral impact was such that she almost ensured the end of the Nationals.

As Queensland Nationals president Terry Bolger said on ABC radio yesterday: "In politics overall, it's been a ripple. To the National Party, it's been a fair shake to us."