

THE AGE

Editorial Opinion: The Pauline phenomenon

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PAULINE HANSON has been a political phenomenon without precedent in Australia. She rocketed into the national firmament from the dark underside of the Sunshine State to embody and express the fears, prejudices and resentments of those who felt cheated by economic forces beyond their control and betrayed by the elitist policies of the main political parties. It may be too soon to write her political obituary, as she has neither repudiated the party she founded in 1997 nor renounced her ambition to seek another parliamentary seat. But her resignation from the national presidency of One Nation and removal of her name from its masthead - accepted without apparent regret by her senior cohorts - has dimmed her personal luminance and may diminish its malign magnetism.

That she should feel exhausted by her national prominence is not surprising. She has battled bankruptcy, endured electoral defeat, suffered party ructions and mass defections, and is still facing criminal investigations and charges of electoral fraud. But she retains the satisfaction of knowing that she has reshaped the political landscape by forcing the major parties not only to listen but to heed and adapt.

This is an extraordinary achievement for a woman at first ridiculed as an obscure fish shop owner with a chip on her shoulder and a taste for colourful clothing. With a mixture of political naivete and personal toughness, she not only spoke her mind without regard to the niceties of political correctness - provoking her disendorsement as a federal Liberal candidate in 1995 - but evoked a groundswell of support from those who shared her right-wing populist views on immigration, Aborigines and economic rationalism.

Although she has always denied being scapegoatingly xenophobic and racist, and resented being described as economically illiterate, more sinister extremists and unscrupulous opportunists flocked to her cause and sought to manipulate susceptible public opinion to their own agendas. This is partly the cause of her own disillusionment with the increasingly fragmented movement she has fronted so conspicuously.

Ms Hanson's withdrawal from leadership leaves One Nation even more divided and less focused, with its centre of gravity switched from Queensland to Western Australia. It is likely to remain at least an irritant to the major parties, and a continuing source of embarrassment to liberal-minded, outward-looking Australians, but no longer such a menace to mainstream politics.

It has reminded the major parties not to take the support of those who traditionally voted for them for granted, particularly at a time of growing disenchantment with politics and politicians. Unfortunately, the Howard Government - and, to a lesser extent, the Labor Opposition - reacted to this disenchantment by adopting some of Ms Hanson's populism rather than addressing issues that had led to voter disillusionment.

Hansonism changed the major parties, especially the ruling Coalition, in less-than-admirable respects. Prime Minister John Howard has capitalised on his claim to be the champion of the little Aussie battler by successfully adopting a harder attitude towards asylum seekers and Aboriginal reconciliation. He has echoed Ms Hanson's view that political correctness has been defeated - though he would claim responsibility for this defeat, just as she does.

The Prime Minister says he is still committed to a reform agenda, but many of the policy decisions taken last year - the one-off payment to retirees and the petrol excise reversal - were clearly not part of any reform program. Labor sought safety in a degree of me-tooism and perhaps paid the price by being kept in federal opposition.

Pauline Hanson articulated rather than fabricated the populism that she so flamboyantly symbolised, but the consequence is that Australia now appears to be a more callous and selfish society, whose leaders are more inclined to follow than to lead.

Will Ms Hanson's legacy be one that lasts? We expect not. In the end, her answers to the issues and challenges confronting Australia were no answers at all. Australia will be better off if Pauline Hanson now fades into obscurity.