

Pauline Hanson's One Nation returns to Australian parliament

By Mike Head
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In Australia's July 2 election, Pauline Hanson's anti-immigrant One Nation obtained 9 percent of the Senate vote in her home state of Queensland and 4.3 percent nationally. As a result, she will return to parliament for the first time since 1998. Her party may pick up an additional Senate seat, depending on the allocation of other parties' preference votes.

Hanson is one of the most highly-publicised of the right-wing populists and nationalists who have been, up to now, the major beneficiaries of the deepening disaffection among millions of workers and young people toward the political establishment. A record 26 percent of voters cast Senate ballots for parties other than the Liberal-National Coalition, the Labor Party and the Greens—more than six times the equivalent vote in 1990.

Hanson first came to prominence when she won a House of Representatives seat in outer-western Brisbane in 1996. She did so by profiting from the landslide defeat of the Hawke and Keating-led Labor government of 1983–1996, which had ruthlessly enforced the restructuring of the economy in the interests of global capital, working hand-in-glove with business and the trade unions via Labor's prices and incomes Accords.

By posturing as an anti-elite candidate, Hanson preyed upon the social insecurities and distress that Labor had created, channeling these sentiments in a reactionary and xenophobic direction to blame refugees, Aborigines and welfare recipients for the growth of unemployment and poverty.

Labor had already laid the groundwork. Four years earlier, in 1992, the Labor government had introduced mandatory detention for all asylum seekers, along with numerous police raids of homes and workplaces in working-class areas aimed at rounding up "illegal" immigrants.

Hanson and One Nation became convenient vehicles for then Prime Minister John Howard's conservative Coalition government, the corporate elite and media proprietors to shift official politics even further to the right. The media provided Hanson with an almost daily platform for her backward and bigoted views, while the major parties adopted much of One Nation's agenda—escalating the persecution of refugees, forcing welfare recipients into low-paid work and boosting police powers.

In mid-1998, after One Nation attracted nearly 25 percent of the vote in a Queensland state election, the powers-that-be made an abrupt about-face. Under conditions where One Nation was threatening to destabilise the two-party parliamentary order, the media suddenly turned on it, pointing to its connections with

ultra-right wing and neo-Nazi outfits, and its anti-democratic organisational structure.

After a dirty campaign orchestrated by elements within the Liberal Party—including Howard favourite, and later prime minister, Tony Abbott—Hanson and One Nation co-founder David Ettridge were sentenced to three years' jail on trumped-up charges under Queensland's reactionary electoral laws. That political frame-up, which underscored the lengths to which the ruling establishment was prepared to go to suppress any political threat to the two-party system, was overturned on appeal three months later. By then, however, One Nation was widely discredited. Over the next decade and a half, Hanson became a perennial but unsuccessful election candidate.

Hanson's re-emergence is a symptom of the depth of the current social and political crisis. Millions of people have voted against Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's Coalition government, reducing it to a wafer-thin majority. Labor's vote has remained at its second lowest in a century and that of the Greens actually fell in the Senate, reducing the party's number of Senators. Hostility to the official political establishment has rapidly escalated, but this opposition has largely been diverted behind right-wing individuals and organisations.

In the course of the election campaign, Hanson consciously targeted some of Australia's most economically and socially destitute regions, where years of deindustrialisation and the decimation of small producers by large agribusinesses have been compounded by the collapse of the mining boom. Across Queensland, mining-related job losses have created virtual ghost towns and areas of deep poverty.

One Nation obtained its highest vote—21 percent—in the semi-rural seat of Wright, west of Brisbane. Its support rose as high as 40 percent of the total in the Lockyer Valley communities that were abandoned in 2011 by the major parties after suffering devastating floods. Years after the disaster, many residents remain in temporary accommodation, despite the Gillard Labor government's \$1.8 billion national flood tax levy on income-earners, all in the name of financing flood relief.

In the adjacent outback seat of Maranoa, which includes several mining areas, One Nation's candidate picked up over 18 percent of the vote. In Flynn, which covers hard-hit coal mining towns like Blackwater, Emerald and Moura, as well as the related port of Gladstone, One Nation received just under 18 percent. Hinkler, based on Bundaberg and Hervey Bay, and Wide Bay, among the

lowest-income electorates in the country, produced votes of nearly 20 percent and 15 percent respectively. The vote exceeded 13 percent in Herbert, based on Townsville, where this year's closure of Clive Palmer's Queensland Nickel refinery destroyed 800 jobs.

Across outer working class suburbs near Brisbane and the Gold Coast—where official unemployment rates exceed 10 percent—Hanson's party secured votes ranging from 8 percent to nearly 16 percent. In the neighbouring state of New South Wales, the highest vote—almost 13 percent—was recorded in the lower Hunter Valley seat of Paterson, where towns like Maitland and Kurri Kurri have suffered from mining-related closures.

In order to attract votes, Hanson continues to pose as a political outsider. She claims, in the words of One Nation's web site, to represent "the people of Australia who are concerned that their will is being ignored by the two party system." In reality, she serves to direct their alienation back behind the existing political order.

Throughout the campaign, Hanson was openly seeking an accommodation with the major parties. Her election posters carried a message to Prime Minister Turnbull, pleading for talks: "My office or yours Malcolm? Let's chat about Australians." On a July 4 talk-back radio show, she made a similar appeal to Labor leader Bill Shorten for an alliance around Labor's proposal for a royal commission into the banking sector. "I think we should work on it together Bill, don't you?" she asked.

Hanson's efforts to appeal to popular hostility to both major parties, while, at the same time, making overtures to those same parties for a parliamentary deal, are expressed in One Nation's economic policies. These include a grab-bag of populist pitches, such as advocating higher aged pensions, denouncing the predatory practices of the banks and calling for higher taxes on foreign companies.

At the same time, One Nation unequivocally commits itself to defending the profit system. Its web site states: "One Nation recognises that long-term employment must come from the private sector... One Nation believes that, combined with a strong primary industry and a vigorous resource sector, the stimulation of a broad-based manufacturing sector is vital to Australia's future well-being."

This is a pitch to those national-based companies that have been adversely affected by the globalisation of production and the increasing domination of finance capital over the past three decades.

Hanson's balancing act is combined with nationalist diatribes against Chinese land purchases and immigration, and laced with anti-Muslim chauvinism. Among other things, One Nation calls for bans on Islamic headgear, surveillance cameras in mosques—in the name of combatting terrorism—and disqualifying Islam from being treated as a religion under the Australian constitution.

In post-election media interviews, Hanson invoked the spectre of "terrorism on our streets" and declared that Australians feared that their suburbs had been "swamped by Asians." The purpose of her xenophobic rants is to split the working class and divert attention from the root causes of the social crisis, which lie in the capitalist system itself.

Political responsibility for Hanson's renewed popularity rests

with the bipartisan austerity agenda pursued by consecutive governments, along with all those political formations that have fought to keep workers and youth tied to the parliamentary set-up.

Above all, responsibility lies with the Labor Party and trade unions, and their supporters among the pseudo-left organisations, which have for decades worked to politically suppress any independent struggle by workers to defend their jobs, wages and working conditions. This has been done in the name of making Australian-based corporations "internationally competitive." At the same time, Labor and the unions have unconditionally backed the fraudulent "war on terror," and the associated assault on democratic rights, particularly against Muslims, in order to justify Australian involvement in the ongoing US-led wars in the Middle East.

Already, prominent political figures, including former Prime Minister Howard, are calling for Hanson's views to be heard, while media outlets are again promoting her. Writing in the *Australian* on July 12, Nick Cater, executive director of the Menzies Research Centre, a Liberal Party-connected think tank, pointed to the reasons why.

Cater declared that "discordant voices" like Hanson's should be welcomed in Canberra, insisting: "The real test for Hanson, then, is not whether she offends the cultural sensitivities of the sophisticates. She only has to take her seat in the Senate to do that. The test is whether she is prepared to take on the populist forces of economic irrationalism and contribute to the urgent task of lowering the debt, reducing the deficit, fighting the dependency culture and promoting economic growth."

In other words, the ruling elite once again has a use for Hanson's right-wing nationalism, so long as it can be exploited to implement the corporate assault on the working class. Her comeback, and the rise of other right-wing populists, must be a political wake-up call.

The purpose of these organisations is to pit Australian workers against each other, along communal and ethnic lines, and against their fellow workers internationally, blocking a unified movement of the working class against the corporate elite and its political servants. In response, workers and youth must begin to consciously advance their own independent class interests, which means turning to the socialist and internationalist program of the Socialist Equality Party and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.

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