

# The rise and decline of Pauline Hanson's One Nation

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In the middle of last year, Pauline Hanson's One Nation was scaling the heights of electoral success, attracting nearly 25 percent of the vote and winning 11 seats in the Queensland state elections. Just nine months later, this extreme right-wing outfit is mired in an internal war, amid a welter of accusations and counter-accusations, resignations, suspensions and expulsions.

Two weeks ago, two of the remaining seven Queensland MPs quit--whether by expulsion or resignation is not entirely clear--leaving One Nation with five representatives in the state parliament. It will soon be stripped of its formal party status, including its Parliament House headquarters, secretarial, research and advisory staff, and funding.

The party's internal conflicts erupted to the surface within a month of the Queensland elections. In July 1998, Hanson's private secretary resigned, accusing David Oldfield, Hanson's political advisor and self-styled "national socialist," of running the show. A series of bitter public recriminations followed, with revelations of party functionaries being sacked, finances being corralled by the top leadership and a growing revolt of party branches against the organisation's undemocratic structure.

While the federal elections in October saw One Nation poll around 8 percent of the vote nationally, because of the system of preferential voting, it won only one seat in the Senate, and none in the House of Representatives. Hanson herself was not re-elected as an MP. The election results fuelled mounting internal dissent.

In December, One Nation lost one of its Queensland state seats--Mulgrave--to Labor, in a by-election called after its MP Charles Rappolt resigned. Rappolt had been embroiled in a sordid domestic conflict. He attempted suicide, then, after recovering, cited the pressures of office and blamed One Nation for failing to support him.

In early February this year, three Queensland state MPs, including deputy leader Dorothy Pratt quit the party, accusing the leadership "troika"--Pauline Hanson, David Oldfield and marketing strategist David Ettridge--of anti-democratic procedures. One of the three told the media he

was appalled at Hanson's dismissal of democracy as "mob rule". At the same time a revolt erupted in the party's South Australian branch, with its members voting a motion of no-confidence in the state director, who had been hand-picked by the national leadership. Soon after, most of the South Australian executive resigned, complaining that the party's finances had not been properly audited and attacking the party's proposed constitution.

The two most recent departures of Queensland MPs came as opposition within the organisation to the draft constitution snowballed. The constitution confers absolute powers on the National Executive, which can appoint its own members irrespective of the wishes of the membership. It entrenches Hanson, Oldfield and Ettridge in their current positions for 4, 3 and 2 years respectively.

Dissenters at the party's recent annual general meeting complained that they were shouted down and forced out. One told reporters outside that he received a karate blow to the back of his head. Others accused the leadership of "locking up" the votes in advance, via thousands of proxy votes. Only 35 minutes were allowed for discussion on the constitution, with a three-minute limit per speaker. The vote on the constitution was deferred for at least six months.

After the conference several more Queensland members resigned.

As with far right tendencies in Europe and the United States, One Nation's meteoric rise has been associated with the development of a deepgoing hostility and resentment, among broad masses of the population, with the official political establishment. The failure of the major parties to offer any solution to mass unemployment, growing poverty and the social crisis in regional and rural areas, has shattered the old political loyalties.

One Nation's populist and xenophobic slogans--its railing against globalisation, demands for renewed tariff protection, attacks on governments and politicians and appeals to "ordinary Australians"--initially drew into its ranks disparate social layers. From the neo-fascist far-right to disgruntled ex-Labor party members, they joined the organisation seeking

some easy, ready-made answer to their problems.

But the Achilles heel of One Nation, like its counterparts internationally, is the social question. It has no program to address any of the needs and concerns of ordinary people. It is totally committed to the maintenance of the private profit system, which is the source of the social crisis. And its nationalist and anti-working class orientation is organically incompatible with democratic rights. Hence the dictatorial regime. No genuine discussion can be held on policy, because, with such a heterogeneous membership, it would immediately threaten party unity. Policy is decided from above and imposed on the various branches. Any dissent is met with swift retribution by the leadership troika, who control everything with an iron grip.

But this is not the only reason for the internal revolt. The part played by the media in fuelling opposition has also been a significant factor. Its role in One Nation's current crisis is worth reviewing.

Pauline Hanson first came to prominence after being disendorsed by the Liberal Party in the 1996 federal elections for airing her grievances about welfare payments to Aborigines. Standing as an Independent, she won the formerly safe Labor seat of Ipswich in Queensland. In her maiden speech to parliament later that year, she attacked Aborigines and immigrants, the most oppressed sections of the working class, blaming them for the social crisis.

From the outset, the media latched on to Hanson, providing her with an almost daily platform for her backward and bigoted views. But her parliamentary speech marked the turning point. From then on, she was propelled into stardom--dominating the airwaves from talkback radio to television news, and the print media from women's magazines to the national dailies.

For the ruling elite and media barons, Hanson and her One Nation party, which was formed in early 1997, became convenient and timely vehicles for shifting the whole spectrum of official politics to the right. Popular disenchantment with the old parties and growing opposition to the impact of the "free market" on daily life, particularly in rural areas, was channelled in their direction.

Fearing the rapid erosion of support, and with their own primary votes at record lows, politicians from all the major parties--Labor, Liberal and National--began adopting One Nation's agenda. Many attempted to shore up their disintegrating electoral base by trying to appeal to Hanson's constituency--advocating further cuts to immigration, forcing welfare recipients into low-paid work, and boosting police powers.

Having raised Hanson and her party to such prominence, sections of the bourgeoisie began to take fright when confronted with the political consequences. In the aftermath

of the Queensland election result, where One Nation attracted nearly one quarter of the vote, they calculated that a similar outcome in the upcoming federal elections would severely jeopardise parliamentary stability at the national level. The conclusion was drawn that One Nation had become dangerous to the "national interest".

Accordingly, a tactical turn was effected--universally and simultaneously--throughout the media. Journalists began to probe and expose One Nation's seamier side: its connections with ultra-right wing and neo-Nazi outfits, its organisational structure, its finances, leadership and procedures. They located party dissidents and splashed their gripes and grievances across the tabloid front pages. Hanson herself was ridiculed.

This was, it must be stressed, only a *tactical* turn. The media and the major parties have continued to pursue One Nation's reactionary social agenda.

In the three years since she was elected federal MP for Ipswich, most of her positions on social policy have been implemented: immigration intakes have been drastically cut and welfare programs slashed while increasingly repressive measures have been instituted against youth and democratic rights in general.

According to the mainstream media One Nation is now in terminal crisis--consigned to the fringes as an "irrelevance". The most recent polls indicate its support has dropped to around 2 percent. But the social processes that gave rise to it have not only not disappeared, they are intensifying. Every social statistic points to deepening social inequality. In rural and regional towns conditions are becoming desperate, while poverty is on the increase throughout the working class.

The danger is ever-present that unless and until the working class begins to consciously advance its own, socially-progressive alternative to the present social order, then extreme right wing movements--whether in the form of One Nation or some other--will continue to exploit the social crisis for their own ends.



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