Australia: After ABC program, Labor calls for investigation into One Nation

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The government-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) flagship program "Four Corners" this month initiated a campaign against the populist right-wing, anti-immigrant One Nation party and its leader Senator Pauline Hanson, alleging breaches of electoral laws.

The April 3 program, airing accusations by former members about One Nation's inner workings, could signal a turn by the media and political establishment against Hanson. There is fear in these circles of her potentially destabilising impact on the increasingly discredited two-party parliamentary order on which capitalist rule has depended.

The ABC program alleged that One Nation, Hanson and her chief of staff, James Ashby, breached the Commonwealth Electoral Act by failing to declare income used for the benefit of One Nation. Under the act, donations or gifts to a political party from an individual or organisation totalling more than $13,000 must be declared to the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), including the donor's name, address and/or the name of the donor organisation.

"Four Corners" highlighted dissension in the party, centring on Ashby's influence and a "brutal dictatorship" by him and Hanson. Disaffected former One Nation candidates and office-bearers aired various grievances, including the disendorsement of candidates, arbitrary expulsions, demands that candidates use Ashby's printing services and a preference vote-swapping deal negotiated with the Liberal Party in last month's Western Australian state election.

The central allegations made by former party treasurer Ian Nelson and ex-national secretary Suraya Beric are that Hanson had use of a plane during last year's federal election campaign that was not declared to the AEC. It is also alleged that Victorian property developer Bill McNee donated the funds to purchase the Jabiru light plane and $70,000 in cash, also undeclared. McNee denied making any donations.

Exploiting the ABC allegations, the Labor Party immediately wrote to the AEC to demand an investigation, raising the possibility of criminal charges being laid. Greens spokesperson Senator Lee Rhiannon supported Labor's call, advocating "repercussions" for any breaches of the legislation. The federal government's Special Minister of State Scott Ryan also wrote to the AEC requesting an investigation.

James Ashby came to prominence in 2012 when, as a staffer of the then-Speaker of the House of Representatives Peter Slipper, he alleged Slipper had sexually harassed him. The Federal Court threw out Ashby's legal action in December 2012. The judge ruled that it amounted to a politically-motivated abuse of judicial process in which Ashby had conspired with several people, including Liberal National Party (LNP) powerbroker in Queensland Mal Brough.

Ashby appealed to the Full Federal Court, which ruled his case could proceed to a hearing, but in June 2014 Ashby dropped it. Within a few months, he had contacted One Nation with a printing offer described by Nelson as "too good to be true." By early 2015, Ashby was appointed to One Nation's executive. Then he became Hanson's chief of staff, running the party office.

There are echoes of the late 1990s frame-up orchestrated against Hanson and One Nation by the corporate media and the Howard Liberal-National Coalition government. After adopting many of Hanson's anti-refugee and anti-welfare policies, John Howard's government moved against her when One Nation secured 25 percent of the vote in the 1998 Queensland state election, threatening the two-party system.

A concerted political dirty tricks campaign resulted in the jailing in 2003 of Hanson and One Nation's co-founder David Ettridge for supposed breaches of anti-

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democratic political party registration legislation. The conviction on trumped-up charges was eventually overturned on appeal after they had served three months of their three-year non-parole sentence, but One Nation was crippled. Tony Abbott, then workplace relations minister, played a leading role in the operation against One Nation.

Whatever the veracity of the present allegations, the decision to air them now is bound up with political calculations. Hanson's use of the plane has been known for almost two years and many of the other grievances have festered since last July's federal election. Comparatively speaking, the amounts allegedly involved are tiny compared to the millions of dollars received and spent by the two major parties during their election campaigns.

As in the 1990s, the mechanism being utilised against One Nation is electoral legislation that requires all political parties to submit detailed, audited, annual returns listing donors and all expenditure. Parties without sitting members of parliament must provide extensive membership lists to obtain registration to contest elections. These measures, which trample over basic democratic rights, are particularly designed to impose onerous conditions on new and smaller parties.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull called an election last July in a bid to clear the Senate of third-party "crossbench" members and secure the passage of legislation that had been blocked since 2014 because of intense public opposition to the government's austerity cuts to health, education and other essential social programs.

The result was the opposite. Due to the deepening popular disaffection with both the government and Labor, more than 26 percent of votes in the election were cast for "other" parties, boosting their Senate numbers. This trend, fuelled by deteriorating living standards and widening social inequality, has intensified. Recent media surveys indicate that the level of support for "other parties" is reaching 30 percent.

The initial beneficiaries of this discontent have been right-wing populist formations such as One Nation and the Nick Xenophon Team, which have been used to channel the hostility in nationalist and xenophobic directions. While claiming to represent ordinary people mistreated by the banks and political elites, One Nation blames the most vulnerable sections of society—immigrants, the unemployed, indigenous people and welfare recipients—for the growing distress and insecurities of vast sections of the population.

Because of One Nation's usefulness in diverting the mounting unrest, the media and political establishment were at pains after the July election to treat One Nation as a legitimate participant in political debate. Former Prime Minister Howard, under whose government Hanson was prosecuted and jailed, declared she was "entitled to be treated in a respectful fashion by the rest of the parliament."

Turnbull government ministers applauded Hanson's maiden Senate speech, which was afforded uncritical blanket coverage. In it she declared the country was "in danger of being swamped by Muslims" or being taken over by the "oppressive communist" Chinese government. Single parents and jobless youth were "thieves" collecting "thousands of dollars a week." She called for bans on "Muslim immigration" and the wearing of burqas, advocated the monitoring of mosques, and called for an "Australian identity card."

For all Hanson's oppositional posturing, One Nation's senators have been the Turnbull government's most reliable parliamentary supporters. It has relied on One Nation's four votes in the Senate to pass 90 percent of the legislation that it has managed to enact since last July's election. This relationship may be shifting. In response to the "Four Corners" program, Hanson has threatened to withdraw support for all government bills unless the government cuts the ABC's funding by $600 million over four years in the May 9 federal budget.

The campaign to destabilise One Nation has nothing whatsoever to do with any political differences with Hanson's reactionary program. Instead, it is driven by anxieties that One Nation could threaten the stability of the parliamentary system, even more than it did in the late 1990s, amid ever-deepening inequality and social tensions. With a Queensland state election due early next year, and some media poll predictions that One Nation could win enough seats to be included in the next state government, measures are being taken that could undermine or break up Hanson's party.

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