Ex-Australian prime minister embraces Pauline Hanson

Mike Head
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Two decades after helping to railroad her to jail, former Prime Minister Tony Abbott last week launched a book by Senator Pauline Hanson, the leader of the rabidly anti-immigrant One Nation Party.

At the launch, Abbott not only personally embraced Hanson but paid tribute to her political career. He declared that Australia would be a "better country today" if her policies, which include the demonization of Asian and Muslim immigrants, had been followed over the past two decades.

The book, a compilation of Hanson's speeches, is titled *Pauline: In Her Own Words*. The cover photograph features Hanson unfurling herself from a black burqa. This reprises her provocative stunt in the Senate last year, when she entered the chamber wearing the full-length Islamic headdress in a bid to whip up anti-Muslim prejudice. Hanson advocates banning the burqa.

Hanson's book features her 1996 maiden speech in parliament, in which she denigrated "Asians," Aborigines and welfare recipients, and her 2016 maiden Senate speech, when she declared the country was "in danger of being swamped by Muslims," dominated by "sharia law," crippled by "welfare handouts" and overcome by terrorist violence. Australia was also being taken over by the "oppressive communist" Chinese government via land and asset purchases, the kind of "foreign takeover" that Australians had fought and died in wars to prevent.

Abbott's decision to launch the book marks a sharp shift to the right within the political establishment, in which Abbott has played a key role for three decades, to promote nationalism and xenophobia to divert and divide the working class. This mirrors similar developments in America and Europe that have led to the victory of Donald Trump, and the prominence of neo-fascist formations like the National Front in France and the Alternative for Germany.

These far-right movements are exploiting the collapse of support for the traditional working class parties and trade unions—in Australia, the Labor Party—that are responsible for suppressing the class struggle for decades and imposing ever-greater austerity.

Abbott obviously harbours ambitions to oust Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, who deposed him in 2015. But his move has implications that go far beyond Turnbull's precarious Liberal-National Coalition government. It indicates a bid to forge a right-wing nationalist constituency, and possibly a new political formation, in anticipation of the government's likely defeat or collapse.

With the opposition Labor Party widely discredited in the working class, Hanson is being brought forward, as she first was during the late 1990s, to divert the social discontent and political disaffection in reactionary directions—blaming refugees and immigrants for falling wages and living conditions.

Abbott heaped praise on Hanson and her policies, saying she had "always had the guts to speak her mind." He declared: "Let's face it, we should scale back immigration and we should be more proud of our country … And we do have a problem with Islamism that does require decent Muslims to stand up to the death to the infidel extremists."

Abbott called for the reversal of the Coalition's policy of allocating its election voting preferences against One Nation. This backfired on the Liberals in recent state elections in Western Australia and Queensland, where their open support for Hanson's poisonous chauvinism contributed to narrow wins by the Labor Party.

Abbott pointed to the fact that One Nation has

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collaborated closely with the Coalition since the government narrowly survived the 2016 double dissolution election. “We would not have been able to pass any legislation in the current parliament but for the constructive work of Pauline Hanson and her team of senators,” he said.

Despite posturing as “outsiders” championing the interests of impoverished layers of the population, Hanson and her two remaining fellow One Nation senators have provided or offered key votes to the government in the Senate, including on welfare cuts and the proposed slashing of company tax rates for big business.

Abbott side-stepped questions about whether he was seeking to oust Turnbull. But he made plain his ambition to return to political leadership. “I think that public life is a vocation,” he said. “It’s not a job, it’s not a career, it’s a calling.”

For her part, Hanson praised Abbott for not walking away from parliamentary politics when Turnbull deposed him as prime minister. She drew a parallel with her own return to prominence at the 2016 election after years of failing to win a seat. “It’s a clear indication that we have stuck with what we believe in to work for the Australian people,” Hanson said.

Abbott’s political embrace of Hanson is all the more revealing because he played a central role, as a senior minister in the Howard Coalition government, in orchestrating the machinations against One Nation that culminated in Hanson being jailed on trumped-up electoral fraud charges in 2003.

Hanson and One Nation co-founder David Ettridge served 11 weeks of a three-year jail sentence before an appeal court overturned the convictions. Soon after her release from jail, Hanson said: “Heaven help this country if Tony Abbott is ever in control of it. I detest the man.”

Abbott and the Howard government had no disagreement with Hanson’s policies. In fact, they adopted virtually all of them: refugee rights were axed, democratic rights attacked, welfare programs slashed and Aboriginal funding cut. But when One Nation became a threat to the government’s social base and to the stability of the two-party system, the government and the media ruthlessly set out to destroy it, utilising secret corporate slush funds, dirty tricks, police raids and ultimately criminal prosecutions.

Now, Hanson is being elevated to centre stage under conditions of a far deeper economic, social and political crisis. Intensifying cuts to wages and the growing danger of US trade war and war with China, Australian capitalism’s largest export market, are fuelling political instability that has led to the fall of five prime ministers since 2007.

Turnbull’s government is showing signs of imploding. These include the ongoing nationalist purge of parliament via a constitutional provision that bars dual citizenship, and the recent removal of deputy prime minister and National Party leader Barnaby Joyce via a supposed sex scandal.

Abbott’s rapprochement with Hanson is part of a wider turn by the ruling class to promote her nationalist and divisive program as a means of bringing forward even more right-wing and authoritarian forms of rule.

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