

Australia: Al Jazeera investigation targets right-wing One Nation party

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The corporate press has been full of reports condemning Pauline Hanson's One Nation, in the wake of a two-part Al Jazeera investigation aired on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) over the past fortnight, showing representatives of the right-wing populist party on a fundraising tour to the United States last year.

Senior Labor and Liberal-National representatives have hypocritically denounced One Nation for soliciting funding from the powerful US gun lobby. The same politicians have collaborated closely with One Nation and promoted anti-immigrant xenophobia and nationalism similar to its stock in trade.

Moreover, all of the major parties raise their finances from sections of the corporate elite, to whom they are beholden.

The manufactured outrage has served to cover up the dubious character of the Al Jazeera program, which resembled a police sting. It has prevented any serious discussion of the possibility that the program was a political operation, aimed at destroying One Nation amid an unprecedented crisis of the official parliamentary set-up.

The program was produced by Peter Charley, the head of Al Jazeera's North American investigative unit. Charley previously produced the ABC's "Lateline" news program from 2000 to 2007 and has worked for a host of other Australian media outlets. He doubtless has extensive contacts within Australia's media and political establishment.

According to Al Jazeera, it began its investigation in 2015. Charley commissioned Rodger Muller, another reporter, to pose as the head of a non-existent lobby group named Gun Rights Australia. They created a professional website for the fictional entity, along with slick campaign videos.

Over the ensuing 18 months, Muller cultivated contacts with various gun lobbyists by presenting himself as an activist seeking to relax Australia's restrictive firearms laws. Muller travelled to the US and participated in the NRA's 2017 national convention.

Sometime in 2018, Muller attended a One Nation function in Sydney. He introduced himself to James Ashby, a senior

advisor to the party's leader, Pauline Hanson, and offered to secure connections between One Nation and the US gun lobby.

At no point in the two-part program is it explained why Muller approached One Nation. There is a plethora of right-wing populist parties, many of which have made a more explicit pitch to anger over Australia's gun laws.

A report released by the Australia Institute last week demonstrated that One Nation is among the parliamentary parties that has received the least funding from Australian gun lobbyists.

Between 2011 and 2018, One Nation received just \$6,203 from the sector, less than a thousand dollars a year. This compared with over \$800,000 to the right-wing populist Katter's Australian Party, around \$700,000 to the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party, almost \$90,000 to the Coalition and more than \$30,000 to Labor.

Moreover, by the time that Muller approached One Nation, the investigation had already spanned at least two years. Vast resources were apparently expended, to provide Muller with a backstory and fictional identity to fool the One Nation leadership.

The centrepiece of the TV program is a trip to the US by Muller, Ashby and One Nation's Queensland leader Steve Dickson.

Secret footage from the visit, filmed by Muller using hidden cameras, certainly presents an unedifying spectacle. Ashby and Dickson appear consumed by the pursuit of money and boast of their ability to manipulate the electorate.

That senior figures in One Nation, or any of the other parliamentary parties for that matter, are cynical political operators is hardly a revelation that required a three-year investigation.

Over the course of several days in Washington, Muller brokered meetings between the One Nation representatives, and a host of political lobbyists in the US, including the National Rifle Association and Koch Industries. The trip largely consisted of a series of alcohol-fuelled functions, at which the One Nation representatives told anyone who

would listen of their desire to change Australia's gun laws and of their need for financial assistance.

For all of the hype surrounding Al Jazeera's program, One Nation came away empty-handed. Their attempts to solicit donations appeared amateurish, unprepared and wholly arranged by Muller.

There are significant questions about the editing of the program. While every poorly chosen and politically damaging remark by Ashby and Dickson is featured, Muller remains a silent presence in the background through much of the program.

It seems inevitable, however, that to gain the confidence of the One Nation representatives, Muller voiced the same backward and jingoistic positions that they did, and encouraged their boorishness to gain the most damaging footage possible.

Much of the media coverage has focused on remarks made by Pauline Hanson in the program, which appear to lend credence to the right-wing conspiracy theory that the 1996 Port Arthur massacre, which killed 35 people, was a ploy to restrict gun laws. Many of the articles and reports have obscured the fact that the remarks were made during a private dinner between Hanson, Muller, Dickson and Ashby.

Hanson responded to the airing of the program by condemning it as a "political sting." She said the party had been "stitched up." She absurdly denounced Muller as a "foreign spy" because he was employed by Al Jazeera, which is owned by the Qatari state.

Some journalists, including Peter Greste, a former Al Jazeera reporter, have labelled the program as "unethical." Greste said that the program was guilty of "crossing the line" by "actually creating a story and not simply reporting it."

The timing of the program raises many questions. It was aired on the eve of an Australian federal election, which will be dominated by mass hostility to the major parties.

There are widespread concerns within the corporate and financial elite that major losses for the Coalition and the Labor opposition could deepen Australia's protracted political instability. They are particularly fearful that a parliament dominated by various right-wing populist formations and independents, will be unable to implement the austerity agenda that they are demanding.

The immediate beneficiaries of the program, Labor and the Greens, have extensive connections at the ABC. Both have used the program to demand that the Coalition disavow any preference deals with One Nation, which may be crucial in marginal electorates.

The production of the program also coincided with a bitter civil war within the Coalition, pitting a "moderate" faction against a right-wing grouping around Morrison, which is

seeking to transform the organisation into an alt-right, Trump-style movement based on anti-immigrant xenophobia and populism.

Both factions, at various points, have had an interest in taking down One Nation. The Turnbull wing has viewed the party as a close ally of Morrison. For its part, the Morrison wing of the party has sought to undercut the appeal of One Nation and similar groups, by adopting its program.

The Al Jazeera investigation recalls a political operation conducted against One Nation in the late 1990s.

The party had been feted by the Coalition government of Prime Minister John Howard, and the corporate elite, who viewed it as a vehicle to shift politics further to the right, and to divert growing social discontent into xenophobic channels. Their attitude changed in mid-1998, after One Nation attracted nearly 25 percent of the vote in a Queensland state election.

The political and media establishment, determined to stamp out any challenge to the two-party set-up, no matter how reactionary, began pointing to One Nation's connections with ultra-right wing and neo-Nazi outfits, and its authoritarian organisational structure. The political frame-up, spearheaded by sections of the Coalition, culminated in the jailing of Hanson and One Nation co-founder David Ettridge, under Queensland's anti-democratic electoral laws.

At the time, the Socialist Equality Party was alone in correctly warning that the operation against the right-wing party was a serious assault on democratic rights that would set a precedent for attacks on progressive and socialist organisations.

The Al Jazeera program is another sign that the upcoming federal election will be dominated by mud-slinging and dirty tricks. All of the major parties are seeking to divert attention from their common agenda of austerity, anti-democratic measures and support for US wars and to score cheap political points from their rivals through scandals and scares.



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