

Moral Greed and the Politics of Insult

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COMMENTARY on the role of the media in the rise of Pauline Hanson and One Nation has tended to concentrate on questions of how Pauline herself has been reported—whether the media has been too critical, too conformist, given her excessive media attention and so forth.

This is dealing with the phenomenon once it has occurred. What it does not do is explain why the sentiments that Pauline Hanson and One Nation have clearly tapped into *could* be so effectively exploited.

A SEPARATE MEDIA

The central duty of the media is to report society to itself. Obviously, news values themselves—things important, strange or otherwise remarkable, what makes something ‘news’—will affect what is reported. Yet, there is a clear sense in which the media is the mirror in which society sees itself. If that mirror is systematically distorted, then problems can be created.

A possible source of distortion is if journalists typically have common and strongly divergent views from those of the general public. If that is the case, there can be systematic under-reporting, or even mis-reporting, of common experiences and views. That can then create simmering resentments, a feeling of being ignored, ripe for possible exploitation.

Clearly, the importance of the media is increased when there is a failure of political leadership. Any media bias is most naturally expressed by journalists trawling for newsmakers they like. But they are driven first and foremost by the need for news. A political leader with a strong message, able to speak past the media—as distinct from politicians who are buffeted and blown by its fashions—makes any such media bias much less important—as Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and Jeff Kennett all show. (Jeff Kennett, for example, has to deal with the most pro-Labor, according to journalists themselves, broadsheet in Australia—see ‘Out of the Mouths of Babes and Sucklings’ in this is-

sue.) But it is not good enough to excuse institutional failings on the basis of how others might, or might not, be performing—accountability operates all round. Furthermore, leaders come and go, whereas the media is a continuing institution. How well or badly it functions is fundamental to the long-term health of the body politic.

As noted in the previous issue of the *IPA Review* (‘Media Propagandists for Social Justice’ by Piers Akerman), and further reported in this one (‘Out of the Mouths of Babes and Sucklings’ by Andrew McIntyre), a survey of public and journalists’ attitudes conducted by Professor Henningham provides a useful indicator of divergence between the attitudes of journalists and those of the general public. I have grouped the various issues together and arranged the groups in terms of increasing divergence between public attitudes and those of journalists.

On the role of markets and fiscal policy issues, there is very little divergence between the attitudes of journalists and those of the general public. Differences on life and family issues, welfare and conservation are more marked, but not particularly significant. Journalists are distinctly more secular than the general public. They are markedly more liberal on sexual issues and markedly more ‘progressive’ on labour market issues, and in their attitudes to national identity, and very much more ‘progressive’ on crime issues, than the general public.

So, while Australian journalists are likely to be good ‘mirrors’ on general economic and fiscal issues, and fairly reasonable ones on welfare, conservation, and life and family issues, there are clearly doubts about their likelihood to be so on religious, sexual, labour market, national identity and crime issues.

Now, what recently prominent political figure has been making quite a name for herself on national identity and crime issues? Pauline Hanson’s distinctiveness on such issues is reflected in her support base—One Nation supporters are likely, to a very disproportionate degree, to cite

immigration, Aborigines, equal treatment, law and order, and guns as reasons for supporting One Nation and to express support in terms of national identity.¹ Ms Hanson has clearly been filling a gap in the political market. The question is, why is that gap there?

THE POLITICS OF INSULT

It is worth reflecting a little more on how much of ‘progressive’ politics works in this country.

Consider, for example, how environmental politics operates in this country. The typical pattern is for some development project in rural or provincial Australia—a Coronation Hill, a Wesley Vale, a Jabiluka—to be demonized by a city-based environmental movement playing largely to an urban-based ‘green’ vote. The project gets abandoned—as do all the other similar projects people don’t even bother to put up. City pieties destroy rural and provincial jobs without any compensation and on the basis of a rhetoric which treats rural and provincial Australians as environmental despoilers, delegitimizing their work. The ‘get a job’ taunts that folk in timber towns throw at green demonstrators, and the willingness of workers to get involved in organized anti-green politics (sometimes reported in the mainstream media as ‘business plants’²), expresses this tension.

The same pattern—of city pieties delegitimizing rural and provincial Australia while imposing real costs—operates in indigenous politics.

All Australians are taxed to pay special benefits and fund special institutions. After *Mabo* and *Wik* we have now special property rights on the basis of race. At the same time we say racism is wrong because, of course, all should be treated equally. The property rights of rural lessees are unilaterally changed by a distant court—leases which are fundamental to their livelihood. Naturally people get upset. Money is poured into failed indigenous programmes—there is little or no improvement in the appalling health profiles of indigenous Australians despite the ex-

	Percentage in favour of				Percentage in favour of		
	Public	Journalists	Difference		Public	Journalists	Difference
Role of Markets				Sexual			
Private schools	83	83	0	Condom vending machines	83	97	14
Competition	96	95	1	Premarital virginity	29	8	21
Business profit	90	91	1	Legalised prostitution	65	87	22
Privatisation	48	46	2	Gay rights	57	79	22
Nuclear power	24	27	3	Average difference			20
Socialism	29	34	5				
Free enterprise	86	92	6	Labour Market			
Average difference			3	Minimum wage	79	87	8
Fiscal Issues				Work for the dole	85	74	11
Public spending cuts	35	36	1	Picketing	33	53	20
Defence spending	68	64	4	Unemployment benefits	67	91	24
Dath duties	12	18	6	Strikes	19	45	26
Wealth tax	40	46	6	Trade unions	47	84	37
Average difference			4	Average difference			21
Life and Family				National Identity			
Voluntary euthanasia	71	77	6	Patriotism	77	70	7
Test-tube babies	56	62	6	Multiculturalism	78	85	7
Legalised abortion	71	82	11	Royalty	46	25	21
Working mothers	80	92	12	Australia as a republic	49	78	29
Average difference			9	Asian migration	51	83	32
Welfare				Mabo	44	78	34
Housing commission housing	83	90	7	Average difference			22
Government welfare	76	89	13	Crime			
Average difference			10	Caning young criminals	40	46	6
Conservation				Decriminalised marijuana	36	63	27
Conservationists	84	95	11	Castrating sex offenders	50	20	30
Religious				Stiffer jail terms	80	46	34
Church authority	20	21	1	Death penalty	60	21	39
Women priests	75	87	12	Average difference			27
Bible truth	41	21	20				
Sabbath observance	52	30	22				
Average difference			14				
(without church authority issue)			18				

penditure of billions of dollars. Understandably, people who daily see the waste and failures stop believing in the wisdom of Canberra.

The politics of grievance encourages the idea that indigenous advancement is some sort of 'gift', and that financial benefits flow from saying how oppressive our common society is. Policy apartheid—giving special benefits on the basis of race funded by general taxes—generates resentment and 'downward envy'. The combination poisons race relations in outback communities.

The guns issue expresses the same dynamic. The implicit message is 'you bastards can't be trusted with guns', of saying 'you are all potential psychopaths'. There are some very angry and insulted people out there, over the gun issue.

There is also the problem of divergences between general attitudes and official multiculturalism—the doctrine that the hosts should pay to adapt to the newcomers (see 'Cultural Pluralism: The Case for Benign Neglect' by Michael James in this issue). Since migrants have tended to concentrate in the major cities, particularly Sydney and Melbourne, multicultural issues tend to be less relevant in the country. Breast-beating about how disadvantaged migrants are, and demands that taxes be appropriated to counter this disadvantage, are likely to have less than normal resonance. Implicitly, or explicitly, saying that a country which has welcomed new-

comers to a remarkable extent is oppressive seems both gratuitous and insulting. When academics such as Professor Stephen Castles—consultant to the former Labor Government on multiculturalism— theorize, along with Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis, that 'Anglo' national identity is weak (not being forged in the flame of battle for country), unattractive (based on genocide, racism, sexism, and war mythology), and backward looking (to a bygone era of monoculturalism and colonial supremacy)³, then the intellectual superstructure for the politics of insult is well in place. That Australian identity might have been forged out of struggle to build prosperity in a distant, isolated and harsh land; that Australia has been a great pioneer of democratic governance; that we achieved federation by discussion and popular vote; that Australia has been a remarkably welcoming society, with very high rates of intermarriage; that we remain an immensely attractive destination for work and study, pass by such sneering moralistic grandstanders almost completely.

MORAL GREED

Again and again, city-based 'progressive' politics loads country Australia down with its fears and projections, and makes it pay the cost of its easy pieties. This is *moral greed*—exactng a vicarious pleasure from a righteous stances on issues that cost the proponent nothing (and are often highly

conformist within their work or social circles). It is a case of 'conspicuous consumption', via the display of moral superiority. It is status without effort. And it is corrupting both the media and the body politic.

The distinctive thing about displays of moral greed is not mere disagreement; it is characterizing opposing views as being wicked, as a sign of moral delinquency, rather than merely wrong or mistaken. Instead of careful reasoning in terms of likely effects or errors of logic, reliance is made on the use of 'boo-words'—such as 'racist' and 'genocide'—often in quite 'over-the-top' ways.

When taking children from families with the intention, however misguided, of giving them a better future is called 'genocide' and thus equated with the Nazi Holocaust, and the Armenian and Rwandan slaughters—and any demurral is treated as implicit approval of the original policy and indifference to genocide—then public moral discourse has become so decayed as to be worse than useless. It has, in fact, become a poison to the body politic—how many votes for One Nation did 'National Sorry Day' generate?

Of course, being a discoverer and denouncer of a great sin, like genocide, gives high status.

The progressive politics of insult naturally alienates country Australians in particular who, either implicitly or explicitly, get treated as a bunch of Aboriginal-dispossessing, environment-destroying, weather-whingeing, gun-happy, redneck racists. A patently morally inferior bunch, who should shut up and do as their told, while city folk sneer at them and destroy their job prospects. Tolerance does not extend to 'rednecks'.

The politics of insult is a natural, indeed a necessary, part of moral greed. How can one have status if there is not someone to whom one is superior? Such grandstanding then provides a rich vein of resentments into which Pauline Hanson and One Nation can tap.

If the media provides an accurate 'mirror' of society, these resentments will get expressed in normal debate and commentary, and have avenues for being discharged. If, however, the media systematically distorts or represses such views, considerable pressure can be built up, waiting for release. If the media are strong practitioners themselves of moral greed, they will be an enormous part of the problem. Honest discussion of issues will become well-nigh impossible, or at least face huge, unnecessary hurdles. Whole sets of experiences, and possibly fruitful responses to them, will face denial or fatu-

ous denunciation. This problem is particularly rife in discussion of indigenous issues—accusations of racism having been the prime device for policing moral ‘correctness’. Thus, amongst the self-appointed ‘moral vanguard’, assimilation policies, or even those which merely treated people equally, are indicators of ‘racism’—for instance, David Marr using the term ‘egalitarian racism’ for those moral delinquents who believe that policy should be colour-blind.⁴ The Canberra Press Gallery cheering the passing of the poorly drafted, unnecessarily complex and tendentious *Native Title Act*⁵ from the Senate gallery was a notable display of progressive conformism in the media. The treatment of indigenous issues is quite different from, say, economic issues—the media is far more willing to give various views an airing in the latter than the former. This is so even for fellow journalists—as Chris Kenny found when his exposé of the Hindmarsh Island fraud was consigned down the ‘memory hole’. The best comment I heard about the Hindmarsh Island debacle was ‘where was the gutter press when we needed it?’ Quite.

If people see that the media is systematically not reporting what they see around them, then they are going to look for explanations of that. If widely held perspectives do not seem to get much of a go in the press, people are going to look around for explanations of that as well. Either way, the ground is made much more fertile for conspiracy theories—well known to flourish in rural Australia—which provide explanations for systematic mis-reporting and under-reporting.

Even if people do not fall prey to such explanations, there is certainly rich ground created for political exploitation—as Pauline Hanson has found. Much of the reporting of Ms Hanson has served to reinforce the perspective that she is merely expressing what many people think, but ‘they’—the media—will not treat fairly. And the ‘all put One Nation last’ campaign continues the pattern of city-dominated public debate belittling rural and fringe-urban Australia. Ironically, the media’s obsession with the voting preferences issue in the Queensland State election—a patent form of moral grandstanding over an issue of political process, not substantive policy—clearly greatly aided One Nation. It gave them huge amounts of free publicity, made it almost impossible for Borbidge and Beattie to get a word in edgewise, and exemplified the pattern of an out-of-touch media foisting its views on the general public—23 per cent of whom promptly went out and voted One Nation.

The archetypal comment about Ms Hanson is ‘she says what others won’t’.⁶

The suggestion that Peter Garrett [the cover story, *Bulletin*, July 28], an arch-exponent of the progressive politics of insult, is an appropriate person to wield out against Pauline Hanson comprehensively misses the plot. The confrontational media lynch-mob treatment of Ms Hanson has been highly counterproductive, as was evidenced in the Queensland election. There is overseas evidence that confrontational approaches against racism, for example, can be significantly counterproductive—a recent survey found that the European Union’s aggressive Year Against Racism campaign had actually ‘been marked by a growing willingness on the part of Europeans to openly declare themselves as racists’.⁷ It is perhaps not surprising that people react against being preached at, particularly when the preaching has strong overtones of moral condemnation and self-aggrandizement.

As for the claim that Ms Hanson represents a revolt against ‘economic rationalism’ (despite the fact that talking about economic issues is *not* how she came to prominence and about which she has little distinctive to say) well, lots of commentators would say that, wouldn’t they? If she represents a revolt on cultural issues, then she represents a revolt against *them*. Far better, and much more comforting, if One Nation (haven’t they noticed the title?) represents a revolt against something they also disagree with.

They do have similar inconsistencies—being against the GST but in favour of tariffs, for example (if a GST on food and clothing is immoral, as some Church spokespeople have said, why have they not denounced regressive tariffs on food, and textiles, clothing and footwear?: but self-serving moral display does not require consistency). Ironically, Ms Hanson herself is rather more progressive on sexual issues than much of her public.

CONCLUSION

The role of the media is to report a nation to itself. If it fails to do that in a systematic way, then the opportunity is ripe for resentments and frustrations to build up, waiting for an appropriate vehicle to express them.

It is perfectly true that a less rhetorically-challenged government—one which understood the massive mandate against domination of policy and debate by the Sydney-Melbourne-Canberra Triangle it had been given, one more able to articulate a middle road between the sneering, moral-greedy, elitists of the guilt industry and more old-fashioned bigotry—would

have dealt with the current stresses more effectively—but they did not create the underlying stresses.

The United States has dealt with Pat Buchanan—a much more imposing figure, pushing similar lines. The answer has been real federalism—allowing diversity and thus reducing alienation—and full employment—massively reducing serious insecurity and greatly ameliorating social problems. What lies behind all these, however, is respect. The self-respect that comes from having a job, and confidence that you can get another, the respect comes from having a political system which allows regional diversity to be expressed rather than imposing centralized homogeneity, the respect that comes from having your perspectives being a fully legitimate part of the political debate.

We can achieve the same answers to the Perils of Pauline, it merely takes the political perception and the will—and a media which does its job with more professionalism and less moralistic self-indulgence. Moral greed is poisoning our body politic far more than the ordinary garden-variety ever has, for it divides the country on the basis of sneers and insults and strikes at the root of ‘government by discussion’ which lies at the heart of democracy.

NOTES

- 1 Goot, Murray, ‘Hanson’s Heartland: Who’s for One Nation and Why’ in *Two Nations: The Causes and Effects of the Rise of the One Nation Party in Australia*, Bookman, 1998, pages 68-70.
- 2 For example, an *Age* article by Geoff Strong: ‘The Green Game’, *Features*, 17 August 1998.
- 3 Millbank, Adrienne, *An Anti-Racist Campaign: Who Needs It?*, Parliamentary Library Current Issues Brief No. 20, 1997-98, page 5.
- 4 In ‘Primal Fear: Race, Politics and Respectable Australia’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 May 1997 (available at <http://reconciliation.queer.org.au/other.htm>). ‘Egalitarian racism’ is a term whose patent oxymoronic status should surely have screamed the stupidity of the usage.
- 5 A ‘great achievement’ of ‘social justice’ that took three years and four months for its first determination of native title on the mainland.
- 6 Goot, page 69.
- 7 Millbank, page 4.

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REVIEW

SEPTEMBER 1998