

'Being There'

The Prime Minister and Pauline

by Denis McCormack

Back in 1988 today's new Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, then leader of the conservative coalition opposition, said in relation to Asian immigrants into Australia: "I do believe that if... in the eyes of some in the community it's too great, it would be in our immediate-term interest and supportive of social cohesion if it were slowed down a little."

He knew that Australia's most respected historian, Professor Geoffrey Blainey, had been hounded from academia in 1984 for saying just that. Howard also knew that public opinion was supportive of him as it was of Blainey. He further chanced his arm against the liberal left-dominated media by heightening the controversy with his follow-through:

I don't think it's wrong, racist, immoral or anything for a country to decide what the cultural identity and the cultural destiny of the country will be. ...Just about every self-respecting country does, and I find most extraordinary the argument that says that by talking about these issues we are offending our friends in Asia. That's bunkum.

With that, his own Liberal Party colleagues deserted in a failure of nerve. He was removed from leadership of the party shortly thereafter and only finally regained the leadership early in 1995 after a series of three lesser leaders had failed — but not before he was forced to issue some very public pseudo-apologies for his '88 comments (none of which, incidentally, contradicted the substance of

Denis McCormack is Australian correspondent for THE SOCIAL CONTRACT and a leading activist for immigration reform in his country. He is co-editor of Immigration and the Social Contract, a collection of articles from this journal, published by Avebury (1996, 237 pages, \$35.00). It is available from **The Social Contract Press**, 1-800-352-4843.

those comments). With an election coming he was seen, in desperation, as the only politician capable of ridding the country of Labor's Prime Minister Keating along with his integration-with-Asia, Republican, Aboriginal, and flag-changing obsessions. All was forgiven, although astute observers predicted that the Asian immigration debate must resurface. Public opinion polls, along with steady support for Western Australian Member-of-Parliament Graeme Campbell and the organization Australians Against Further Immigration, together have maintained a creditable vote and profile focused on immigration problems which has kept pressure on both sides of the political scene.

Along came the March 1996 Federal election, with Howard back at the helm and well-positioned. The media were calling a photo finish. For the House of Representatives seat of Oxley in the State of Queensland, John Howard's Liberal Party had pre-selected the local fish-and-chip owner, Pauline Hanson, as a token candidate for the strongest Labor-held, theoretically unwinnable, seat in the state. Labor would no doubt have won hands down but for their dirty tricks department getting in the way. They dug out from the local press a letter Hanson had published some time previously in which she expressed popular concerns relating to the vast amount of taxpayer funds being lavished, and often wasted on, Aboriginal welfare. In the heat of the election campaign she was promptly disendorsed by Howard and the Liberal Party in a move to appease the media and the chattering classes. This action drew both national and local attention to her. As a result, the local folk rallied to her defense and she was elected to Federal Parliament as an independent with a massive swing to her at the same time that John Howard became Australia's Prime Minister in a landslide victory.

Graeme Campbell has given Hanson valuable support since her unexpected arrival in Federal Parliament, especially on immigration issues, but the bomb was really dropped in her maiden speech of 10 September 1996. Here are some quotes.

I come here, not as a polished politician... My view on issues is based on common sense, and my experience as a mother of four children, as a sole parent, and as a businesswoman running a fish and chip shop. I won the seat of Oxley largely on an issue that has resulted in me being called a racist. That issue related to my comment that Aboriginals received more benefits than non-Aboriginals...

Immigration and multiculturalism are issues that this government is trying to address, but for too long ordinary Australians have been kept out of the debate by the major parties. I and most Australians want our immigration policy radically reviewed and that of multiculturalism abolished. I believe we are in danger of being swamped by Asians. Between 1984 and 1995, 40 percent of all migrants coming into this country were of Asian origin. They have their own culture and religion, form ghettos, and do not assimilate.

Of course, I will be called racist, but if I can invite whom I want into my home, then I should have the right to have a say in who comes into my country. A truly multicultural country can never be strong and united. The world is full of foiled and tragic examples, ranging from Ireland to Bosnia to Africa — and closer to home, Papua New Guinea. America and Great Britain are currently paying the price... Abolishing the policy of multiculturalism will save billions of dollars and allow those from ethnic backgrounds to join mainstream Australia, paving the way to a strong, united country.

Immigration must be halted in the short term so that our dole queues are not added to by, in many cases, unskilled immigrants not fluent in the English language. This would be one positive step to rescue many young and older Australians from a predicament which has become a national disgrace and crisis. I must stress at this stage that I do not consider those people from ethnic backgrounds currently living in Australia anything but first-class citizens, provided, of course, that they give this country their full, undivided loyalty... We may have only 10 to 15 years left to turn things around. Because of our resources and our position in

the world, we will not have a say because neighboring countries such as Japan, with 125 million people; China with 1.2 billion people; India, with 846 million people; Indonesia, with 178 million people; and Malaysia, with 20 million people are well aware of our resources and potential...

There was more in her speech regarding cessation of foreign aid, withdrawal from the UN, etc. and with no mention of environmental concerns, one can imagine that not all those who are concerned about immigration are happy to be lumped together with Hanson in a new orgasmic political push.

The reaction to her maiden speech has been a unique phenomenon. The media in trying to stamp

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out the flames only managed to spread the fire. There has been front page and lead-item electronic coverage since September. Public outpouring of emotion on talk-back radio has been starkly contrasted with Government, Opposition, and media commentators against her. Asian media are revisiting John Howard’s 1988 remarks. Thinly-veiled threats of trade and tourism repercussions have been issued both at home and around the Asian region should we not bow low enough.

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Prime Minister Howard is playing a cool hand under the circumstances. He could see something of this nature coming, and is probably relieved that it formed around an inexperienced newcomer like Hanson who is unfortunately muddying the waters somewhat for Graeme Campbell and his nascent Australia First Party which kicked off only a couple of months before the Hanson affair. Some more

Machiavellian observers suspect Hanson has been given the extraordinary coverage in part to obscure Campbell's more thoughtful position, as an intended by-product. Soon after forming Government, Howard began to surgically remove key ethnic lobby and immigration industry influences from their cozy positions close to the heart of government. These moves, coupled with a cut of 10,000 to this year's immigration program, the foreshadowing of another cut next year, and a general tightening-up of immigration policy and administration had generally set the tone well before Hanson's maiden speech in September. The 200,000-plus primary votes for Australians Against Further Immigration in the election, along with a spate of anti-immigration opinion polls, certainly encouraged him in these moves. And the media actually praised him for making them.

So why all the fuss about Hanson's speech? There is nothing new in what she had to say. One answer is that the media has mixed motives in affording Hanson the flood of coverage she has received. There are a few key people in the media who want the Asianization issue honestly exposed and debated and they are using Hanson as a lightning rod to that end. It hasn't worked because the intellectuals are still in denial about Asianization and its orchestration. The majority of the media however are using her to dumb down the debate to one about supposed bigotry and racial prejudice rather than national direction, democratic government, and national sovereignty. They suspect Howard's agenda in not directly condemning Hanson. One prominent journalist has recently written that Howard's moves on immigration policy will eventually "approach" AAFI's vote and that "Howard feels vindicated over the concern that he expressed eight years ago." The Prime Minister, while walking the wire, has been championing freedom of speech on immigration. It is under this aegis that he is happy to have Hanson, Campbell, and AAFI do the dirty work in the public domain which allows him to collect the kudos for cutting immigration. Why have a dog and also bark yourself? He cannot and he has not repudiated their views on Asian immigration, for if he does, he repudiates not only the demonstrated majority opinion, but also his own. Howard has come under immense pressure to directly repudiate Hanson on Asian immigration from the media, church leaders, business leaders, the tourism industry, the

opposition, and even his own colleagues — still he refuses.

Your correspondent was in the parliament gallery on 30 October when the hastily drafted Bipartisan Statement on Racial Tolerance was passed with great fanfare in the hope of hosing down the issue both at home and abroad. Campbell was the only speaker against the motion. Pauline Hanson was absent from Parliament. On that occasion, the statement was a predictable regurgitation of all the time-worn, generalized, formulaic, feel-good, motherhood

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incantations and mantras which have been force-fed to the unmoved mainstream for the last 20 years. It did nothing to address the underlying issue of unpopular levels of Asian immigration. All diplomatic posts, trade missions and universities touting for business in Asia have been given the Statement in order to placate their prospective clients.

The media are only now winding down the Hanson mania, or should I say phobia. There is a gradual dawning that all this angst has had little to do with Pauline Hanson, the political neophyte from the suburbs, who, through an unlikely chain of events, finds herself "being there" in similar style to Chauncey Gardener/Peter Sellers in the motion picture of that title. It has more to do with an essentially patriotic but naive new Prime Minister who is well aware of what needs to be done on immigration, but who has yet to realize that the rest of the internationalist, deregulationist, bipartisan economic dogma that he has for so long promoted and is now hastily implementing, is unfortunately part of the same suite of nationally corrosive problems to which immigration belongs.

"Being there" is one thing, being in control is entirely another.

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