

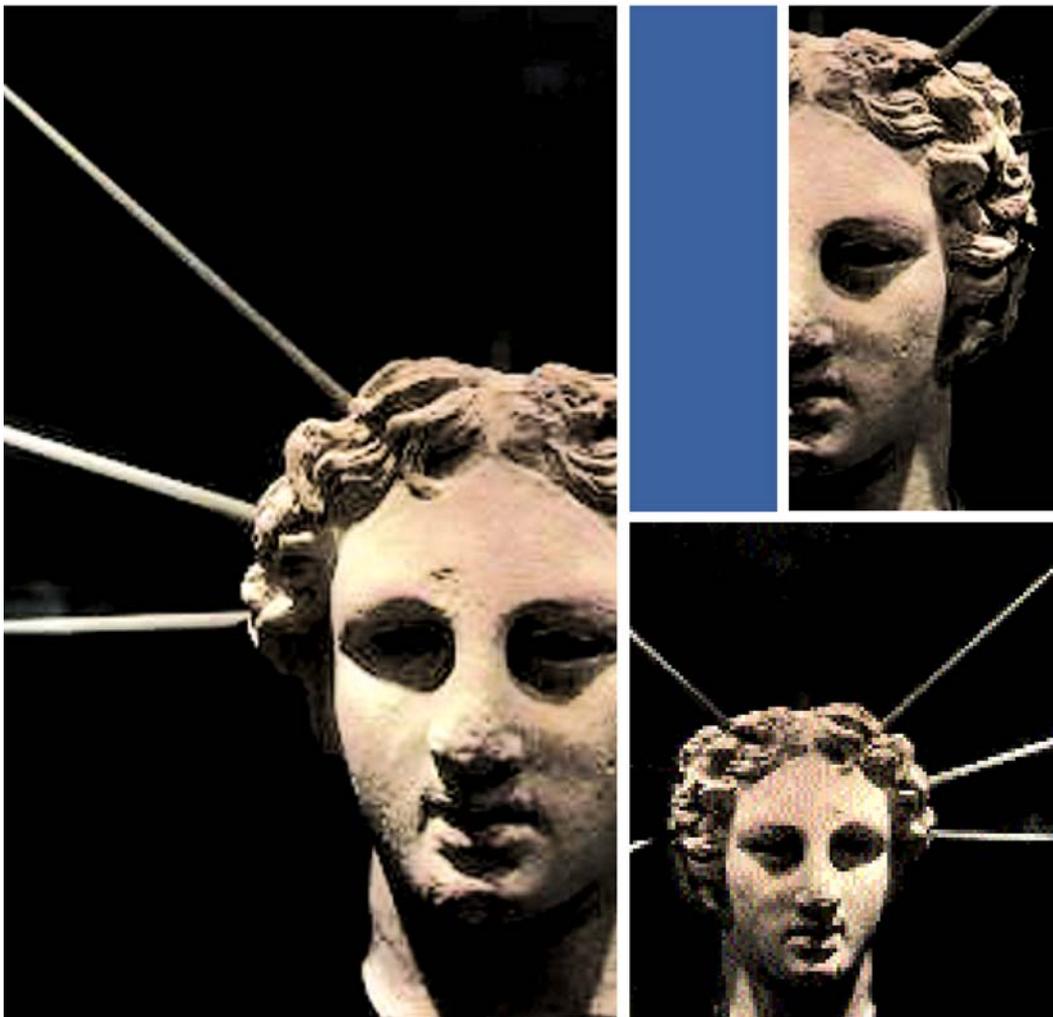
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Media Governmentality, Howardism and the Hanson Effect

David Nolan

Introduction

In September 1996 Pauline Hanson gave her first speech as an independent MP in the Australian federal parliament. In an address that was to become infamous, Hanson not only repeated claims that government expenditure targeting Indigenous disadvantage was unfair and divisive, but criticised policies of multiculturalism on similar grounds, argued that immigration levels were too high, and suggested the country was in danger of being ‘swamped by Asians’. This speech not only attracted an enormous amount of media attention but in its own right, but was followed by a mediated ‘race debate’ that worked to propel Hanson to the status of media celebrity. In the period that followed Hanson gained a degree of media attention that was unprecedented for an independent politician, with one content analysis of national and metropolitan newspaper coverage finding that she received roughly the same amount of media coverage as the Prime Minister for the next three months (Deutchman and Ellison 1999). This profile led Hanson to establish her own party, Pauline Hanson’s One Nation, which for a time attracted considerable support from voters in both federal and state elections, before negative publicity from financial and administrative mismanagement as well as factional infighting within the party led to a dramatic drop in support. As public debates surrounding Hanson’s coverage attested, for the period that that Hansonism constituted a significant and demonstrable (if ill-defined) political phenomenon, media coverage in general and journalistic practices in particular played a key role.

Yet while this was generally recognized, for the most part discussion of the role journalism played in producing Hansonism tended to be framed in rather moralistic terms. That is, journalists were either criticized for promoting Hanson and her racist worldview, or coverage was defended on the grounds that Hansonism constituted a significant phenomenon in Australian politics and/or that it was representative of Hanson’s demonstrable popularity with sections of the Australian public.¹ In such critiques, the relation between media and politics was implicitly presented in oppositional terms, such that media were viewed as either: (a) expressive of a polity; or (b) a force acting upon that polity in a positive or negative fashion. For the most part, academic analyses tended to take a less overtly moralistic approach, focusing on how industry conventions and formats work to determine how news is defined and produced rather than the morality of individual journalists. However, even in such work, which explained coverage in

¹ For critical reviews of such debates, see Goot (2000), Nolan (2001).

the terms of both functionalist sociology and as a product of political economy, the relation between media and politics was considered through the same implicit framework, well described by Allan (1999: 9) as an assumed 'media-society dichotomy'.

In the case of the former (cf. Bell 1997, Putnis 1997), Hanson could be seen as an example that served to illustrate theories of how media operate to uphold normative models of social order by, to refer to the most well-known articulation of this approach, 'visualizing deviance' (Ericson et al. 1987). This broadly sociological explanation is supported by empirical analysis of the implicit 'news values' that underpin news definition, as stories come to be defined as such by their status as instances of the unusual, unexpected, conflictual, dramatic, extraordinary or socially deviant by contrast to (assumed) normative conditions and values. In this case, Hanson's status as a suspected racist, a figure of controversy and catalyst for social division, a woman in public life, an unconventional or 'maverick' politician whose public statements challenged assumptions informing mainstream policy approaches, as well as her visually and socially idiosyncratic public persona, all served to mark her as highly newsworthy. The functionalist aspect of such analyses becomes apparent if, for example, we consider Putnis's conclusion that in its inadvertent promotion of Hanson the media had 'just been doing its job...in the ongoing articulation and mapping of our society, a process in which the media is playing a very important role' (1997: 93). This conclusion not only appears strangely disjunctive with Putnis's own suggestion that media representations had actively *shaped* the Hanson phenomenon itself, but serves to reduce the role media play in social politics to an expressive one. It also serves to deflect attention from the politics inherent to such norms, the degree to which they may be gendered etc.

By contrast, explanations informed by a critique of political economy focused on how Hanson's 'deviance' served to make her highly valuable copy, as the controversy surrounding her coincided with the economic imperatives of commercial media industries (cf. Lewis 1997, Jakubowicz 1997). Indeed, for some, Hanson was seen as both product and illustration of an increased commercialization of journalism, whereby economic considerations serve to determine news agendas across *all* media to an unprecedented degree. Thus, in line with suggestions that an increased 'tabloidisation' of journalism has been evident in recent years (Gripsrud 1999), Lewis has argued that commercial television, talkback radio and the tabloid press, which he describes as 'the New Media', set the public agenda for the Hanson debate, while 'Old Media' (quality press, public radio and television) coverage was more reactive. The 'Hanson effect' is thus explained by pointing toward the economic base of media industries, such that the actions of journalists are seen as determined by the strictures of political economy. While in many ways this argument is quite plausible, it is one that tends to discount the question of the agency of journalists as critical social actors. This is not only problematic because it continues to support the opposition between media and society discussed above. It also upholds an implicitly oppositional relationship between 'structure' and 'agency' that Buckingham (1993) has also identified as a problematic element in discussions of media audiences. That is, journalists are viewed as either sovereign individuals that bear individual responsibility for any given coverage, or as subjects whose agency is entirely determined by anterior economic (or social) structures. The possibility that

journalists may be seen as social actors that exercise an agency whose scope may be seen as *circumscribed* by sociopolitical, organizational and discursive structures rather than *determined* by them is not considered.²

The point of this critique is not to suggest that these approaches do not provide valuable insights for understanding the Hanson phenomenon. Rather, it is to highlight how, as explanations, they are limited by the terms of the 'media-society dichotomy', and to argue that to understand the determinants of media representation the question of journalistic agency remains a crucial one. This is not, however, to propose a return to an approach that takes as its starting point the views of journalists as individuals, to be explored by survey research into attitudes and predilections. While such elements of subjectivity no doubt do exert an influence, taking this route merely suggests that anterior determinants of journalism are filtered through the views of sovereign individuals. Rather, addressing the problem of journalistic agency requires that critical attention be paid to the practices and conventions of journalism as a professional activity, and the rationalities routinely employed by critically engaged practitioners in specific situations. On the one hand, this means focusing on practices and conventions of information gathering and writing employed by media professionals, an area that has received considerable critical attention by researchers, but requires continued critical attention as the field of journalism develops further practices and formats.³ On the other, it means considering the forms of critical reason employed by practitioners that also serve to constitute journalism.

While this area has been partially explored by research that has examined frameworks of journalistic objectivity, such work tends to approach objectivity either as an ideology or as a pragmatic epistemology employed by professionals (cf. Schudson 2001, Dunlevy 1998, Hackett and Zhao 1998, Golding and Elliot 1995). As a consequence the relationship between 'theories of the press', routinely invoked by journalists in response to media criticism, and the production of journalism tends to be viewed either as a means by which journalists gain a distortedly idealistic view of their own practice or as a convenient alibi. To consider these as *rationalities* of journalism, by contrast, is to call attention to how specific normative models of what journalism is and/or should be work to regulate both media production *and* critique in different historical contexts. It should also be stressed that such normative frameworks for understanding journalism are, like production processes and representational formats, contextually and historically variable. Nevertheless (or rather bearing this in mind), I wish to argue in this paper that journalism in liberal-democratic societies can be historically understood as a technology that constitutes a vital element within a broader apparatus of liberal government. Having outlined this case, I will suggest how this provides a basis for understanding the 'Hanson effect' as, in part, a product of contemporary formations of liberal journalism.

² Here, I am drawing on the conception of social agency outlined by Hindess (1989), which avoids the problems of both individualism and structuralism discussed here.

³ A review of such research, that emphasises the need for ethnographic research to pay continued critical attention to the changing 'news ecology', is provided by Cottle (2000).

Liberal Journalism and Media Governmentality

While liberalism continues to be viewed predominantly as a political doctrine that places primary emphasis on individual rights, in recent times a number of political theorists and historians have contended that liberalism is better understood as an approach to the problem of how to govern (cf. Dean 1999, Rose 1999, Hindess 1996, Barry et al 1996). In this light, liberalism's emphasis on individual rights is not simply an end in itself, but rather stems from concerns regarding the effects of 'too much' government. In order to elaborate the implications of this for an understanding of journalism, it is useful to consider how this approach provides the basis for a contestation of a more conventional understanding of journalism as (ideally or actually) a 'fourth estate' or 'public sphere' that mediates between civil society and various sites of power, including the state. While perhaps more often viewed in terms of its failure to match up to the public sphere ideal than as representative of it, the very fact that the realities of journalism are considered through the prism of this model exerts a significant heuristic influence on how problems in journalistic practice may be understood. Thus, contrary to a view of academic media criticism operating with a more sophisticated view of journalism than that which informs public debate and industry practice, it may be argued that the normative understanding assumed in much academic criticism serves to reinforce a view prevalent within the field as a whole. A limitation of the public sphere model, however, is that it almost invariably reproduces a double conceptualization of journalism that is ultimately contradictory. On the one hand, journalism is understood as a means by which 'public opinion' itself is produced, reproduced and transformed. Simultaneously (and more problematically) it is seen as a means by which the public, understood as a sovereign (if fragmented) body of citizens, may have their collective views or interests represented. In this regard, analyses that are built on an understanding of journalism as a public sphere take their place within a broader liberal understanding of government outlined by Dean and Hindess:

On the liberal view...government is seen primarily from the top-down - that is, primarily as the work of *the* government and of agencies that it authorises. The focus here is on the limits to government, understood in terms of a complex view of the importance of individual liberty. On the one hand, liberty is seen as desirable in itself, and therefore as setting limits to the character and objectives of governmental regulation...On the other hand, individual liberty is seen as necessary to the well-being of the state itself. (Dean and Hindess 1998: 4)

In disputing such a view of government Dean and Hindess draw upon Michel Foucault's analysis of 'governmentality', which flatly describes this liberal view as 'a reductionist vision of the relative importance of the state's role' which, paradoxically, 'renders it absolutely essential as a target needing to be attacked and as a privileged position needing to be occupied' (Foucault 1991: 102). Dean and Hindess argue that the problem with this framework is that, while it is one that is both adopted and engendered by liberalism itself, it provides a highly limited basis for an historical understanding of liberal governance. Rather than being an abstract political philosophy, liberalism emerged at a particular historical moment as a pragmatic response to the problem of how to govern populations, in a context where various forms of enquiry were making the latter visible as a domain that was

subject to apparently inherent biological, economic and social processes. In light of this understanding of populations as extremely complex objects of rule, various approaches to the problem of how to govern such an entity emphasised the importance of both gaining a detailed knowledge of such processes and developing technical means to direct them. What is particular to liberalism, however, is the suspicion that excessively interventionist approaches to governing such processes may work to distort, jeopardise or undermine their autonomy, upon which the effectiveness of government itself depends.

In this respect, rather than a doctrine that emphasizes the primacy of individual rights *against* government, liberalism constitutes a rationality of *limited* government that ‘undertakes to determine how government is possible, what it can do, and what ambitions it must needs renounce to be able to accomplish what lies within its powers’ (Gordon 1991: 15). Since liberalism posits that government is both necessary and dangerous (as it always threatens to compromise those quasi-autonomous processes necessary to it) it not only provides a grounds for favouring particular approaches to government, but also a basis for constant transformation and self-renewal via liberal critiques of liberal rule. It is this inherent tendency toward critique and reform of practices of liberal rule that Dean points to where he notes that:

In its concern to establish a set of linkages between a government of subjects active in their own rule and a knowledge of processes necessary to the security of the state, liberalism hollows out a space in which it is open to a dialogical self-critique in relation to forms of *positive and interpretive disciplines* and critical discourses. (Dean 1999: 52; emphasis added)

Emerging as a practice that is part of (though not exhausted by) liberalism as a heading for a much broader apparatus of governmental rationalities, techniques and practices, journalism can be seen to constitute a technology of liberal government in two senses. Firstly, it constitutes one such ‘positive and interpretive discipline’ in its own right, with characteristic (albeit multiple) modes of knowledge production and transmission, that provides an ongoing critical commentary that is widely recognised to be a highly influential element in the ‘dialogical self-critique’ of liberal-democratic societies. Secondly, it also provides a mechanism through which various other disciplines and critical discourses enter into public dialogue and contestation.

Since this view of journalism as a technology of government in its own right contests a more habitual view of it as a ‘public sphere’ positioned between governmental authorities and civil society, it is worth examining how liberal ‘theories of the press’ may be reconsidered in light of such an analysis. In his classic articulation of liberal press theory, Peterson (1956: 74) lists two central tasks of journalism as ‘enlightening the public so as to make it capable of self-government’ and ‘safeguarding the rights of the individual by serving as a watchdog against government’. In the first instance, journalism is positioned as being explicitly concerned with issues of public conduct and subject formation. In the second, journalism stands as a watchdog on government in the public’s name. On the basis of public sphere theory, these roles can only be seen as a site of tension and potential contradiction. Indeed, one might easily jump to the conclusion that they stand as opposites, since in one role journalism constitutes a source of authority that is reliant on forms of expertise, while in the latter it

apparently stands ‘against’ authority. However, if journalism is viewed as a technology of government, then these aspects of press theory can be seen as dual moments within a single process, wherein various forms of expertise (including journalism itself) *both* constitute sites of authority and engage in processes of critique and reform. Such a reading may be seen to be the more plausible one if it is acknowledged that in their ‘watchdog’ role journalists are also habitually reliant upon various forms of expertise. For example, in taking on this role of ‘public representative’, journalists routinely rely on: expert assessments and commentaries on the political climate; figures who claim to speak for ‘the people’, including elected politicians; technologies for measuring ‘public opinion’ and associated forms of expertise in interpreting findings etc. The reciprocity between these two roles becomes apparent if we consider that it is the discursively produced norms of autonomous citizenship, produced through these very processes of developing, measuring and representing models of ‘the public interest’ and ‘public opinion’, that inform practices of ‘public enlightenment’. For example, it is in relation to such norms that particular developments and figures featured in everyday journalism are defined as being of social and moral concern and/or approbation.

In short, it is the journalistic understanding of its readerships as *publics*, which journalism itself bears the responsibility of both shaping and representing, that marks it as a liberal technology that plays a key role in a broader apparatus of government. It must be emphasised, however, that ‘publics’ do not exist simply as objectively identifiable entities, but are discursively produced through various forms of quantitative and qualitative knowledge. It is in relation to normative models of ‘the public’ produced by such forms of expertise that journalism develops, but such models also provide a basis for media critique. In this regard, as an agency of public knowledge, journalism exists in a reciprocally constitutive and dependent relationship with other such agencies.

Neo-Liberal Journalism, Howardism and the Hanson Effect

One implication of this is that a genealogy of contemporary forms of journalism (which I cannot pursue here) would not only involve an examination of how rationalities and practices of journalism have changed over time, but how they have shifted in relation to changing ‘publics’ produced through various forms of institutional practice. Of particular relevance for an understanding of ‘the Hanson effect’, however, is the development of various forms of journalistic practice that have been increasingly informed by a neo-liberal understanding of the public as a body of sovereign individual consumers exercising choice within a market. While various aspects of this could be described, I wish to highlight two that seem of particular importance. Firstly, journalism has become increasingly reliant on quantitative measures of public opinion as a basis of its legitimacy. This not only means that audience size and ratings have gained an increasing primacy across almost all journalistic forms, but that a vital element of professional expertise has been the ability to change tack, or refocus stories altogether, in response to perceived shifts in public opinion. Secondly, this neo-liberal ethos has worked to resituate an understanding of expertise as institutionally produced techniques of thought and action toward a view of it as the rhetorical claims of individuals competing within a market. This has not only worked increasingly to mystify the social relations upon which expertise is based, but has served to support a form of

populism that juxtaposes the claimed knowledge of elites with the presumably organic 'common sense' knowledge of the people (Greenfield and Williams 2001: 40-41).

In considering the latter effect of neo-liberal models of 'the public', I have drawn upon Greenfield and Williams' analysis of 'Howardism' as that particular neo-liberal rationality associated with three Howard governments that has increasingly provided the predominant basis upon which politics has become thinkable in Australia since the mid-1990s. While supporting their analysis of Howardism as a populist political rationality, I wish to suggest that its success is inexplicable without an examination of the grounds upon which its logics proved seductive, and that this must include a consideration of developments in media practice. Indeed, the degree to which Howardism is dependent upon forms of media practice is something that Howard himself appears acutely conscious of, in his seemingly ceaseless appearances in television interviews and on talkback radio in particular. I would also contend, however, that it is possible to discern a shift in journalistic practice in Australia during this period as it has become increasingly informed by this political rationality.

'Howardism' has been well defined by Greenfield and Williams as a 'particular version of neo-liberalism associated with two Howard governments and their blend of economic fundamentalism, assimilationist social agendas, the steady privatisation of capital and risk, and a nostalgic politics' (Greenfield and Williams 2001:32). As the use of the word 'associated' here suggests, their analysis is concerned to show how the policy platform of the Howard government is enabled by Howardism, as the political rationality that makes such policy measures appear both appropriate and necessary in the current climate, at the same time as the electoral success achieved by the government has resulted in a further entrenchment of Howardism as a hegemonic political discourse. This discourse has involved the installation of a particular form of populism as the predominant discursive framework through which a wide range of problems are articulated. In this respect, Howardism may be characterised by a particular rhetorical framework that, among other moves, identifies the national interest with 'the mainstream', personified in the figure of the 'battler', which is defined against 'elites' and/or 'special interests'. This move has also enabled various attempts to marshal evidence against the government's stance to be positioned as the expression of elite and factional self-interest. Greenfield and Williams argue that this strategy, which they describe as 'mainstreaming', involves the active construction of norms and standards 'to which various marginalised are pressured to aspire and to assimilate' (2001:33; see also Johnson 2000). It is these same norms that have simultaneously provided the basis upon which problematic individuals and groups have tended to be publicly identified, disciplined and punished.⁴

⁴ Perhaps the most strikingly visible instance of this was at the 2001 federal election, in the government's framing of the *Tampa* incident, where it both opposed the safe passage of those rescued at sea and denied the right of subjects to seek political asylum, as a demonstration of its credentials to ensure national security in the face of threatening others (MacCallum 2002; Perera 2002; Marr and Wilkinson 2003).

There is not scope in this paper to provide a detailed analysis of media coverage of Hanson, or the various ways in which it was implicated in that process, an undertaking I have pursued elsewhere (Nolan 2002). It is instructive, however, to consider how John Howard's initial refusal to criticise Hanson for her statements and his legitimisation of her views as an 'accurate reflection of what people feel' (quoted in Lynch and Reavell 1997: 40) set in train a process whereby Hanson actually attained popular status. Indeed, while she continued to be represented as both a political extremist and a problematic individual, journalists came to see Hanson as exactly what she claimed to be: a genuine 'representative of the people'. The centrality of Howard's personal role in this process cannot be underestimated for, as Prime Minister, he constitutes a key reference point for the definition of what constitutes acceptable public discourse. Howard not only positioned Hanson's speech as a representation of the sentiments of 'ordinary Australians' and the removal of "the pall of censorship on certain issues", but also contested the suggestion that Hanson's views could not reasonably be labelled racist (Cope and Kalantzis 1997, Newman 1997). Howard's suggestion was that politically correct elites had 'got it wrong' because racism was self-evidently immoral and the people could, for this reason, not be considered racist. This ultimately led to established understandings of what constitutes racism themselves being undermined. Nowhere was this clearer than where Hanson's statements *themselves* were used as the basis for opinion polls (see Goot 1997; Blood and Lee 1997). Such polls worked to provide political legitimacy for proposals such as 'reducing Asian immigration' simply by presenting them as serious options for which respondents could reasonably grant or refuse support. At the same time, poll results served to provide further support to Hanson's claims to 'represent the people'.

Given the tendency of populist journalism to draw on such findings to tailor their stories to public opinion, such practice is an obvious cause for concern. However, while there is little doubt that in some cases journalists deliberately aimed to exploit Hanson's market value, perhaps more crucial was the way journalists who were disturbed by Hanson's stance nevertheless adopted the terms of Howardism. For instance, Paul Kelly, former editor of *The Australian*, has described how journalists in the quality press had originally focused on Hanson because they were scandalised by Howard's refusal to take a stance against her:

Hanson received an exaggerated coverage because the media, profoundly hostile to her views, felt that exposure was the prelude to extinguishment. The unintended consequence was different. Hanson's support and importance rose to reflect the coverage she had received. A cruel irony and a miscalculation by the quality media. (Kelly 1998: 95-6)

Here, Kelly reproduces precisely the terms of a liberal discourse of journalism, where journalists bear responsibility for leading and representing 'the people' simultaneously. However, in representing its strategy as a 'miscalculation', Kelly effectively accepts that, in failing to predict the consequences of their actions, journalists had indeed lost touch with 'the people'. Such a reading (which views newsmaking primarily as a reflection of individual morals rather than professional processes) does not provide an adequate basis for understanding the basis of Hanson's coverage. It does, however, serve to illustrate the always problematic nature of the journalistic credo of 'representing the public', which enforces the

constant negotiation of a relation of identity or non-identity with a (perceived) actual public.

While Kelly drew upon the Howardist elites-people dichotomy to defend the morality of his own practice, others drew on exactly the same framework to engage in a process of self-critique. For instance, Sydney Morning Herald journalist Margo Kingston has recounted, in *mea culpa* mode, how she once unsuccessfully argued that Hanson's maiden speech should not be reported at all, how at one point she had a policy of refusing to speak to Hanson's media adviser or to write stories about Hanson or her party, and how she had 'quietly cheered' when watching protests outside One Nation meetings. Reflecting on this stance in hindsight, she states that 'I was wrong. Most of us were wrong' (Kingston 2000, p2). Why such a response was 'wrong', as far as Kingston is concerned, is because it failed to recognise the extent to which Hanson *was* a genuine representative of the people. Thus, she tells of how, in the face of 'strong non-tabloid opinion that the treatment promoted her by taking her too seriously' *Herald* journalists had argued that 'she now had to be taken seriously - *her poll results* were showing she could be an influential, explosive political player' (Kingston 1999: xxv, emphasis added). Again, this argument is grounded precisely in a liberal discourse of the media's ideal role as a representative 'public sphere' between state and civil society:

Dick Morris, former spin-doctor to President Clinton, says in his book..."the media play the key role in bringing the private pains and needs of real people to public attention". This role, along with its corollary - to scrutinise the powerful to ensure that they are telling the people the truth - is the reason why we have a privileged role in a democracy. The Hanson phenomenon exposed it as unfulfilled...In short, Hansonism was partly the media's fault for failing to act as the interface between the people and the powerful, and for turning our backs on the public to become just another part of a complacent establishment. (Kingston 2000: 3)

It may be argued that a principled refusal to report any of Hanson's statements *is* a problematic stance. However, it is surely far more reasonable to ask questions about the sort of polity that might be engendered through journalistic practice, including decisions over whether or not to give prominence to racist forms of 'common sense', than it is to argue that such decisions have already been made by a public that the journalist must 'second guess'. What must be noted, however, is that it was such a view of journalism as an *expressive practice* that served as a rationale for continued, and more sympathetic, coverage of Hanson.

It was only through an adoption of the discursive framework assumed by Howardism, in which politics is viewed in such reductively expressive terms, that Hanson came to be seen as representative of 'the people' by contrast to social 'elites', including journalists. Hanson's inflated profile should also be seen, however, as a case study that demonstrates the centrality of media practices to the formation of contemporary politics. In this respect, both Hanson and Howard were the beneficiaries of a journalism 'long habituated to populist schema and understanding...[itself] as having a particular representative affinity with or responsibility to "the ordinary person"' (Greenfield and Williams 2001: 33), particularly as it has come to be informed by a neo-liberal ethos. However, the 'Hanson effect' was far more than simply an example of a journalistic phenomenon, for its consequence was to reinstate views previously seen as regressively racist as not only acceptable public discourse but also, to a

considerable degree, political common sense. If this effect was beneficial for some, it has had extremely grave consequences for others – particularly those ‘others’ whose concerns have been marginalised, and who have been explicitly demonised, as a result of their embodied inability to match up to Howardism’s economic norm of the entrepreneurial citizen and its cultural norm of ‘mainstream’ Australian national character.

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