Hanson gets the band back together – can she make an impact?

Pauline Hanson has reunited with One Nation to contest the seat of Lockyer in the upcoming Queensland election. The reunion is an acknowledgement that neither Hanson nor her former party has fared so well since their break-up.

A rapid rise – and fall

Pauline Hanson’s One Nation exploded onto the scene a year after Hanson won the seat of Oxley as a disendorsed Liberal candidate in 1996. By this stage, she had already made her own mark on politics. She used her maiden speech to parliament to decry Asian migration, and claimed that taxpayer-funded industries were “servicing Aboriginals, multiculturalists and a host of other minority groups” at the expense of ordinary Australians.

One Nation’s fortunes peaked in the 1998 Queensland state election, when it won 25% of the statewide vote, and Coalition preferences helped it to claim 11 seats. But the 11 Queensland MPs quickly proved a motley crew, and One Nation began to fracture under internal power struggles. There was a major split in February 1999, and other dissident members left to form the City-Country Alliance at the end of that year.

Meanwhile, an agreement between the major parties to put One Nation last on preferences had nobbled the party at the October 1998 federal election. It ended up with a sole senate seat, in Queensland.

What kind of party is this?

From its beginning, One Nation espoused an anti-politics mantra, rejecting the title of “party”.

Despite this populist rhetoric, the original party had a profoundly undemocratic dual structure. On one hand was the incorporated One Nation Ltd., entirely controlled by Hanson and her political lieutenants David Oldfield and David Ettridge. On the other hand was the constitutionally separate and powerless Pauline Hanson’s One Nation (Membership), which housed thousands of party members.

Following a challenge from disgruntled party members, the Supreme Court of Queensland ruled in August 1999 that the One Nation Party had been fraudulently registered in Queensland. Subsequent splits in the party saw its title shortened to One Nation, and Hanson went solo.

The problem with populism

The fortunes of One Nation highlight the problems of populist parties. Candidates are usually untested, while the parties themselves lack internal vetting processes and have poor internal discipline.

Populist parties also tend to have fluid platforms, and to coalesce around a general position rather than policy specifics. Likewise, electoral success tends to create an alternate power base. As party members become MPs, they increasingly compete for influence with their charismatic leader.

All of this provides fodder for "creative differences". In present day politics, something of the same problem can be seen with the Palmer United Party (PUP). And as with PUP leader Clive Palmer, Hanson also had a tendency to fall out with her political lieutenants.

Hanson returns – again
Hanson’s return to the stage might be more remarkable had it not occurred so frequently before. Since losing office in 1998, Hanson has been a serial candidate.

In fairness, several of Hanson’s earlier attempts were close-run misses. When she first ran for the seat of Blair in 1998, for example, she took 36% of the primary vote but missed out on preferences. She even reprised the United Australia Party label in 2007.

What is more interesting this time is the reunification with One Nation and the return of the original name – not least because Hanson has tended to outpoll the One Nation Party itself during her solo attempts.

**What’s new this time?**

This time around, Hanson’s formula is similar. However, the protagonists are different, and so is the lay of the land in Australian politics.

Hanson continues to attack the established political elites for pursuing “political correctness” and betraying ordinary folk. The party’s new campaign themes predictably focus on popular insecurity over migration of Muslims (with a focus on the Halal registration issue and burqa bans), the United Nations, the recent China trade deal and foreign investment.

Notably, the privatisation of water, food security and deregulation of the dairy industry also featured strongly in the campaign’s November launch. This is a reminder that insecurity over the scale and pace of economic change explained much of Hanson’s former support.

While the right of Chinese companies to buy land is another campaign theme, Hanson’s original anti-Asian rhetoric in the late 1990s now seems as retro as the White Australia policy. This shows how faddish supposedly deep wells of popular resentment can actually be, and the way a revolving series of outsiders can be invoked to fuel anxiety over migration.

It is also true that the bipartisan consensus of 1996 has shifted considerably rightward on totemic issues of immigration, asylum seekers and the republic, narrowing the space for Hansonite politics and partly incorporating it within a mainstream position. There is little doubt that John Howard out-competed Hansonism through incorporation, and One Nation may be right when they claim some credit for these developments.

> Micro-parties like Rise Up Australia, whose platform includes cutting immigration, may have filled Hanson’s former political niche. AAP/Joe Castro

**Is there room for Hanson in 2015?**

Whether the reformed One Nation can make hay from the minor groundswell of sentiment around the Halal registration issue remains to be seen, though some minor upper house success can hardly be ruled out – except in Queensland itself, where the Legislative Council was abolished in 1921.

The reformed Pauline Hanson’s One Nation will probably lie somewhere on the border between minor and micro parties, where prospects are difficult to gauge. With the honourable exception of the NSW Legislative Council, micro-party success in Australian upper houses has more to do with preference “Ponzi schemes” than actual voter behaviour.

Despite being One Nation’s birthplace, Queensland in 2015 may not suit the reunion gig given the state has no upper house. While Queensland’s optional preferential system does make it harder for the majors to block a third party, the almost inevitable major swing against the Newman government is unlikely to prove fertile ground for a minor party resurgence.