

The (re)birth of far-right populism in Australia: The appeal of Pauline Hanson's persuasive definitions

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Chapter 13 The (Re) Birth of Far-Right Populism in Australia: The Appeal of Pauline Hanson's Persuasive Definitions/ Ben Fenton Smith (Griffith University, Australia)

Introduction

In the same year as Donald Trump's presidential victory, another result sent shockwaves through Australia's political landscape: the resurrection of Pauline Hanson's One Nation (PHON) party, which emerged from the 2016 federal election as the largest right-wing party outside the mainstream Liberal-National coalition in the upper house (Senate). This achievement confirmed PHON as Australia's representative among the maverick far-right populist movements that have come to prominence globally (see chapters by Baysha, Brandmayer, Gaul, Kahlina, Knoblock, and Vekow in this book). This was a "rise again" moment for Pauline Hanson, who first emerged from obscurity in the 1996 federal election as a self-styled "fish-and-chip shop owning single mother". She surprisingly won a seat in the House of Representatives by tapping into popular unrest over multiculturalism (particularly Asian immigration), Aboriginal welfare, high-end profiteering, foreign aid, and foreign corporate takeovers. Her maiden speech to parliament has been described as "the most widely circulated speech ever delivered in the Australian parliament" (Goot 2005:89). Its incendiary suggestion that "we are in danger of being swamped by Asians" is still seared into the Australian consciousness.

Space does not allow for a detailed account of Hanson's travails over the past twenty years. Between 1998 and 2016, her presence and/or that of PHON in federal/state parliaments was inconsistent (at times non-existent) due to the party's organisational incompetence and infighting, and a *cordon sanitaire* implemented by major parties. She lost her seat, spent time in jail for electoral fraud and was even expelled from her own party. But there always remained a sizable and latent 'anti-other' voter base in Australia whose values were never truly captured by the major parties. The constituency's non-representation was mistaken by many for non-existence. This explains why Hanson was able to return as a federal MP after a 19-year hiatus and seamlessly resume as the nation's most recognisable and divisive politician. While her party's electoral fortunes waxed and waned, Hanson never relinquished her mantle as the Australian far-right's spiritual leader, remaining in the public eye as (variously) "political prisoner", TV celebrity, and marginalized political campaigner. Given the right set of circumstances she could always return as the "voice" of the unrepresented radical right. Her personal setbacks and perceived exclusion from the mainstream only enhanced her iconic status in the eyes of many as a far-right martyr, victim of elitist cabals, and fighter for the forgotten people.

Populism as style and ideology

There is an ongoing discussion in political science and discourse studies about the extent to which the so-called "populist" phenomenon essentially embodies a communicative style or a coherent ideology. When viewed as the former, there is relatively firm agreement about its characteristic elements. Populist rhetors invariably position themselves as the voice of "the people", identify ways that "ordinary" citizens are exploited by elite interests, and circumscribe a monolithic national identity that necessitates the construal of outsider groups. Variations of this framework are found in the work of Jagers and Walgrave (2007), Mudde (2004), Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), Pelinka

(2013), and Wodak (2015, 2017), among others. Wodak (2014), however, strikes a cautionary note about the “populism as style” thesis, arguing that it runs the risk of downplaying the ideological substance of populist movements.

Populism has a capacity to attach itself to so-called “thick-centred” or “full” ideologies, such as neoconservatism, far-right nationalism, or green leftism. When utilised as a communicative frame to “sell” these ideologies, it evolves into a fully-fledged socioeconomic critique. Such political movements are often dismissed because the critique is cloaked in populist terms. However, the electoral victories of Trump, Hanson and the Brexiteers proved that political movements are no less “substantial” if their message is delivered in an unconventional, disruptive, or emotive manner. That is to say, such movements are not necessarily “policy-lite”: decisions on protectionism and immigration, for example, materially impact millions of people.

Something these movements typically share is the capacity to popularise ideas which had hitherto been discredited as naïve, taboo, backward, unscientific, isolationist or unethical. At a macro level, one central notion of populism is that existing constitutional structures have failed to actualise the true will of the people, and that greater forms of direct democracy are called for. On this basis, Canovan (1999:2) cautions against the “hasty disdain” with which populism is brushed aside:

Populists see themselves as true democrats, voicing popular grievances and opinions systematically ignored by governments, mainstream parties and the media. Many of them favour ‘direct democracy’ – political decision making by referendum and popular initiative.

Populism can therefore be viewed as a disruption, or threat, to the status quo. Stavrakakis (2017:524) argues that a common element to populists is not so much their “far-right” or “far-left” orientation, but that they “cause surprise”:

Mainstream media, established political forces and academics are quick to denounce their scandalous nature: all of a sudden, the unthinkable seems to be happening. Populism is seen as violating or transgressing an established order of how politics is properly, rationally and professionally done. It emerges where it should not when it should not; it disrupts a supposed “normal” course of events and can only be seen as a signal of failure.

These formulations of populism apply to Pauline Hanson as well. On the one hand, she adopts policy positions on multiculturalism, economic protectionism, gun control and climate denial that are typical of far-right movements globally. She is broadly committed to direct representation of “the people’s” views in decision-making processes. But she is also a populist *communicator* of note because she combines a parochial Australian “ordinariness” with the rhetorical tropes of international far-right leaders. While she has drawn as much attention for *the way she speaks* as for *what she says*, the former has been subjected to far less systematic analysis.

The significance of Hanson’s far-right populism

In 2016 Pauline Hanson made the bold claim that her 1996 maiden speech “shook a nation, woke up many Australians and gave hope to those who thought no-one was listening” (*Hansard* 2016).ⁱ The truth is, her maiden speech *did* rock the nation and *did* inspire many followers who felt their views were not represented by the mainstream parties. Stavrakakis’s notion of populist surprise is evident in the way she subverted the convention of the maiden speech, which is traditionally an uncontroversial statement of warm-hearted values given at the commencement of a

parliamentarian's career. By targeting Asian immigrants and indigenous Australians, she outraged both the elites (media, political, and academic) and society in general. But she also "woke them up" to the fact that large numbers of Australians shared her views and felt unrepresented.

One Nation's emergence in 1996 marked the birth of an organised Australian radical right-wing movement (Deutchman 2000; Gibson et al. 2002; Scalmer 1999). Since the 1960s (the last days of the White Australia Policy), issues of race and immigration had not been hotly debated in mainstream politics. With Hanson's rise, race-based appeals by politicians have achieved a substantial degree of legitimacy. As Hogan and Haltinner (2015:525) observe, a secret to the longevity of conservative Prime Minister John Howard's government (1996-2007) was that it quickly adopted Hanson's rhetoric for electoral advantage:

[T]he dramatic rise of One Nation helped reframe ethnonationalism as a potentially legitimate way of conceptualising the nation. Amidst contentious debates over the arrival of "boat people" on Australia's shores, John Howard's Liberal party warned of the nation being "swamped by asylum seekers".

This has continued under subsequent Coalition *and* Labor governments and is now a common catch cry in election campaigns. However, the reality of winning elections ensures that even the most conservative prime ministerial aspirants can never afford to stray so far from the ideological centre as to allay the conviction of Hanson's supporters that no-one but *her* truly speaks for them. As Marr (2017:61) rightly states: "People listen to Hanson. It's her gift. The only political asset she has is an unshakable belief out there that she speaks for real Australians as no politician can."

Persuasive definitions

The way we define things has consequences, because "to choose a definition is to plead a cause" and "to name an object or idea is to influence attitudes about it" (Zarefsky et al. 1984:113). The stakes are raised when the "definer" is a politician, someone with a platform to impose their cause on others. It is therefore crucial to scrutinize the definitions made by influential public figures, because these actors do not just objectively define given realities, but offer self-interested versions. As Walton and Macagno (2015:140) point out, the version of reality that we find most convincing or natural is likely to form the basis for our acceptance of particular policies:

[N]ames can become the premises of tacit arguments supporting specific conclusions. The classification of a state of affairs as "peacekeeping" or "war" can lead to conflicting conclusions based on very different values ("to keep peace is our duty" or "wars should be always avoided"). The definitions that assign to such terms the same reference are generally taken for granted, even when they can be controversial. These implicit and condensed arguments can play a fundamental role in political discourse, especially when some policies need to be justified or argued for before the public.

In this sense all definitions are, to some extent, acts of persuasion. On the one hand, arguments *about* definitions explicitly draw attention to the meaning of a term. For example, conservatives and progressives may squabble over the definition of "marriage" in a same-sex marriage debate. On the other hand, arguments *from* definition typically occur below the level of consciousness. For example, a speaker's use of the term "Australian values" can be rhetorically powerful because it stems from

an assumed, not openly contested, denotation of the term. Compliance with the meaning is achieved without struggle, because it happens unwittingly.

The sections that follow focus on four ways in which Hanson uses persuasive definitions for popular appeal: dissociation, reframing, floating signifiers, and definitions by effect. Each are explained in their respective sections, drawing on the work of scholars in rhetoric and political science (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000; Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969; Schiappa 1993; Walton and Macagno 2015; Zarefsky 2004).

Data

Eleven significant speeches were selected from different points in Hanson's parliamentary career (see **Error! Reference source not found.**) and analysed for instances of persuasive definitions. Several factors went into the selection of these texts. Firstly, Hanson herself views them as significant, since all but one of the speeches appear in her book *Pauline: In her own words* (2018), a self-selected collection of major addresses.ⁱⁱ

<insert Figure Chapter 13-1 here>

Table 1: Corpus of Hanson speeches analysed in the study

Secondly, the corpus represents Hanson chronologically, since it includes at least one speech from every year of her two parliamentary terms (1996-98; 2016-present). Thirdly, it reflects the range of issues about which Hanson has been outspoken. Finally, it includes speeches that mark occasions when national attention was drawn to her (i.e. highpoints of newsworthiness).

Dissociation

Dissociation refers to the breaking down of a concept. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969:190) explain it as the "techniques of separation which have the purpose of dissociating, separating, disuniting elements which are regarded as forming a whole or at least a unified group within some system of thought". When pitched as definitions within the context of argument, dissociations have the effect of unravelling and/or redrawing conceptual boundaries that were taken to be sound. This strategy starts from the assumption (set up by the rhetor or already present in listeners' minds) that a concept is unitary and progresses to a questioning of the concept's homogeneity. The listener is therefore guided to a fresh appraisal of it - to a belief that it is more complex than first thought. Having split the concept into parts, the speaker can then evaluate some elements (i.e. those that suit the argument) positively while evaluating others negatively (associating them with antagonistic positions).

Let us consider Hanson's definition of government:

- (1) Australia needs a national government, not a corporate one, not a union one, and not an alternative lifestyle one. (*Hansard* 2016).

This suggests that there are essentially two forms of government: one conducted in the *national* interest and another conducted for *vested* interests. Hanson's One Nation is associated with the favoured national type, while her opponents can be aligned with each of the vested interests: corporate (Coalition), union (Labor) and alternative lifestyle (Green). By implication, only PHON represents *everyone's* interests.

Schiappa (1993:408) points out that the "prototypical philosophical pair" used in dissociations is that of appearance/reality: the "arguer uses this pair by claiming that one definition is the real or true instance of X, whereas competing definitions point to an illusory appearance". This structure is used by Hanson to characterise Muslim culture as incompatible with "true democracy":

- (2) Australia is a true democracy based on gender equality and freedom of expression, and where everyone is equal under the law. Most Australians like it that way, but not radical Muslims. Radical Muslims want sharia law, where women are not treated equally to men and homosexuals are not tolerated. The Muslim world has yet to learn that secularism avoids religious conflict. (*Hansard* 2017a)

The thing defined (*definiendum*) is democracy, dissociated into a true/untrue notional pair. Australia is an example of a *true* democracy, defined by positively valued features such as gender equality and freedom of expression. This is contrasted with a competing system of social organisation, associated with adherents to strict Muslim culture, in which these values are not respected. The implication is that Muslim culture is inconsistent with a truly free society and therefore has no place in Australia.

Hanson also redefines the Australian Muslim population. There are innumerable ways in which Muslims could be divided (e.g. denomination or country of origin), but she plays on the perception of them as a monolithic group whose most important point of internal distinction is good vs. bad:

- (3) [O]ur leaders continue to tell us to be tolerant and embrace the good Muslims. But how should we tell the difference? There is no sign saying "good Muslim" or "bad Muslim". How many lives will be lost or destroyed trying to determine who is good and who is bad?' (*Hansard* 2016)

The same argument could be made about any social group: there are good and bad Anglo-Saxon Christians, self-evidently. In proposing a dissociation of this nature, Hanson can maintain the line that she is not anti-Muslim, only anti-*bad* Muslim.

Another relevant domain is welfare. In the early 1980s Ronald Reagan persuasively redefined social security by coining the term "safety net" in his first Congressional address. He articulated the notion of the "truly needy", thereby dissociating "need" into that which is "apparent" (closely allied with fraudulence – i.e. welfare cheats) and that which is "real" or "true" (Zarefsky et al. 1984:114). Reagan was able to appear both fiscally responsible, by eliminating wasteful spending, and compassionate, by reassuring those in (true) need that they would continue to be looked after, via the safety net.

Hanson draws on the same rhetorical playbook. Her situation is not unlike Reagan's, because a key constituency of contemporary far-right populists are the socioeconomically disadvantaged "globalisation losers" (Curran 2004; Deutchman 2000; Wodak 2015). Therefore, Hanson treads a fine line on welfare cuts as her supporters include those most affected. She does this by setting up a series of binaries through which welfare ought to be re-assessed:

(4) Welfare, age pensions and disability pensions were introduced for people who are truly in need or need a short-term helping hand. We can no longer support those who are not prepared to work. Being on welfare has become a way of life for many, as we see third-generation claimants. (*Hansard* 2018)

(5) Welfare is not a right, unless you are aged or sick. It is a privilege paid for by hard-working Australians. (*Hansard* 2016)

In a Reaganesque move, what has been dissociated in (4) is the notion of the welfare recipient. The distinction is between those who access welfare because they are “truly in need”, and those who access it as a lifestyle choice or as a result of upbringing. In (5), welfare itself is dissociated. Two definitions are presented: welfare as a right and welfare as a privilege. It is implied that both have currency with Australians, but only the second is correct. The problem, as she sees it, is that too many people mistakenly believe the first definition to be true. This dissociation allows Hanson, like Reagan, to occupy the dual position of social security defender (by preserving it for the truly needy) and champion of fairness (by denying it to scammers).

The dissociative strategy resonates with Hanson’s preoccupation with unity and division. Her party is *One Nation*. She opposes *multiculturalism* because “a truly multicultural country can never be strong and united” (*Hansard* 1996a). Drilling down to the vocabulary of her speeches (see Table 2), a frequency count of content words reveals that almost all of the ten most frequent ones are semantically related to the ways people are socially grouped, numbered, separated or organised: “Australia”, “government”, “people”, “country”, “one”, “nation”, “foreign”, and “Muslims”.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Table 2. Most frequent (stemmed) content words in Hanson’s speeches.

As discussed above, unity and division are a central concern of populism more broadly. Populists formulate monolithic national identities, which allows them to target social elements that compromise or threaten this self-constructed whole. A paradox at the heart of populism is that it dissociates “oneness”: at the same time as it constructs mythical unities, it draws energy from the articulation and exploitation of divisions.

Reframing

Zarefsky (2004:613) defines reframing as “postulating a different frame of reference from the one in which the subject normally is viewed”. His example is the 2003 invasion of Iraq by allied forces, originally justified by Bush, Blair and Howard as securing the world’s defence against weapons of mass destruction. With time, no weapons emerged and global security only seemed weakened by the events. Therefore, alternative frames were generated to (re)explain past decisions and actions.

Hanson uses reframing in her 2016 Senate comeback speech to explain away her 1996 comment that “we are in danger of being swamped by Asians”. With anti-Asian sentiment waning in the intervening years (Asian Australians even standing as PHON candidates), Hanson places a fresh interpretation on the earlier statement:

- (6) In my first speech in 1996 I said we were in danger of being swamped by Asians. This was not said out of disrespect for Asians but was meant as a slap in the face to both the Liberal and Labor governments who opened the floodgates to immigration, targeting cultures purely for the vote... (*Hansard* 2016)

She now claims her statement has been widely misinterpreted and should not be understood as meaning “Asians do not belong in Australia” but rather as “the major parties exploit Asian immigration for their own ends”.

Reframing matters to Hanson because her appeal feeds on the rejection of conventional worldviews promoted by powerful elites (particularly the Liberal and Labor parties) and mainstream media organisations such as the state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Her point of difference is that *her* take on issues and values has been suppressed or misrepresented by big media and the political establishment, yet represents the “real views” of “ordinary” voiceless Australians.

In this light, let us return to Hanson’s discussion of Islam. As example (7) shows, one of her objectives is to recast Islam from a mere religion to an all-encompassing socio-political code of control. (Dorling (2017) argues that PHON very deliberately claims that Islam is not a religion in order to deprive it of the constitutional protections granted to religions, a strategy copied from the American far-right.) Islam, she claims, is concerned with reshaping Australia’s fundamental values, traditions, freedoms and institutions:

- (7) Why then has Islam and its teachings had such an impact on Australia like no other religion? Islam sees itself as a theocracy. Islam does not believe in democracy, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, or freedom of assembly. It does not separate religion and politics. It is partly a religion, but it is much more than that. It has a political agenda that goes far outside the realm of religion. It regulates Muslims' social and domestic life, their legal system and politics—their total life. (*Hansard* 2016)

Islam is thus reframed from “religion” to “theocracy”. With this frame established, it logically follows that policies restricting the practice of Islam, and even Muslim immigration itself, are necessary. It cannot be allowed to flourish in Australia, since it is antithetical to the essence of Australia itself.

When Hanson famously took her seat in federal parliament wearing a burqa, she deftly reframed the argument around a nationwide burqa ban. Rejecting the claim (i.e. frame) that her actions had fanned the flames of racial discrimination, she recast the ban as an issue of social cohesion and public safety:

- (8) The case for a general ban on full-face coverings in all public places rests on the need for social cohesion and for the ability to identify and confirm eligibility in a variety of situations and for public safety. [...] Our social cohesion is founded on seeing one another's face; on a common language, English; and on a willingness to integrate into an Australian way of life. (*Hansard* 2017a)

Where Hanson’s opponents see xenophobia and racism, her supporters see the defence of “an Australian way of life”. Is Hanson a racist? The debate is partly definitional, volleying back and forth over the questions “What is a racist?” and “What is racism?”. Hanson proactively engages this debate:

(9) I am not a racist. Criticism is not racism. I am a proud Australian fighting for our democracy, culture and way of life. (Hanson 2018b:45)

(10) Ladies and gentlemen, I have just raised some very taboo topics and will be called a racist and bigot. They did it years ago, but many of you know I am not a racist defined as “someone who believes their race to be superior to another”, but a proud Australian fighting to keep our culture and way of life intact for us, and future generations. (Hanson 2018a:43)

These examples illustrate her use of *prolepsis* to reframe the racism charge: i.e. anticipating an opponent’s objections and offering a refutation (Lanham 1991). In statement (9) she recasts her own identity by pointing out that her comments should not be interpreted through the lens of “racism” but rather that of “criticism” (i.e. reasoned critique of a belief system that is antithetical to Australian culture and democracy). In (10) she explicitly invokes a definition of racism to show that her comments are of a fundamentally different order. The distinction that Hanson wants to make is between a blind antipathy towards certain races (she is not that) and reasoned objection to cultural practices that are incompatible with Australian norms. This allows her to articulate an alternative frame to mainstream multiculturalism:

(11) It is time that all Australians and our media learn that multiculturalism and multiracialism have two very different meanings and we must acknowledge that there are some cultures that cannot live in peace and harmony with one another due to their incompatible beliefs. Why have we been made to believe otherwise, what if it is just human nature? (Hanson 2018b:50)

Hanson’s argument is that multiple frames can be used to characterise contemporary Australian society. The conventional view (dictated, in Hanson’s eyes, by media elites and others) is that Australia consists of multiple cultures which co-exist peacefully. The dissenting view recognises the multiplicity of cultures, but does not accept that they “fit in”. A further possibility is that Australia comprises people from multiple racial backgrounds, but they all conform to a singular culture. By opening debates on these perspectives, Hanson positions herself as the outsider politician prepared to offer alternative (even suppressed) interpretive frames through which contemporary Australian society can be understood.

As these examples show, the alleged will and views of the broader populace are often invoked by Hanson as foundations for her positions: populism in its purest sense. She identifies herself with a collective “we” assumed to be at loggerheads with powerful elites such as the media and major parties. This is evident, for example, in the use of “they” versus “us” in statement (10) and the passive construction in statement (11): “Why have we been made to believe otherwise...?”. A people’s consensus can thus be conjured rhetorically to give weight to the alternative frames.

Floating signifiers

The notion of the *floating signifier* is associated with poststructuralist discourse theory (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000) but is here integrated with the rhetorical approach because it, too, is essentially a

form of persuasive definition. To understand this interconnection, let us commence with a brief explanation of poststructuralism itself, before considering its relevance to politics:

The creation of meaning as a social process is about the fixation of meaning [...]. We constantly strive to fix the meaning of signs by placing them in particular relations to other signs [...] so that the meaning of each sign is locked into a specific relationship to the others. The project is ultimately impossible because every concrete fixation of the signs' meaning is *contingent*; it is possible but not necessary. (Jorgensen and Phillips 2002, 25)

Let us break this down. The social process described above is readily applicable to politics, because a goal of politics is to "fix" certain meanings: i.e. to have the public believe that the way *my side* sees the world is the way the world *is*, or should be. In reality, meanings are of course context-bound and constantly in flux ("contingent"), but in the contest of ideas politicians act *as if* certain meanings are stable, even unquestionable, in part as a rhetorical ploy to paint opponents of those positions as undeserving of popular support.

This process is, moreover, central to the identity of *conservative* politicians, who by definition play the role of conserving foundational beliefs, values, customs and norms (no matter how contingent or partisan they actually are). What the politician is trying to establish is "the partial fixation of meaning around certain *nodal points*", where a nodal point is defined as "a privileged sign around which the other signs are ordered" (Jorgensen and Phillips 2002:26). If done successfully, a "discourse is established as a totality" in which the meanings of signs (e.g. key words or expressions) appear fixed, to

the exclusion of all other possible meanings that the signs could have had: that is, all other possible ways in which the signs could have been related to one another. Thus a discourse is a reduction of possibilities. It is an attempt to stop the sliding of the signs in relation to one another and hence to create a unified system of meaning. (Jorgensen and Phillips 2002:26-7)

While the meanings ascribed to nodal points may be restricted within a certain discourse, they remain open to contestation outside that discourse – or, more accurately, in the contestation between discourses. For example, there will be contestation over the meaning of "the elite" within and between the discourses of "far-right nationalism" and "green leftism". The term *floating signifier* refers to highly significant nodal points within discourses that are particularly open to contestation outside those discursive frames. It is the ambition of political actors to recruit these floating signifiers to their cause, which is why they are both semiotically and rhetorically charged.

A theme that persists through Hanson's speeches is *Australian essentialism*, the idea that there is an intrinsic, monolithic, and time-honoured core to the Australian identity which must be protected. This core manifests in various conceptualisations (or "signs"), such as "Australian values", "Australian culture", "Australian way of life", and "Australian traditions". In reality we might struggle to agree on precisely what those values are, because the terms are not fixed. But Hanson's persuasiveness stems from acting as if these signifiers *are* fixed: all that matters is that the listeners accept that *adherence* to Australian values is a good thing. The rhetorical trick lies in persuading the audience by *connoting*, but not *denoting*, the concept.

Let us consider some examples, starting with Hanson's maiden speech to parliament in 1996. It is her recourse to Australian essentialism in this address that allows her to deflect the accusation of racism stemming from her condemnation of Asian immigration:

- (12) 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. (*Hansard* 1996a).

The notion of “loyalty to Australia” is an effective floating signifier because it has wide appeal and can mean myriad things to different people. It has a common-sense ring to it - surely no sensible person would advocate *disloyalty* to Australia? And to oppose anyone who *would* advocate disloyalty, as Hanson is doing, is self-evidently an appropriate stance. But when probed further, her statement is problematic. How does one *identify* disloyal behaviour? For example, is it constituted by practicing certain religions or adopting some forms of dress? And what criteria determine an “ethnic background”?

Even in her days as a novice politician, Hanson intuitively grasped that a key to winning the public debate was securing the terms through which major floating signifiers were understood. The following example comes from a 1997 parliamentary debate over a federal government white paper:

- (13) I refer to the government's foreign and trade policy paper In the National Interest. This paper states that advancing the national interest of Australia and the Australian people is the primary goal. [...] It also states that the only way to achieve these objectives is through more globalisation, more free trade and more foreign ownership. The report does not, however, define in explicit terms what national interest means, nor does it state in clear terms the impact that ever-increasing globalisation will have on the average Australian. I suspect that the government has confused national interest with international interest. (*Hansard* 1997)

Hanson artfully attacks the key phrase at the heart of the government paper: *national interest*. The strength of her attack rests on a playful and ironic dig at its semantic ambiguity, suggesting that its vagueness is deliberate and even cagey, since the Australian people would be rightfully upset, were they to realise that the government actually means *international* interest.

Twenty years later, Hanson again spoke of the national interest in broad terms in her maiden Senate speech:

- (14) I love my country, culture and way of life. My pride and patriotism were instilled in me from an early age when I watched the Australian flag raised every morning at school and sang the national anthem; watching our athletes compete on the world stage, proud to salute the Australian flag being raised to honour them as they took their place on podiums. It is about belonging, respect and commitment to fight for Australia. (*Hansard* 2016)
- (15) Tolerance has to be shown by those who come to this country for a new way of life. If you are not prepared to become Australian and give this country your undivided loyalty, obey our laws, respect our culture and way of life, then I suggest you go back where you came from. If it would be any help, I will take you to the airport and wave you goodbye with sincere best wishes. (*Hansard* 2016)

Statement (14) manifests the rhetorical figure of *chronographia*: the vivid representation of a historical time to create an illusion of reality (Silva Rhetoricae 2007). It conjures “Australianness” by reimagining a golden age of national pride, a past that new arrivals cannot share in. Both statements

are replete with floating signifiers referencing Australian essentialism: country, culture, way of life, pride, patriotism, loyalty. The very words “Australia” and “Australian” overflow with assumed meaning. However, unpacking these terms can be problematic. Is there one “culture” and one “way of life” in Australia, or innumerable different cultures and ways of life? If many people feel a sense of “pride and patriotism” for Australia, do they all feel it for the same reason(s)? She implores “belonging, respect and commitment to fight for Australia” but do all Australians “belong” in the same way and to the same thing? What is meant in (15) by the suggestion that there are some citizens who “are not prepared to become Australian”?

Definitions by effect

Catastrophising (whether by the left or right) is so common in contemporary political discourse that its impact has been dulled by overuse. Doomsday scenarios (*ominato* in traditional rhetoric) are regularly evoked by Hanson for dramatic effect. She claims, for example, that “Australia will cease to exist as an independent sovereign nation”, if globalisation is not resisted, and that “we will be living under sharia law and treated as second-class citizens with second-class rights” (Hansard 2016), if Islam spreads unchecked.

Definitions by effect (Walton and Macagno 2015) are a sub-type of *ominato*: they offer the veneer of logical argument as a way of evoking an uncertain future. They work by tying the “thing defined” (*definiendum*) to a real-world effect or outcome. While the effect may be positive or negative, this paper focusses on the latter, because catastrophising, or extreme negativity, is a favoured strategy of Hanson. In essence, Hanson sets up a relation between an idealised form of the *definiendum* and a real-world outcome that is unpalatable, unforeseen, dangerous, discriminatory or even apocalyptic.

Let us consider specific examples in which Hanson combines the “definition of a thing” with the “effect of the thing”. The first case relates to multiculturalism. As mentioned, Hanson views the accusation that she is racist as a failure to understand her critique of multiculturalism. Her argument is that she opposes multiculturalism only because it leads to cultural tension and social instability:

(16) I am opposed to the policy of multiculturalism because history and the rest of the world show us that multiculturalism never works. It stops new citizens from giving this country, their new home, their full and undivided loyalty. I am not a racist; I am a realist. A truly multicultural society can never be strong and united. United States President Bill Clinton pointed out when he was in Australia that the world is littered with the bodies of people killed in failed and tragic attempts at multiculturalism. (Hansard 1996b)

To put this another way, multiculturalism, *by definition*, has negative social consequences. This is not, she claims, an argument from cherry-picked evidence; on the contrary, it *never* works, a fact allegedly/supposedly supported by “history”, the “rest of the world”, and even a liberal US President. Its effects are clear: new citizens do not give loyalty to their adopted land, society becomes disunited, and people die. Not only has Hanson redefined multiculturalism on the basis of extreme negative outcomes, but she has also redefined herself, from “racist” to “realist”.

The globalised economic order is also catastrophised. A common refrain of far-right and far-left

politicians alike is the damage inflicted on working people and local industries by the massive ramping up of free trade and globalisation. Hanson speaks in this tradition, defining the unfettered globalised economy in terms of negative causes and effects:

(17) I absolutely have to make this clear: the market wants profit only; all other considerations are secondary. Economic rationalism is a weapon wielded by governments on behalf of big business and, in particular, multinationals. To Australia, economic rationalism is a weapon of mass social destruction and it is our own government which press the button and, as yet, have not taken their finger off the trigger. Exposing us to unlimited competition from foreign countries where workers earn a dollar or two a day is destroying our industries and exporting our jobs. The proof of this is everywhere. The continuation of Labor or coalition policies can result only in further drops in our standard of living and an increasingly insecure future for Australians. (*Hansard* 1998)

There is an absence of nuance in this statement, as she explicitly signals through lexis such as “absolutely”, “clear”, “only”, and “all”. The nub of her definition by effect is contained in this statement: “economic rationalism is a weapon of mass social destruction”. If multinational corporations are allowed to dictate economic policy, the result will be the death of local industries, loss of jobs, and decline in standard of living. As in her comments on multiculturalism, she is adamant that the evidence for this is not selective: the “proof of this is everywhere”.

The third example relates to environmental policy. Australia is one of over 170 countries that broadly endorses the non-binding 1992 United Nations document “Agenda 21”, which the federal government’s environmental agency describes as a “blueprint that outlines actions that governments, international organisations, industries and the community can take to achieve sustainability” (Department of the Environment and Energy 2018). Agenda 21 has become the focus of far-right conspiracy theorists worldwide (Frick et al. 2014; Harman 2015), with US Tea Party conservatives pressuring state legislatures to pass laws that prevent its environmental sustainability goals influencing planning regulations. Hanson positions herself within this movement:

(18) Agenda 21 also calls for the fencing of rivers and creeks, at the expense of the land owner, to stop live stock from accessing the water, supposedly for environmental purposes. Water is our life’s blood, without it we will die. No government or individual has the right to own or control another person’s use of water. [...] It’s the man on the land that is being targeted today, tomorrow it will be the cities that will be taxed for the rain water they capture in their tanks. Queensland will experience Agenda 21, it is only a matter of time. Always be wary when you hear the words sustainable development. (Hanson 2018a)

Agenda 21 (and sustainable development more broadly) is therefore defined by the restrictive impact it will (allegedly) have on people’s liberties. The loss of these liberties is concerning, in Hanson’s view, because they are fundamental to existence itself (i.e. water) and strike at the nation’s mythological love affair with “the man on the land”.

The final example comes from the 2017 same-sex marriage debate. A nationwide plebiscite strongly backed gay marriage in every state and territory, a resounding “people power” decision that ran

contrary to her traditional hard-right view that “marriage was between a man and a woman” (Hansard 2017b). She was therefore unable to mount the populist argument that the people’s will had been run over roughshod by the elites. In this case, it was the people - not the elites - who literally *redefined* marriage. To maintain a hard-right anti-same-sex marriage stance without decrying the people’s verdict, she takes up an “unforeseen consequences” argument, a variant of definition by effect:

(19) My concern about this is that, if we pass it in this parliament of 226 people, who's to say that further on down the track a parliament could not expand it to mean multiple marriages or who knows what? I believe that what should be enshrined in the Constitution is what it has been determined the people want, whether it is marriage between people of the same sex or of the opposite sex. It could then only be changed by being taken back to the people. (Hansard 2017b)

While it is awkward for her to take issue with the new *meaning* of marriage - redefined by the majority - she can take issue with its *effect*. She makes the pitch that if a change is legislated now, further changes down the track could result in the legalisation of polygamy and “who knows what”.

As all these examples show, it is intrinsic to Hanson’s worldview that society as we know it is under threat, or that society as we *knew* it has been seriously eroded. Definitions by effect are a persuasive technique for making this case.

Conclusion

The language of Pauline Hanson is variously derided as unsophisticated, inarticulate, and/or boorish. Perhaps intuitively, she knew from the start that this perception was an invaluable gift. The second sentence of her first parliamentary address suggests so: “I come here not as a polished politician but as a woman who has had her fair share of life's knocks”. It embraces the charge of plain speaking, dispelling the idea that she communicates, and therefore *is*, like other politicians. Disowning sophistication and articulacy is itself a sophisticated and articulate move – something many critics fail to appreciate.

Persuasive definitions are a powerful tool for politicians to hawk their ideas. Fringe political movements, in particular, need to literally redefine the status quo to gain support. The four points below summarise the variations in persuasive definition covered in this chapter and suggest why they may be of relevance for the analysis of far-right populism more broadly:

1. Dissociation is the rhetorical deconstruction of concepts held to be unitary. By breaking them into parts (typically negative/positive pairs), the listener’s focus can be trained on negative evaluations or consequences associated with certain parts, thereby undermining faith in the concepts themselves. This is useful for politicians preoccupied with national unity and division in an era of rapid social change, particularly in densely multicultural countries.
2. When issues and/or events are reframed, dominant narratives and commonly accepted perspectives are overturned. This is the goal of politicians with anti-elitist convictions, who view the mainstream media and establishment parties as purveyors of worldviews that are out of touch with the concerns and interests of ordinary citizens.

3. The semiotic contest over floating signifiers involves identifying and co-opting cultural key terms such as “values”, “way of life”, and “national interest”. A populist leader’s appeal can stem in part from the belief that these essential identifiers have been lost or hijacked.
4. Definitions by effect allow speakers to wed definitions to (negative) outcomes. This may cohere with a populist leader’s certainty that a desired social order is threatened or collapsing.

The persuasive definition is a rhetorical tool available to politicians from across the ideological spectrum. As retailers of ideas they would be remiss to ignore it. But this paper has argued that Hanson is particularly adept at using it and that, by extension, the Hanson phenomenon cannot be understood without appreciating the role language plays in it.

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ⁱ Hansard speeches are listed under "Commonwealth Parliament of Australia" in the references list.

ⁱⁱ The 2018 Budget Reply speech, which post-dates the book's preparation, is the only exception. To ensure accuracy, transcripts of parliamentary speeches were retrieved from Hansard, not Hanson's book.