

03/05/1997

Aussie Govt to take on Hanson, her agenda

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AT LAST, it would appear that the Howard Government has realised the seriousness of the Pauline Hanson threat to the political and economic relations with Asia and has decided to do something about it.

Several Howard ministers have made muted criticisms of Hanson in the past but they went virtually unnoticed because they lacked punch.

But, hopefully, things are beginning to change with government leaders now ready to take on Hanson and her agenda.

On Thursday, Mr Alexander Downer, the affable Foreign Minister, did not mince words when he launched a savage attack on Hanson, the fish and chip shop owner who shot into national prominence with her unsavoury attack, in the Federal Parliament in Canberra, on the long-suffering Australian aborigines and her assertion that Australia was about to be swamped by Asians.

She was making her maiden speech after her shock victory as an independent in the March 1996 federal election in the Queensland seat of Oxley, near Brisbane.

Downer, who had earlier been briefed by Australian ambassadors and high commissioners in Asia at their annual meeting in Canberra, must have been aghast at the reports from various overseas posts of the damage and hurt Hanson's statements were having on countries in Asia and the Pacific.

Downer said Hanson's political agenda for a "little Australia" would destroy thousands of jobs in this country and damage Australia's international reputation.

He said this must not be allowed to happen.

In a most strident and detailed attack against Hanson, Downer said the views espoused by the maverick MP and her One Nation Party were "offensive to people of all backgrounds" and ignored the "triumph of cultural diversity" in Australia.

Referring to Hanson's criticism of foreign investment and Asian immigration, Downer said such views "promote an insular Australia separate from the region" of the Asia-Pacific.

This is the concept of a little Australia - inward looking, narrow-minded, protectionist and disconnected from our own neighbourhood.

"They are views which, if adopted widely within this country, would harm our national prosperity and diminish the role Australia can and must play in Asia and, moreover, they would diminish Australia itself".

While Prime Minister John Howard later, on ABC's current affairs programme 7.30 Report endorsed Downer's criticism of Hanson over foreign investment and immigration policy, he refused, as in the past, to condemn her outright.

Deputy Prime Minister Tim Fischer also expressed deep concern on the effects of the Hanson bandwagon in Asia, knowing very well, as Trade Minister, that an increasing part of Australia's income comes from trade in Asia, and endorsing Hanson's policies would be foolhardy.

There is no doubt that the Howard Government is jittery in the wake of two opinion polls that suggest Hanson is accumulating a strong support base for her One Nation Party.

A Morgan Gallup poll in The Bulletin showed One Nation had attracted the support of 10 per cent of voters and an AGB-McNair poll in The Sydney Herald found 28 per cent of voters claimed they would consider voting for a One Nation candidate in Senate.

The popularity of One Nation has been dismissed by Howard as a distortion, claiming that as the next election gets closer, voters will make a more considered judgement over who will lead the country.

He said that Hanson's views are destructive, and while this was enough for the disenfranchised mid-term voter, at election time the same voters will demand a positive and constructive approach which One Nation, was unable to deliver.

But last year, Howard also claimed that Hanson would be in the political wilderness by this time, and that has not been the case.

While Japan supports Australia's attendance at the new Asia-Europe forum, other Asian nations are more reticent.

Unless there is condemnation of these views from the highest levels of Australian Government, people outside of Australia will be deterred by the amount of support garnered by Hanson.

China has already expressed concern to the Australian Government at the perceived increase in racist sentiment.

Dr Mahathir threatened to withdraw Malaysian students from Australia after a student was bashed Newspapers in Thailand and Hong Kong have expressed disappointment at the slowness of the Howard Government to directly admonish Hanson.

The media in Australia will play a significant part in the future of One Nation.

So far Hanson has been circumspect in her media usage.

She looks uneasy in front of the camera and her performance is stilted.

She has difficulty at times responding to questions and there is a popular perception developing that she is not up to the intellectual challenge of being an Australia leader.

As Hanson attempts to consolidate her following and forge support in mainstream Australia, she will have to be more willing to appear in the media.

Given her poor media performances to date, this could hurt her credibility amongst the supporters she has gathered and prevent her supporter base from developing. As the next election closes in, and the media starts to demand answers and reform agendas from Hanson, her support could plummet.

The Australian Government is finally confronting the views of Hanson.

Her popularity today suggests that they were too slow of the mark, despite the clear message she issued in her first parliamentary speech last September.

Howard may be right, her popularity may be a mid-term anomaly and whether this gathering political force can maintain its momentum remains to be seen.

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