

Grattan on Friday: Twenty years on, the Perils of Pauline haunt another Liberal leader

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

The election for the Senate hasn't ended well. To have four senators from One Nation in the upper house is worse than unfortunate.

If Malcolm Turnbull had not called a double dissolution, but settled for a normal half-Senate election, Pauline Hanson would probably have been elected but not with three other One Nation candidates.

The potential sway of the Nick Xenophon Team (NXT) received much attention before the election but it has secured one less Senate place than Hanson's group, which emerged as the big winners when the final Senate results were announced on Thursday.

The Senate outcome is Coalition 30, Labor 26, Greens nine, One Nation four, NXT three, Liberal Democrat one, Family First one, Jacqui Lambie, and Derryn Hinch. The number of non-Green crossbenchers is 11, compared with the eight previously, with the government requiring nine to pass bills opposed by Labor and the Greens.

Turnbull has absorbed the lesson that the Abbott government did not master – the need to try to strike meaningful relationships with the crossbenchers from the start.

When he became leader Turnbull reached out to the then crossbench but there was not adequate follow-through – that was the senators' story, anyway.

Now a good deal of preparation is being done. Turnbull has been in touch with a number of the crossbench senators, including meeting Hanson. David Bold, until recently in charge of Turnbull's media team, has a fresh assignment. He'll head a new group of three or four within the Prime Minister's Office that will liaise with the crossbench and the government backbench.

Bold's own focus will be on the crossbench senators who will determine how much of the contested parts of the Coalition's program gets through.

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Government Senate leader George Brandis predicts the new crossbench could be “somewhat easier to deal with” than its predecessor. Certainly it will not receive quite the provocation that one did – we won’t be seeing another budget like 2014’s.

Immediately after the election, it was thought the government would have no hope of getting passed the industrial relations bills used to trigger the double dissolution – these would resurrect the Australian Building and Construction Commission and toughen union governance.

Now it is expected the numbers are there for them to get through a joint sitting. But they may even pass the Senate, with some amendments, making the joint sitting unnecessary.

The government judges the new non-Green crossbenchers as being, overall, more conservative-leaning than the last lot; it also thinks things will be simpler when there are two blocs.

There’s precedent for the very occasional deal with the Greens. But when Labor and the Greens team up to oppose legislation, the Coalition will need support from NXT and One Nation senators.

If each bloc stays together and both blocs back a measure, the Coalition requires two more votes. Family First’s Bob Day is sympathetic, and Liberal Democrat David Leyonhjelm – though presently angry at Liberal attacks on his party – should often be winnable.

Then there’s Hinch. In one of those exquisite twists of politics, Hinch’s adviser is Glenn Druery, famous as the “preference whisperer”. It was Druery’s “whispering” that wrangled the Australian Motoring Enthusiast Party’s Ricky Muir a seat at the 2013 election.

The government and Greens combined to bring in a new voting system to thwart the “whisperer”, although its effect of squeezing minor players was offset by having a double dissolution. Druery says his advice to Hinch is: “work with the government where possible, but don’t do anything for free”.

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The Senate situation clearly delivers a great deal of power to Xenophon and Hanson, both of them populist and protectionist, though in other ways hugely different.

Xenophon is the experienced negotiator and networker, used to the subtleties of the Senate game. In policy terms he is especially concerned about the embattled manufacturing sector.

He is also focused on his home state of South Australia – this will be reinforced by his team (there is a fourth in the lower house) all being elected from that state. Unlike Hanson with senators from three states, Xenophon – despite his earlier aspirations – wasn't able to plant a national footprint at the election.

Hanson in this new setting is an unknown quantity. Parliament gives her a platform but also, for the first time, the opportunity for a seat at the table.

Her comments suggest she has been chuffed by the government going out of its way to show a pleasant face to her. "He was very gracious," she said after a meeting with Turnbull, especially, no doubt, as "I did most of the talking".

When she entered parliament as member for Oxley in 1996, recently disendorsed by the Liberal Party, Hanson became an extraordinarily powerful disruptive force in Australian politics, with severe fallout for John Howard.

This time, will she remain the outsider, using parliament as a soap box, or will she seek to be more of the insider in that place of complex dynamics, the Senate?

And how will Labor handle her? The ALP finds the Hansonites extremely distasteful politically, but it can hardly ignore a bloc of four. Someone in Labor will eventually have to put the kettle on, literally or figuratively. If they don't, the ALP will be handing the government a useful break.

Hanson has got the jackpot at the election but she faces her own nightmare. This party is slack

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on unity and discipline and big on individuals with strongly held opinions, including some divisive, offensive and downright wacky ones.

While ultimately Hanson's power depends on her being able to deliver a bloc, in fact the Hansonites are likely to split on particular votes. The One Nation team could end up the same way as the Palmer United Party, which saw two of its three senators become independents.

Thanks to Turnbull, the Hansonites, together and individually, are set to be a signature story of this parliament.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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