

It's appalling, sinister and faintly ludicrous that Pauline Hanson's right-hand man James Ashby and former Queensland MP Steve Dickson played footsie with the American gun lobby, talking up One Nation's book, trailing their coats for gun or any other gold.

That they fell victim to an [Al Jazeera](#) "sting", trusting a man in an Akubra whom they now call a "spy", is stunning but sort of fitting. It was Ashby who was involved in a different kind of sting that brought down former speaker Peter Slipper.

Indeed, Ashby's political career is a dark, rolling soap opera. Currently he's banned from entering Parliament House over a physical altercation with a former One Nation senator.

These two political cowboys are crying foul after being duped and publicly trashed by an extraordinarily elaborate Al Jazeera plot.

They've called in the police and ASIO, denounced political interference from a "Middle Eastern country", claimed they didn't set out to seek money, let alone to weaken Australia's gun laws. They just wanted to tap into America's National Rifle Association about campaigning techniques.

As for those damning recorded references to \$10 million, \$20 million, they'd "got on the sauce" - it's what happens when there are "three men talking together and having scotches for about three or four hours".

They might as well not bother with the spin and excuses. Claims about "context" are lame; they damned themselves most times they opened their mouths and that was often.

The whole sordid episode, in long version, is there in pictures and audio. Ashby and Dickson grabbed the entree to the US gun advocates, and if the millions of dollars they fantasised about had materialised from somewhere they'd have grabbed them too.

View from The Hill: James Ashby rocks a few boats, including his own

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Subject, no doubt, to what Hanson said - a couple of months later she voted to ban foreign donations.

Read more: [*Did Al Jazeera's undercover investigation into One Nation overstep the mark?*](#)

Not that the dollars were a prospect. Just as, all those years ago in the 1970s, the money the Labor party sought from Saddam Hussein's Iraqi Baath party was never seen. It's like that when you deal with dubious characters - or ones who are much too clever for you.

Ashby knew he was playing a dangerous game; as we hear him saying in the Al Jazeera documentary, "If it gets out, it'll fucking rock the boat". And Hanson, though invited, sensed this was a trip not to be on.

Well, boats have been rocked. Hanson's for one. Scott Morrison's for another. To say nothing of Ashby's.

The extraordinary expose is a blow for the One Nation leader, days after her star recruit Mark Latham was elected to the NSW upper house. Hanson - who did not appear on Tuesday, reportedly feeling very unwell - and Ashby are joined at the hip. He's the political figure to whom she is closest, and she's stood by him in previous embarrassments. She should, of course, immediately send him packing.

Read more: [*Coalition wins a third term in NSW with few seats changing hands*](#)

How much the affair will hit the One Nation vote is a matter of conjecture. Logically, you'd expect substantially, especially coming after the New Zealand massacre. There has been much praise for the strength and value of Australia's gun laws.

But I'm not sure logic is the best prism to use here. Hanson has a certain Teflon quality in the eyes of her supporters, who routinely have overlooked the chaos, and worse, around her shambolic party.

Many of those in One Nation heartland are protesting against perceived grievances; they may see this as a sideshow. Anyway, some potential One Nation voters would be quite in sync with the gun lobby. On Saturday in NSW, the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers picked up two more seats.

The Ashby-Dickson debacle complicates Scott Morrison's struggle in handling what were already awkward questions about his attitude to preferencing One Nation.

Since the Christchurch killings Morrison has been on the barbed wire fence when repeatedly pressed on whether the Coalition should or would put One Nation last on how-to-vote cards.

In the Coalition this is another north-south issue, like coal and climate change. Southern Liberals insist One Nation should be at the bottom of voting tickets. Cabinet Minister Kelly O'Dwyer (retiring from the Melbourne seat of Higgins) said on Tuesday, "I can't see any reason why One Nation wouldn't be preferenced last".

In Queensland it's another story. Nationals Ken O'Dowd on Monday said One Nation should be above Greens and ALP.

In general, the preference debate is encouraging the Coalition to demonise the Greens even more than usual, with some in the government painting them as being as bad as, or worse than, One Nation.

Morrison initially used his favourite look-over-there tactic, trying to fend off the questions by saying there would be no preference deal with One Nation. That didn't wash. No one ever thought there would be a "deal" (quite apart from remembering the Liberals' bad experience in the Western Australian election, when they did one).

The issue is where the Liberals and Nationals decide to put One Nation on their tickets, regardless of what One Nation does with its preferences.

As the preference debate has raged, some are urging Morrison to take John Howard's "principled" position when the then prime minister said One Nation should be placed last. Talk of Howard's "principle" overlooks that he was dragged to this position. His inclination was for a seat-by-seat approach, but this became untenable.

In the wake of the Al Jazeera revelations, Morrison on Tuesday hopped into One Nation while making a direct appeal to those inclined to vote for it.

It was "abhorrent" that its officials "basically sought to sell Australia's gun laws to the highest bidders, to a foreign buyer,," Morrison said.

He went on: "I'm not interested in getting One Nation's preferences, I'm interested in getting their primary vote". The answer to the grievances of these votes "is not One Nation, the answer is not to go to those extremes. The answer is the Liberal and National Parties".

But that is not the answer to the preference question. And on that Morrison's not for turning. It's a matter for closer to the election, he says, when all the candidates can be seen. (One convenient diversionary line is: what about if there are Fraser Anning candidates?)

The signs are that come the election, the Coalition preference picture will likely be a patchwork, with One Nation being treated benignly at least in parts of Queensland. Possibly Morrison couldn't stop that if he wanted to; probably he doesn't want to.

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