

## View from The Hill: Breaking Pauline Hanson's 'strike' has taken skin off Bridget McKenzie

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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Given her status as holding two vital Senate crossbench votes Pauline Hanson is at times, in the eyes of senior government figures, She Who Must Be Obeyed.

And so it was last week, when Hanson announced she was striking, to press the cause of straitened dairy farmers. She wouldn't vote on non-essential legislation.

The fallout was palpable. The government wanted her support for a particular bill. Ministers and the Prime Minister sprang to attention. The upshot was Hanson won a concession the Nationals backbench hadn't yet been able to land.

But there was a price. Some Queensland and NSW Nationals were furious - so much so that a leak to the Courier Mail's political editor Renee Viellaris canvassed the possibility of a "spill" attempt against deputy leader Bridget McKenzie, who is agriculture minister.

There was no move at Monday's party meeting but there was criticism of McKenzie - who was at Senate estimates - in her absence.

The episode is important in its detail because it reflects the division and frustration in a party that in the past has often taught the major parties lessons in unity.

The saga began with Hanson's vociferous and emotional campaign for measures to help struggling dairy farmers, who are suffering from very low prices.

But it was her proposed no show on legislation that exercised the government. It was particularly anxious to have her support when the vote comes on its legislation to enable the royal commission into the exploitation of disabled people to obtain material from state institutions.

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In general, it needed to break the Hanson “strike”.

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Social Services Minister Anne Ruston and Senate leader Mathias Cormann (the government's “fixer” with the crossbenchers) swung into action.

Surely something could be given to Hanson on dairy? McKenzie was already working on a code of conduct - which would increase the negotiating power of the milk producers - but it was to be a long job.

McKenzie had indicated to Nationals colleagues the code would not be ready until next year. Indeed, One Nation was told the same thing early last week.

But suddenly the impossible became possible. The drafting was accelerated; the proposed consultation time shortened.

The deal was done on Wednesday. McKenzie wrote to Hanson saying the code would be ready later this year.

Discontented Nationals were left fuming. One Nation, their bete noir in bush seats, could claim the credit.

As one puts it: “[McKenzie] can deliver for Hanson but she can't deliver for us.”

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The Nationals leadership tried to make the best of an awkward situation by taking the initiative on another front - the latest government move on drought.

They mustered their troops for a Thursday morning news conference to announce the cash grant for farmers coming off the Farm Household Allowance after they had reached their four year limit. Under questioning at that news conference McKenzie indicated the exposure draft for the dairy code would be released within days.

But the Nationals had failed to forewarn the Prime Minister's Office of their news conference. So the government had the spectacle of Scott Morrison unveiling the cash grant on radio at the same time as the Nationals' appearance, and trumpeting it as a scoop for John Laws. Then the Nationals were upset at finding themselves overshadowed.

It was an appalling lapse in communications at the top level of the Coalition.

That snafu came against the background of the Nationals feeling increasingly frustrated that Morrison has been crowding them out on drought policy, taking ownership of the issue.

McKenzie's position is not seriously at risk. The Nationals don't operate like that. Anyway tossing her out would be an enormous call, not least because she's a woman, but also because whatever the claims about her limitations as a minister she is a good retail politician for the party.

But the leaking is evidence of how much trouble there is in the Nationals party room, and the wider disgruntlement between the Coalition partners.

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*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 their academic appointment.*

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