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**Walsh, Kerry-Anne - *Hoodwinked: How Pauline Hanson fooled a nation*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 2018, (pp. 304) ISBN 978 1 76011228 8**

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Very few public figures can claim the level of fame, or infamy, that Pauline does. So much so, her surname isn't needed. Everyone knows her, or knows of her, and nearly everyone has a passionate viewpoint about her; she doesn't engender indifference (Walsh, 2018, p. ix)

At the time of writing, in international politics US president Donald Trump is to face an impeachment investigation over his alleged attempts to coerce a foreign power to investigate his political rival, Joe Biden; Turkey has invaded northern Syria after the US withdrew its troops; the UK remains in its Brexit crisis; and teenage Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg has given an extraordinary speech to the UN bluntly and emotionally castigating the international political community for its failure to take significant action to avoid catastrophic climate change. Amid all this drama, Australia's own longstanding 'human headline', One Nation leader Pauline Hanson, managed to court her own incendiary local headlines. In what has been seen as a tactic to secure her vote in the Senate, the government has appointed her as deputy chair of yet another review of Australia's family law system. This latest controversy marks yet another chapter in the ongoing story of respective Australian governments' attempts to grapple with the populist electoral phenomenon of Hanson. It is also instructive of Hanson's underlying *modus operandi* with respect to politics, political issues and political engagement.

In *Hoodwinked: How Pauline Hanson fooled a nation*, former press gallery journalist Kerry-Anne Walsh, sets out to explore the Hanson phenomenon. From the uncompromising title to the choice of unflattering cover photo of Hanson – described elsewhere as hovering 'like a malign cloud approaching from the

horizon' – you are in no doubt as to Walsh's position on her subject. This pervades the narrative style, the tabloid tone and frame, and is its singular biggest weakness.

Walsh, however, is unapologetic about her approach from the start. She notes in the book's Forward, that her aim was not to write an academic treatise, but to get to heart of what makes Hanson 'tick'. Using original source material, in particular Hanson's many media and parliamentary utterances, her memoir/political manifesto *Pauline Hanson: The Truth* (1997) (that she later denied having any involvement in), plus the perspectives of others including those of her original svengali, John Pasquarelli, from his book *The Pauline Hanson Story, by the Man Who Knows* (1998), Walsh weaves a fast-paced narrative. Interestingly, she did not appear to interview Hanson herself.

But what new is there to know? The Hanson story, the booms and busts of her party and her political career, and the essence of her ongoing populist appeal has been well researched elsewhere (e.g. Marr, 2017; Kurmelovs, 2017). However, to what extent is Hanson herself the genuine article, a naïve political pawn or a deceptive gold digger? This is the central question.

As a significant player in the Australian political landscape for the best part of 20 years, Walsh notes that Hanson has had:

... a dramatic effect on the body politic even though many of her utterances are knowingly ill-informed and clearly aimed at stirring up anger and resentment rather than creating a stronger, forward-looking nation (ix).

This statement neatly summarises the book's treatise: despite Hanson's oft-repeated claims to the contrary, her *raison d'être*, Walsh argues, has been to court publicity rather than to offer any genuinely workable or informed solutions to the issues of concern to her supporters. In tracing the various machinations around political funding (for which Hanson was briefly jailed in 2003), Walsh labels One Nation 'a business disguised as a political party' (191). Her populist rhetoric is largely hollow. In practice, many of the policies that her party has endorsed such as tax cuts for big business and reduced welfare spending, would be contrary to the best interests of her so-called 'base' of mostly disaffected male, rural and working-class voters. According to one disgruntled candidate from Western Australia:

Phon is supposed to be for the battlers, yet the PHON Senators crossed the floor supporting a cut in penalty rates, these people are low paid often casual or permanent part-time, who often need more than one job to provide for themselves ... (256).

To tease out the enigma of 'what makes Pauline tick', Walsh chronicles Hanson's formative years, her failed marriages and the genesis of her almost accidental political career which perhaps unsurprisingly included a fondness for

controversial former Queensland premier, Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen. It is not a flattering picture:

Those who had walked the perilous path of life with Hanson to that date recounted tales of a contradictory, complex character: a loner, prone to suspicion about everyone's motives; someone quick to friendship, but even speedier to loathsome enmity; a lover and hater in equal measure who was remarkably confident, yet at the same time acutely vulnerable (107).

Underlying her career are a series of tempestuous personal, professional and political relationships, most of which have a similar story arc: enthusiastic admirers and keen advocates for Pauline and the 'cause', the majority of whom eventually become disillusioned and drift out of favour when they challenge Pauline's autocratic and chaotic managerial style, fall foul of one of her coterie of influential advisors such as David Oldfield or James Ashby, or fall foul of electoral laws. It is an oft-repeated tale, the political ramifications of which reverberate at regular intervals, the most recent being the Al Jazeera exposé where two members of the party were filmed courting the US National Rifle Association for funding in exchange for supporting winding back Australian gun laws (Al Jazeera, 2019).

A secondary aim of the book Walsh states is to apply critical scrutiny to the media enabling of the Hanson phenomenon, something the author feels is lacking given the 'uncritical airing [by tabloids and commercial media] not afforded to other politicians' (x). From her regular appearances as a political commentator on the *Sunrise* program, *Sky News* and the Alan Jones program on radio 2GB, Hanson's views on everything from immigration, foreign affairs to vaccination have been broadly, and mostly uncritically, aired. The impact has been to legitimise and mainstream her racist and ill-informed views. She has milked these opportunities to her political advantage, positioning herself as an outsider, a victim, unfairly maligned by a complacent establishment and mainstream media that is out of touch with 'ordinary' people, many of whom are afflicted with an almost terminal disaffection with the traditional parties. Walsh argues that rather than the victim of an elitist, out of touch political establishment, Hanson is someone who, while unsophisticated and at times naïve, has milked that system for personal and financial gain. By virtue of her actions, she has 'hoodwinked' her supporters, and shown herself to be no better than those with whom she is repeatedly 'fed up'.

While this 'yarn' is engaging, and the perspectives interesting and certainly useful, the book is largely let down by the obvious enmity that Walsh has for her subject that reverberates through the uncompromising, and at times vituperative, language. While certainly not a Pauline fan, I found this particularly distracting and at times irritating. It was a very black and white picture which may well leave a critical reader wondering if perhaps the author doth protest too much. A lighter and more balanced touch would have been far more effective.

Understanding the Hanson phenomenon is an important part of understanding the essence of our current political system and the problems with which it is dealing. Hanson appeals to a simplistic, rose-coloured nostalgia for a post-colonial, Anglo-Australian, pre-feminist past where white (male) Australians ruled, and where political correctness was yet to impinge on our freedom of speech to publicly blame equally marginalised ‘others’ – Asians, Muslims, Indigenous, single mothers, unemployed – for their woes. This narrow, uninformed and inaccurate historical worldview was best countered by former prime minister Paul Keating in 1996 when he noted:

The great tragedy of the shamelessly regressive politics of Pauline Hanson is not so much that it is rooted in ignorance, prejudice and fear, *though it is*; not so much that it is dangerously divisive and deeply hurtful to many of her fellow Australians, *though it is*; not even that it will cripple our efforts to enmesh ourselves in a region wherein lie the jobs and prosperity of future generations of young Australians, *though it will* – the great tragedy is that it perpetuates a myth, a fantasy, a *lie*. The *myth* of the monoculture. The *lie* that we can retreat to it (1996).

As is evident by the current geopolitical parallels in the US, UK and Europe, the retreat into ‘nativism’ is certainly no answer to the legitimate concerns of marginalised voters. If anything, it is merely a tool adopted by those who similarly seek to ‘hoodwink’ the disaffected for their own personal and political gain. Pauline Hanson is in good company.

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## **About the reviewer**

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