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Nunavut or None of it?

by Peter Jull

Pauline Hanson's *'Queensland election speech'* in federal Parliament, June 2, attacked the United Nations draft declaration on indigenous rights. It would *'take power and choice from the majority of our own people and place that power and freedom of choice firmly in the hands of foreigners and self-seeking minorities'*, she said. The *'so-called rights of the indigenous people could ultimately result in the disintegration of our nation.'*

On national radio the next day Prime Minister Howard said her speech *'verges on the deranged in various places'* and was *'fanning racist sentiment'*. He pointed out that her view of the UN document's status and potential were quite wrong. Many Australians were relieved that he had taken a clear stand on Hansonism.

Ms Hanson added that *'The Canadian parliament has just agreed to divide up their country and create a new indigenous state called Nunavut, owned and governed by the Inuit or Eskimos.'* She said I was *'architect of Nunavut'* and was advising various bodies *'on how to establish independent race based states in Australia.'* She alleged at least five such employers on June 2-3, one of whom, the North Australia Research Unit, I actually did work for (to early 1993).

Because Ms Hanson's claims were (1) too ludicrous to fool anyone interested; (2) designed to heighten racial anxiety; and (3) irrelevant to the important reactions of Mr Howard and Queensland politicians, I had no wish to make them an issue.

Ms Hanson's speeches and literature are not fact-based or rational arguments susceptible to reply in any case. They are strings of subliminal insinuations aimed at personal insecurities and fears, needing only a tweak with loaded or coded words. Or, as in Helen Dodd's biography and policy volume, *Pauline, The Hanson Phenomenon*, the devil is not in the detail but in earnest misuse of selected 'facts', a swelling sorrowful symphony.

One reporter suggested I must be outraged at claims about dividing the country. 'You forget that I am a Canadian,' I replied, 'and worked for years in an anxious country where any group trying to improve its lot was denounced as "separatist".'

The media clearly believe that checking Ms Hanson's claims is the best course, and over time, they may be right. The middle of the Queensland election campaign was no such time, however, with small accuracies a luxury amid party politicians juggling images and expressions to dazzle voters.

What can be said, calmly? An 'architect' is a meaningless notion in liberal democratic constitutional change. The Hansonite view that someone can create a new constitutional jurisdiction by stealth, like slipping a lasso over a skittish reindeer, is childish. (When asked where her feared new *'black states'* would be, Ms Hanson

said, *'Who knows?'*, the implication being that if native title hasn't got there first, a new country may pop up in your backyard overnight.)

John Amagoalik of the new capital, Iqaluit (Frobisher Bay on older maps), has been Nunavut's key figure for 25 years. He has headed, guided, and spoken for a process exemplary in its openness.

In April 1982 all Nunavut residents voted 4-1 by plebiscite to create the new territory. In the same month the Queen signed Canada's revised and expanded national Constitution into law, ending the last ties with Westminster. Nunavut was the first truly popular ('of the people') constitution-making process since the white man's arrival in Canada. Inuit were proud to be showing everyone how it was done.

Nunavut's evolution was assiduously democratic and open, with information campaigns across Canada as well as among Inuit. It intrigued conservative premiers no less than indigenous rights advocates. Some other indigenous groups were grumpy about all the attention and denied that Nunavut was any good. This was a stroke of luck because without a visible enemy Inuit voter turnouts might lessen. Now they voted in record numbers – and in record proportions for the Yes side.

The Nunavut project was open for all Canadians to see from its 1976 inception to 1993 passage of twin territory constitution and land/sea claims agreement Acts through federal Parliament. Amendments to facilitate phase-in went through Parliament in 1998 with full scrutiny and debate. Canadians are proud of Nunavut as an example of reconciliation, and for showing that old political structures can handle new realities.

While Nunavut government is open to all, 85% of the population are Inuit. The land and sea claims settlement is only for Inuit, now and in future, to protect traditional rights of occupancy and livelihood, and maintain a productive physical environment. Across the northern two-thirds of Canada indigenous political activity has been achieving improved environmental management and teaching Canadians environmental awareness more generally.

The hunter-gatherer people of Nunavut live in villages with no roads to anywhere. Now they are also Canadian mainstayers in their demands, and citizens of the world. This is especially obvious when the ancient Inuit curse of famine hits some area of the world. Inuit send every dollar they can find to help, John Amagoalik having been especially prominent internationally in Ethiopian famine relief.

As *The Age* comments alongside its on-line text of Ms Hanson's speech, *'The Canadian decision on Nunavut bears little comparison with the Australian situation, however much some Aboriginal groups might wish it. There is no popular or mainstream political support in Australia for the creation of such a territory, which is not based on race anyway.'*

There was no political or mainstream support in Canada for land rights, self-government, Nunavut, or indigenous international cooperation, either. As with most public policy in our system of government, advocates set about winning the public, media, and government support. Then they negotiated outcomes. Indigenous people,

whether in Australia, Canada, or anywhere else, cannot wait upon the goodwill of European populations. On the other hand, Canadian successes and others in USA, Greenland, and Scandinavia show that entrenched public hostility and prejudice can be overcome with patient and persistent political work.

Substantial self-government is the solution to indigenous grievances and socio-economic problems. Canadian governments did not reach that position because they are nice but because they concluded after generations of failed policies and programs that supporting indigenous peoples in solving their problems was the only way ahead.

I have written reports on ‘first world’ approaches to indigenous policy when requested by many Australian groups and institutions, i.e., on what may be learned from overseas experience. Likewise I have written reports on Australian experience for interested audiences abroad. Such exchanges of information are the unexceptional stuff of everyday citizenship and university life.

Ms Hanson in her speech fretted about the word ‘*indigenous*’ being allegedly abused today to exclude persons born here like herself. She said the *Oxford English Dictionary* was checked and agrees with her view. For a nativist movement based on paranoia this is no small matter, although one may enjoy the notion of her as a seeker after knowledge in the holy 20-volume shrine of our language. But the *OED* does not say what she says it does. Rather, it makes clear that *indigenous* ‘primarily’ applies to ‘aboriginal inhabitants’ and quotes the first known English use (1646) in precisely that sense.

But facts aren’t the point, are they?

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