Silent suburbs shatter reasoning of regions

ON February 14, 1996, just before the federal election, the road trip happened to an Ipswich fish and chip shop owner, Pauline Hanson. She was sacked as the local Liberal candidate by then opposition leader John Howard for her “inflammatory and insensitive” remarks about Australia’s multicultural society.

But the ballot papers had been printed, and on March 2 Hanson had a stunning victory. She won her seat of Oxley with a swing of nearly 20 per cent, the largest swing in the land as John Howard swept into office.

In her first speech to Parliament on September 10, Hanson ventured a trite of resentment against Australian society and Strangers. Her appeal was to regional and rural, Australia, to those she saw as having lost out from the previous decade of economic reform. Pauline Hanson’s new prominence must be the nation’s greatest political underling story, an unknown woman from an insignificant country town without power, who charted the shape of politics in Australia and became a household face and name.

For writer Rob Ellis, Hanson led “a kind of political road rage of people who had had enough.”

Over nearly a decade, Pauline Hanson and the One Nation party ensured “rural and regional Australia’s views have priority attention by state and federal governments.” Hanson tapped the Australian sentiment of a fair go at a time when many Australians felt left out of a prosperity that seemed to be flowing unfairly to the elite professionals in their shiny office towers in the big city.

Hanson ignited politics around Australia. On Friday, March 13, 1998, according to The Herald, 1200 Hanson supporters paid $10 each to hear her speak at the Ipswich Theatre. Around the corner in Civic Park, 2000 people gathered peacefully to protest Hanson’s arrival in the city. But another 1000 Hanson fans and protesters gathered noisily outside the theatre. There were 300 police in attendance. There were bulletproof vests, batons, police dogs, and mobile riot squad cars.

This was the full Monty. Hanson’s Newcastle visit followed BHP’s announcement on April 29 that the Newcastle steelworks would be shut down. Hanson pointed to the closure announcement as another example of how economic reform in Australia was strangling the urban elites at the expense of rural and regional Australia.

Last week I was at a conference in Melbourne to discuss regional policy in Australia and to hear speakers from the European Union describing their regional problems. Poor Europe, I thought. Here we are, a whole continent to ourselves. We swim and fish in the oceans that are our unchanging borders. Europe, though, has a war torn history of disputed borders and nationalism. The contrasts are stark. The Australian land mass is nearly twice the size of the European Union. The EU has 27 nations and 455 million people. We have 22 million.

The Europeans described the EU’s attack on regional inequality. Their problem areas are the former communist nations of Eastern Europe, and the old rural regions in the south of Spain. Italy and Greece. Yes, Greece.

By comparison, the data presented at the conference showed Australia as one of the world’s fairest places, with only minor differences in living standards across the Australian states and from one capital city to the next. So our graphs look good. Quietly over coffee, though, the Australian delegations admitted that if you dig down below the graphs you find significant areas of poverty and struggle in all Australian states, especially among indigenous Australians in our remote regions.

The conference made me reflect on how eerily silent regional politics has become in Australia. One Nation has died away. And the traditional voice of rural Australia, the National Party, seems hardly able to raise a murmur of protest from our country cousins. The only loud voice of regional protest comes from the mine shaft over the resources super profit tax decision. But well-funded lobby groups led by billionaire Andrew “Twiggy” Forrest are a bit different to traditional Australian politics of little blokes seeking a fair go.

Instead, the fair go battlegrounds in Australia are the nation’s outer urban areas, the housing estates, the sites where young families struggle to meet mortgage commitments while battling daily life, forced into their cars by a lack of public transport, onto roads built for the 1960s. Frustrated by health and education services that aren’t up to scratch.

The Europeans observed that we are the most urbanised nation on the planet. Not surprisingly, now that the city is all, the political voice of Australia’s industrial heartlands has died away. So too the politics of rural Australia have quietened as our rural towns dwindle and die. Increasingly, it is the silent voters from our new suburbs who determine who wins political power.

Inspiration in the coursework of convictions

These two young women have left their mark, writes Tracey Edstein.

WHILE I had not followed Jessica Watson’s progress alone and unanswered around the world in her little pink boat. I did find the footage of her returning to Sydney Harbour that Saturday afternoon compelling viewing. And I kept watching, that Saturday afternoon compelling watching. And I kept watching, that Saturday afternoon compelling.

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Born today

Harriet Beecher Stowe, U.S writer (1811-1896); Buri Ives, U.S actor, singer (1909-1956); Ernesto “Che” Guevara, Argentinian revolutionary (1928-1967); Alan Davidson, pictured, cricketer (1929-); Donald Trump, U.S property developer (1946); Boy George, English pop singer (1961); Henry Kissinger, iron man (1923-); Steffi Graf, German tennis star (1969).

Odd spot

Romanian Leon Lauter, 20, hid himself in the landing gear of a jet parked at Vienna’s airport and survived a flight to London.

Today’s text

“How precious to me are your thoughts, O God. How vast is the sum of them.” Psalm 139:17.