

Poking mullock

The Populist Party, One Nation and political jokes

by Michael Winkler

Q: Did you hear the one about that politician you hate from the party you despise?

A: The establishment and resolution of a hypothetical situation and/or a play on words with similar sounds but different meanings will result in a re-evaluation of your understanding of the question while simultaneously confirming your belief that the politician is a cretin/ hypocrite/degenerate/all of the above.

‘POPULIST’ WAS INITIALLY a noun rather than an adjective. The word was devised for the agrarian reform movement that emerged in *fin-de-siècle* America, formalised as the Populist Party in 1891. The brief florescence of the Populists did not receive wide coverage in the Australian press. There was a local economic depression to deal with, newspapers were more interested in news from the UK and Europe than the US, and the Populists flamed out quickly. Although the party was not finally disbanded until 1908, it had little potency after 1896.

The US Populist Party was a ragtag amalgam of farmworkers and labour unionists strongest in southern and Midwest states, riven from the beginning by rivalries between leading figures. Its central tenet was addressing inequality. The party platform described a country where ‘the fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few’. The most profound split in the party from inception was between assimilationists who wanted to team with the established Democrats, and those who believed that by staying independent they could become a genuine ‘third force’ of American political life.

The establishment response was predictable. Newspapers and the two major parties ridiculed the Populists as yokels, cranks and fanatics. Curiously, some of the jokes directed at the political upstarts made their way across the Pacific and into the pages of Australian newspapers. An example from *The Maitland Weekly Mercury*, 11 January 1896:

A boy in Kansas was pulling a dog along the road by a rope. The boy called to his dog: ‘Come along, Pop, you ornery cuss.’

A bystander asked him why he called the dog Pop.

‘For short,’ answered the boy.

‘What’s his full name?’

‘Populist,’ answered the boy.

‘Why call him Populist?’ asked the stranger.

‘Well, sir,’ the boy said, ‘because he is just like a Populist. He’s the orneryst dog in Kansas. He ain’t worth a durn only to sit on his tail and howl.’

The Populists are remembered as a left-wing movement, but the designation is flawed. In modern Australia, Pauline Hanson’s One Nation (PHON; formerly One Nation) is habitually characterised as a right-wing party, but its policy positions are scattered across the spectrum like pellets from a .303. Clearly there are differences between the Populists and PHON, but there are also striking similarities. According to William Hogeland in *Boston Review*:

[Populists] deemed advanced formal education and its resulting expertise tools for keeping ordinary people out of the halls of power. Populists revered practical know-how, the common sense and hands-on experience of the worker, farmer, and small businessman... The hottest blast of populist rhetoric was directed less at specific policies than at elites’ dismissal of ordinary people’s judgments.^[i]

All of which has a familiar ring.

Some Populist positions would appeal to modern Australian leftists, such as government ownership of all forms of transportation and communication, but many other policies fit neatly into the One Nation worldview, including

forbidding the ownership of land by foreigners and reform of immigration policy. In *The Jews of America, 1654 to 2000* (University of California Press, 2004), historian Hasia Diner noted that ‘Some Populists believed that Jews made up a class of international financiers whose policies had ruined small family farms. Jews, they asserted, owned the banks and promoted the gold standard, the chief sources of their impoverishment.’^[ii] This anti-Semitic suspicion chimes with PHON Senator Malcolm Roberts’s claim that international bankers, particularly Jewish families, are orchestrating global control through environmentalism.

Both the Populist Party and PHON were welcomed to the political stage with derisive wisecracks. Humour theorists conventionally identify four broad categories for jokes: superiority, incongruity, relief and ambivalence.^[iii] Alexander Bain thought all humour involved degradation. Henri Bergson called humour a universal corrective for deviancy in the social order. Immanuel Kant thought humour stemmed from ‘the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing’. *Anton Zijderveld* wrote in praise of humour’s ‘unmasking functions’.^[iv] In a world where Max Weber’s concept of routinisation – the extraordinary rendered ordinary by repetition – prevails, where pronouncements from PHON candidates on scientific matters (climate change, vaccination, the Great Barrier Reef and so on) are monotonously unscientific, where President Trump regularly asserts untruths, any one of which might reasonably have brought previous presidencies to their knees, it could be argued that this unmasking has never been more important.

PERHAPS THIS WAS the motivation of 1890s Australian newspaper editors also, running jokes about Populists as a revelatory act. Readers unfamiliar with the movement’s proclivities could easily apprehend its faults through the broad-brush stereotyping. Populists were long-winded bores on pet topics, as per this from Launceston’s *Daily Telegraph* in 1896: ‘Is that populist that came ashore this morning still talking free silver?’ asked the cannibal chief. ‘Yes sire,’ answered his minion, ‘he seems to be warming

up to the subject.’ ‘Oh well – if that is the case a slight broiling will be sufficient.’ [v]

They also had a chip on their collective shoulder. *Australian Star*, 1898:

First Populist: What do they mean by ‘the laws of gravitation?’

Second Populist: I think they must be some laws that keep people down in the world. [vi]

They were bumpkins and worthy targets for general ridicule in the *Gawler Bunyip*, 1898:

During the last American campaign, an ardent Populist, with the proverbial long flowing beard, was delivering a speech somewhere in the wilds of Kansas. During the course of his remarks he said: ‘Fellow citizens. It is necessary for the welfare of our country that silver should be kept at its face value. If the Government marks a dollar a dollar, it follows that it must be worth one hundred cents.’ A voice coming from the rear of the crowd interrupted him saying: ‘Excuse me, Mr. Speaker, may I ask a question?’ ‘Certainly sir,’ replied the Populist, ‘a dozen if you like.’ ‘Then, Mr. Speaker, I should like to know if the Government marked your whiskers hay, would a mule eat them?’ [vii]

In the same vein, there are plenty of PHON and Hanson jokes to be found, although few are howlingly funny. (Hanson might appreciate them, of course. She thought it was great when Greek and Italian migrants were called ‘wogs’ because ‘when the Aussies had a go at them in that Aussie way they then became part of the community, they assimilated...it was taken in a good sense of humour.’ [viii] She evidently appreciates a good chuckle at a hurtful joke.)

Why is Pauline Hanson like the commentator at Rosehill? They both start shouting when they see a new race.

How did Pauline Hanson spend election night 2016? Doing find and replace with ‘Asian’ and ‘Muslim’.

What's the difference between Pauline Hanson and a bucket of shit? The bucket.

Details change, but the thrust of political jokes remains consistent. Winners crow, whether outside tally rooms or on Twitter. One hundred and fifteen years ago, as the new century waxed and the Populist Party waned, there was a note of triumphalism in Bathurst's *National Advocate*:

On the Presidential election:

'I tell yew,' declared the agriculturist with long whiskers, 'if Thomas Jefferson was alive he'd be a Populist.' 'Come to think it there is something in common between Jefferson and the Populist party.' 'Eh? Yew admit it?' 'Yes. Jefferson's dead.' [ix]

The Populists may have been a spent force in their native land, but they lingered in a strange half-life via jocular items in Antipodean newspapers. A lengthy joke titled 'Must be a Populist' appeared in the *Coburg Leader* on 12 November 1898, was recycled in publications across the country, and was still being reproduced word for word almost two decades later. It graced the *Euroa Gazette*, *West Wimmera Mail* and *Nathalia Herald* in August 1916 before a final appearance in the *Gundagai Independent* on 28 September 1916. The joke outlined the mental peregrinations of a rural idiot trying to determine which party to vote for at the election, ending with a savvy judge suggesting he might be a Populist. The dill replies, 'Mebbe I am. Pap says I'm the biggest dern fool in four precincts.' The punchline is not much of a pay-off, but it certainly makes its point.

THE US POPULISTS emerged at a time when there was tension in Australia between landholders, bankers and their political representatives on one side, and the burgeoning union movement on the other. It is conceivable that Australian papers were acting pre-emptively, undermining the rural uprising lest it jump from that continent to this and threaten the power of local landowners. Unless the brief surge of the Populists was

regarded as a harbinger of rural collectivist uprising across the globe, the subject of the jokes – a political party in a friendly but remote country – must have seemed esoteric to domestic readers. A modern analogy might be an Australian newspaper printing humorous material about Winston Peters' New Zealand First Party.

Alternatively, editors may have simply been filling space with wire material, a theory given some credence by the continued publication of old jokes long after the Populists' push had been stymied. But if so, what was it about Populist-themed jokes that appealed? It can be assumed that Australians purchasing newspapers at that time would have included a disproportionately large percentage of wealthy and powerful citizens, and perhaps jibes at political arrivistes would have given these readers pleasure. Or the attraction could have been that the jokes poked mullock at backwoods simpletons. *The Bulletin* popularised humorous bush verse in the 1890s, including Banjo Paterson's 'The man from Ironbark' (1892). Steele Rudd's *On Our Selection* (1899) and Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life* (1903) made great sport of hillbilly characters. The dumb hick was a stock comic figure, funny regardless of its continent of origin.

Many of her supporters 'read' Hanson as a rural figure, although she is not from the country. This connects to her gift for transformation: sliding between candidacies in Queensland and New South Wales, between upper and lower houses, conjuring a handy revenue stream from electoral funding while posing as an 'anti-politician', positioning herself as an outsider while functioning as an insider, and slithering from sliming Asians and Indigenous people in the 1990s to Africans and Muslims today. While she changes, her detractors attempt to freeze her identity; counterproductively, the jibes and criticism strengthen her adherents' idea of who she is. She is defined by her hair colour, her cheese-grater-on-the-knuckles voice, her anti-intellectualism. The very things her opponents sneer at are attributes her followers love.

A staggering proportion of the knocks against Hanson reference her work background. We are at a low point in Australian history where someone is belittled because they have owned and worked in a fish-and-chip shop.

Why did Hanson's fish and chip shop go broke? Because she refused to sell any fish that wasn't whiting.

Ben Chifley was an engine driver, but apparently there is now an occupational threshold that determines whether a person should be permitted to enter parliament. Political party hacks, union powerbrokers and Institute of Public Affairs puppets are perfect, but not people who cook takeaway food. (A small digression worth pondering for several reasons: Gough Whitlam once said to Clyde Cameron in Cabinet, 'What would a fucking ex-shearer know about economics?' Cameron replied, 'As much as a fucking ex-classical Greek scholar.' [x])

Hanson's red hair is also habitually referenced, including by those who self-identify as non-discriminatory anti-racists.

Why was Pauline Hanson fired from Maccas? They already had a red-haired clown.

Like jokes about Trump's supposedly small hands, this is a form of body-shaming, mindless prejudice apparently validated by the targets being bigots of the right. It is possible to make a joke based on Hanson's hair colour without hypocrisy, but the only example of this that comes to mind is a 1998 image by Jim Mitchell. He created a version of the classic Redheads matchbox image relabelled as 'Rednecks' with Hanson's head and some well-chosen text. It wasn't just a putdown for being a 'ranga'; it was powerful satire. Sales of Mambo shirts featuring Mitchell's work generated \$110,000, which was donated to the National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association. [xi]

Surprisingly, there is not much evidence of explicit sexism in the oeuvre of Hanson jokes, although there may be misogyny that is embedded rather than overt. Consider this, from 1997:

Q: Why does Pauline Hanson shave her pubes?

A: One less black cunt to worry about.

Sharing this joke with various people led to some interesting discussions (once they moved past issues around lack of correspondence in the curtain-carpet department). The joke works as a joke – the punchline is a surprise, but it also matches the set-up, albeit in an unexpected way. It is also unpleasant. It could conceivably be an anti-racism joke, but the wording suggests the opposite; it notes Hanson’s racism but does not speak against it, and there seems to be glee in using the abhorrent phrase ‘black cunt’ presumably in reference to an Indigenous person. There is also the transgressive image of Hanson doing something intimate to her genitals, a useful way of cutting a female tall poppy down to size by reducing her to her anatomy. Some thought the joke misogynistic; as long as the strongest swear word in English is also a reference to female genitalia, this remains moot.

MOST JOKES ABOUT PHON and the Populists fall into the category of superiority humour, a mode where delivering a whack can be more important than being hilarious. Even professionals are not immune. In 2015, comedian Adam Hills tweeted, ‘Australia would send a better message to the world if we just hung Pauline Hanson from the Sydney Harbour Bridge.’ There was a minor furore. He noted afterwards that it was a poor gag and agreed with the tweet from fellow comic Chris Wainhouse: ‘Come on Adam Hills – What type of Rookie fucks up an anti Pauline Hanson joke? If you’re going to punch down at least make it connect.’^[xii] Similarly, comedy writer Guy Rundle visited One Nation’s West Australian state election campaign for *Crikey* and determined that James Ashby, Hanson’s chief of staff, was ‘about as useful as a crème brûlée dildo’.^[xiii] It is a self-conscious and slightly strained attempt at clever-funny, but unlikely

to offend – or change the thinking of – *Crikey's* overwhelmingly metropolitan, AB-demographic audience. In the same piece he decided two bystanders could not be One Nation supporters because of their 'clear skin, absence of sagging tats of Celtic crosses and Eminem, no mouth-damp half-lit Horizon 50 hanging from the lower lip'.^[xiv] It is not just a crude piece of punching down but also misses the importance of the changing characteristics of the One Nation support base, something comprehensively canvassed in David Marr's *Quarterly Essay: The White Queen* (Black Inc., 2017).

An item of incongruity humour that was more amusing, at least at the time, was the song 'Backdoor man' by Pauline Pantsdown. In 1998 it was the subject of censure by the Queensland Court of Appeal, which ruled in part: 'These were grossly offensive imputations relating to the sexual orientation and preference of a Member of Parliament and her performance which the appellant in no degree supports as accurate and which were paraded as part of an apparently fairly mindless effort at cheap denigration.'^[xv] To be fair, hearing 'Pauline' asserting 'I'm a backdoor man, I'm homosexual, I'm a backdoor man, yes I am' over a dance beat could have been confusing to certain voters.

'Backdoor man' provided an opportunity for those who felt victimised by Hanson's homophobia to laugh back at her. Conceivably it could have been influential in changing attitudes, but this seems unlikely. PHON followers who despise the LGBTQI community were given no reason to change their minds by Pantsdown's pastiche. By the same token, portraying Hanson as unintelligent is a zero-sum game. She is best remembered during her very short term on Ipswich City Council for crusading against library funding. This is not someone shy about appearing anti-intellectual. On the one hand, her critics think that parodic parroting of 'Please explain' is a punchline, a clincher. On the other hand, her supporters reflexively dislike intellectual smugness as exemplified by the use of long words (Tracey Curro's question about 'xenophobia' and Hanson's apparent ignorance of its meaning

triggered the original utterance of ‘Please explain’). Sniggering at her limitations helps position her as that Australian favourite, the underdog.

New political movements have always provided fodder for satirists, but does the mickey-taking have any influence? Perhaps it depends not just on what the jokes are and who is making them, but also on who is listening. A remarkable example of this occurred last year, when we witnessed the resilience of the Donald Trump juggernaut in the face of unprecedented levels of derision. Meme-smiths of the world united in an online onslaught, high-profile comics declaimed from their bully-pulpits, television wits devoted extraordinary levels of energy and airtime to Trump – and ultimately they looked like boys trying to stop an advancing Sherman tank by squirting it with water pistols. Trump’s opponents scored a clear victory in the badinage stakes; Trump settled for winning the presidency instead.

Creating cutting satire about Pauline Hanson on the internet, or on *Mad as Hell*, or in a student newspaper, or via inner-city street art, is a little like cooking a fragrant curry and expecting the aroma to impress someone living interstate.

ONE OF THE buzz terms of recent years is ‘filter bubble’, brought to prominence by the ominous headline on *Wired* just prior to Trump’s election, ‘Your filter bubble is destroying democracy’.^[xvi] The filter bubble, as *The New York Times* explained, is ‘the tendency of social networks like Facebook and Twitter to lock users into personalised feedback loops, each with its own news sources, cultural touchstones and political inclinations.’^[xvii] News is compartmentalised, but so is comment and satire. Andrew Bolt may appear in numerous newspapers, on pay television and commercial radio, but it is relatively easy to avoid his commentary if that is your desire; it is entirely possible that those people most virulently opposed to his slant on affairs would not purchase the News Corp papers, watch Sky News or tune into his shock-jock radio sessions anyway. Alternatively, ABC TV spreads the mock of Charlie Pickering, The Chaser and Shaun Micallef across the whole nation, but ratings for each program hover below one

million viewers, meaning that roughly 96 per cent of Australians are not receptors of their ratbaggery. Being offended by what they are peddling requires opting in. The Trump-bludgeoning satire of *Saturday Night Live*, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, *The Colbert Report* and others is enjoyed and applauded around the globe, but seems to make no inroads into the consciousness of those US citizens who elected him.

Filippo Menczer, former director of the Center for Complex Networks and Systems Research at Indiana University, investigated the cultural silos we are dwelling within and found profound polarisation and segregation: ‘The liberals retweeted the liberals and the conservatives retweeted the conservatives, but there were very few liberals who retweeted conservatives, and vice-versa. We use this term “echo chambers” to describe how people are exposed to information that is aligned with their pre-existing beliefs.’ [xviii]

If the jokes are bouncing around an echo chamber, why do the meme-makers and satirists persist? Does it provide comfort? Distraction? The illusion of making a difference? A brief trawl of the academic literature from the US (where most of the research is taking place) turns up contradictory findings alongside the bleedingly obvious. For example:

‘Comedians publicly ridiculing a presidential candidate may cause audiences to have negative attitudes toward that individual.’ [xix]

‘Satire seeks through the asking of unanswered questions to clarify the underlying morality of a situation.’ [xx]

‘Satire can be cathartic for those with little power, and it can help to build solidarity.’ [xxi]

‘Much of the information disseminated by political memes is more opinion than fact.’ [xxii]

‘Studies consistently find a correlation between exposure to political comedy and political knowledge, often on par with that associated with hard news.’ [xxiii]

‘It is unlikely that meaningful attitude change will emerge in response to a comedic message.’ [xxiv]

PETER MCGRAW AND Joel Warner note that some scholars argue, ‘not only is comedy incapable of launching revolutions, but it might even have prevented a few from happening. According to this line of thinking, joking among the discontent masses might act as a release, allowing folks to let off steam, instead of rising up in rebellion.’ [xxv] It is possible that comedy is counterproductive, because it gives the illusion that something is happening when nothing meaningful is occurring. It may feel meaningful to write joke headlines for satirical news sites, but it would be delusional to think that you are achieving anything greater than provoking laughter (remembering of course that creating laughter is a worthy achievement in itself.)

For example:

‘Fears for Pauline Hanson’s health after she realises some Asians are also Muslim’ (*The Shovel*)

‘Hanson investigating where gays come from so she can tell them to go back there’ (*The Backburner*, SBS Comedy)

“‘Pauline says what we are all thinking’ says man who can’t understand daylight savings’ (*Betoota Advocate*)

The concept of ‘dank memes’ made the ungainly journey from youth culture to mainstream discussion during the 2016 federal election. A quick survey of the internet turns up a multitude of Hanson-themed memes, variant in style and quality but generally working the ‘superiority’ seam of humour. For example, a photo of Hanson cut from a newspaper defaced with her holding a ‘snack pack’ of penises, with a penis stuck in her mouth and a speech balloon: ‘Is dick halal?’ Another meme positions a photo of Hanson beside a photo of a cane toad with the words ‘One of these is a poisonous menace from Queensland, the other is a cane toad’. Another shows Hanson with a coffee sign saying ‘100 per cent Arabica beans’ and the word ‘Triggered’.

Jokes about the US Populist Party were aimed low, hammering them even after they were exposed as impotent. Hanson and her party – seemingly inept, always apparently teetering towards disintegration – remain resilient. As the Liberal and National parties contort their political personae in an attempt to snare PHON voters, it is reminiscent of the Democratic Party in the US in the 1890s changing its orientation and adopting part of the Populist program in order to survive. [xxvi]

On one side of modern Australian politics the conservative parties are trying to absorb One Nation characteristics, amoeba-like, without losing faith with their base. On the other side of the political spectrum there is a vigorous and long-standing campaign of mockery that asserts One Nation is a joke. But a joke on whom? The fracturing of the body politic in contemporary Australia, and around the world, means that voters self-select not just the news they listen to, but also the political humour. And sometimes (think of the grimly funny jokes told by put-upon Russians in the Soviet era) these jokes are simply a way for people to feel better when faced by a political reality they despise. This humour is a source of consolation, not control.

Consider Joh Bjelke-Petersen. Prior to Hanson he was the most satirised individual in Australian political history. He was lampooned through puppetry on *Rubbery Figures*, given the Max Gillies caricature treatment, drawn as a hayseed by Alan Moir – and it not only did him no harm, but hardened the araldite of his supporters' approval. If you have a 'Bjelkemander' featuring state electorates shaped like donuts or dogs' legs, if you have other branches of the governmental apparatus in your control, if you have the big-money people onside, you can let satirists do their worst. Tellingly, it was dogged journalism (Phil Dickie's series of reports on police corruption in the *Courier-Mail*, followed by the *Four Corners* report 'The moonlight state', which eventually triggered the heavy lifting of the Fitzgerald Inquiry) that ultimately brought down Bjelke-Petersen. It was not Gough Whitlam calling him a 'Bible-bashing bastard' or wits from southern and western states mimicking his rhetorical 'Don't you worry about that'. While comic contumely flowed towards the man and his rotten National Party,

providing some small comfort for his critics, his supporters continued to love him and he remained premier for almost two decades.

Joh did not have a discernible sense of humour. Donald Trump does, but it is an acrid and unlovely thing. It is also effective – more effective, indeed, than the finely honed comedy of his political foes. Ian Crouch wrote in *The New Yorker*, ‘Many popular comedians went in hard against Trump, ridiculing him as being brazenly unfit for the presidency – and, by extension, ridiculing anyone who might consider voting for him – only to find that their arguments had little effect in the places where it turned out to matter.’ [xxvii] Hanson is not Trump, but for both politicians the thing that turns out to matter is the number, location, distribution and commitment of their supporters. Realpolitik beats political satire. The Populist Party was wiped out not because those higher up the privilege ladder told jokes about them, but because they were poorly organised.

Most of us prefer to stay inside our hermetic bubbles. While we are in there, memes and online jokes from people who think just the same way as we do might soothe our sore hearts. The danger lies in overestimating the ability of jokes to change the world. It is difficult to imagine PHON – a party riven with disorganisation and disharmony since inception – lasting another twenty years, but the people who venerate Pauline Hanson are not going away. There will remain a place in the political arena for her persona, if not her specific policies. The Populist Party flamed out like a cheap Roman candle, but mimetic versions of its adherents remain within the American electorate. If they were around today, some would have backed Bernie Sanders, but more would have voted Trump. That’s the thing about democracy – even citizens who are figures of fun are allowed a vote.

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