



The Coalition Hands Its Values To Hanson

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The rise of Pauline Hanson's One Nation party continues to befuddle the Canberra press gallery and the major political parties.

In Western Australia One Nation could hold the balance of power after the state election next month, and in Queensland the party is polling 23 per cent. Even in Victoria, the state often presumed to be the country's most progressive, One Nation is on 10 per cent of the vote.

At least part of the reason for the success of One Nation is that Pauline Hanson is not afraid to talk about culture and values. Specifically, she's willing to support the sort of values that too many commentators are too eager to dismiss as quaint, old-fashioned, or as a "sideshow" to the business of politics.

One Nation is simply filling a void left by the Coalition and the Labor Party.

In response to the survey question, "How important is freedom of speech to you?", 95 per cent of



respondents answered either “important” or “very important”. One Nation has a policy position in favour of freedom of speech. The Coalition and the ALP don’t.

The story of Georges River College, a public school in Sydney, is another example of the difference between One Nation and the major parties.

It was revealed this week that the NSW Education department has allowed the school to establish a policy whereby male students can refuse to shake the hands of women. The policy supposedly respects “the cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds of all students”, and so, in the words of the department: “At the school’s 2016 presentation day, the principal explained to invited guests making awards that some Muslim students may place their hand across their chest instead of shaking hands.”

Rob Stokes, the Liberal education minister, refused to say what was his view on the policy. Labor’s education spokesperson also refused to comment.

One politician wasn’t afraid to say what she thought. Hanson called the policy “rubbish” and contrary to Australian values.

The practical consequences of a school endorsing male students not shaking hands with women are legion. An education system that doesn’t prepare boys for the world of work and the possibility that one day they might have a female boss is fundamentally failing its responsibility to its pupils.

A few days ago the New South Wales Education Standards Authority announced that the English curriculum would be revamped to have pupils study classic writers such as Shakespeare, Dickens and Austen.

This is a welcome development. But Stokes should ask himself how any future Jane Austen would be treated should she visit Georges River College.

The refusal of boys to shake women’s hands, and then the endorsement of such behaviour by the government raises a much bigger question than just the employment prospects of those students.

A common accusation levelled at Hanson is that she’s merely a “populist”. But there’s nothing “populist” about being concerned about a government-sanctioned policy of gender segregation such as that practised by Georges River College. Hanson has proved to be an unlikely champion of gender equality.

For as long as the major political parties refuse to talk about issues such as whether boys should shake hands with girls, they will bleed support to the minor parties. If the Coalition and Labor want to increase their share of the vote, they must do more than complain about One Nation and its like. The Coalition and Labor are going to have to engage in the debate about Australia’s national culture and values in a way that Stokes didn’t.

The Liberal Party has a particular problem in this regard. With the Liberals directing their preferences to One Nation in Western Australia, a tactic likely to be repeated in other states and



at the federal level, there's a danger the Liberals will abandon talking about values altogether in the belief that the "culture wars" can be fought by One Nation, their preference-partners on the right.

This is dangerously short-term thinking. When a political party contracts out to someone else debates about its principles, it risks sowing the seeds of its own irrelevance.

Witness the Labor Party, and how the Greens now determine much of the ALP's policy agenda.

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