COMMENTARY on the role of the media in the rise of Pauline Hanson and One Nation has tended to concentrate on questions of how Pauline herself has been reported—whether the media has been too critical, too conformist, given her excessive media attention and so forth.

This is dealing with the phenomenon once it has occurred. What it does not do is explain why the sentiments that Pauline Hanson and One Nation have clearly tapped into could be so effectively exploited.

A SEPARATE MEDIA

The central duty of the media is to report society to itself. Obviously, news values themselves—things important, strange or otherwise remarkable, what makes something ‘news’—will affect what is reported. Yet, there is a clear sense in which the media is the mirror in which society sees itself. If that mirror is systematically distorted, then problems can be created.

A possible source of distortion is if journalists typically have common and strongly divergent views from those of the general public. If that is the case, there can be systematic under-reporting, or even misreporting, of common experiences and views. That can then create simmering resentments, a feeling of being ignored, ripe for possible exploitation.

Clearly, the importance of the media is increased when there is a failure of political leadership. Any media bias is most naturally expressed by journalists trawling for newsmakers they like. But they are driven first and foremost by the need for news. A political leader with a strong message, able to speak past the media—as distinct from politicians who are buffeted and blown by its fashions—makes any such media bias much less important—as Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and Jeff Kennett all show. (Jeff Kennett, for example, has to deal with the most pro-Labor, according to journalists themselves, broadsheet in Australia—see ‘Out of the Mouths of Babes and Sucklings’ in this issue.) But it is not good enough to excuse institutional failings on the basis of how others might, or might not, be performing—accountability operates all round. Furthermore, leaders come and go, whereas the media is a continuing institution. How well or badly it functions is fundamental to the long-term health of the body politic.

As noted in the previous issue of the IPA Review (‘Media Propagandists for Social Justice’ by Piers Akerman), and further reported in this one (‘Out of the Mouths of Babes and Sucklings’ by Andrew McIntyre), a survey of public and journalists’ attitudes conducted by Professor Henningham provides a useful indicator of divergence between the attitudes of journalists and those of the general public. I have grouped the various issues together and arranged the groups in terms of increasing divergence between public attitudes and those of journalists.

On the role of markets and fiscal policy issues, there is very little divergence between the attitudes of journalists and those of the general public. Differences on life and family issues, welfare and conservation are more marked, but not particularly significant. Journalists are distinctly more secular than the general public. They are markedly more liberal on sexual issues and markedly more ‘progressive’ on labour market issues, and in their attitudes to national identity, and very much more ‘progressive’ on crime issues, than the general public.

So, while Australians journalists are likely to be good ‘mirrors’ on general economic and fiscal issues, and fairly reasonably one of welfare, conservation, and life and family issues, there are clearly doubts about their likelihood to be so on religious, sexual, labour market, national identity and crime issues.

Now, what recently prominent political figure has been making quite a name for herself on national identity and crime issues? Pauline Hanson’s distinctiveness on such issues is reflected in her support base—One Nation supporters are likely, to a very disproportionate degree, to cite immigration, A borigines, equal treatment, law and order, and guns as reasons for supporting One Nation and to express support in terms of national identity. Ms Hanson has clearly been filling a gap in the political market. The question is, why is that gap there?

THE POLITICS OF INSULT

It is worth reflecting a little more on how much of ‘progressive’ politics works in this country.

Consider, for example, how environmental politics operates in this country. The typical pattern is for some development project in rural or provincial Australia—a Coronation Hill, a Wesley Vale, a Jabluka—to be demonized by a city-based environmental movement playing largely to an urban-based ‘green’ vote. The project gets abandoned—as do all the other similar projects people don’t even bother to put up. City pieties destroy rural and provincial jobs without any compensation and on the basis of a rhetoric which treats rural and provincial Australians as environmental despisers, delegitimizing their work. The ‘get a job’ taunts that folk in timber towns throw at green demonstrators, and the willingness of workers to get involved in organized anti-green politics (sometimes reported in the mainstream media as ‘business plants’), expresses this tension.

The same pattern—of city pieties delegitimizing rural and provincial Australia while imposing real costs—operates in indigenous politics.

As Australians are taxed to pay special benefits and fund special institutions. After Mabo and Wik we have now special property rights on the basis of race. At the same time we say racism is wrong because, of course, all should be treated equally. The property rights of rural lessees are unilaterally changed by a distant court—leases which are fundamental to their livelihood. Naturally people get upset. Money is poured into failed indigenous programs—there is little or no improvement in the appalling health profiles of indigenous Australians despite the ex-
The guns issue expresses the same dynamic. The implicit message is ‘you bastards can’t be trusted with guns’, of saying ‘you are all potential psychopaths’. There are some very angry and insulted people—some sort of ‘gift’, and that financial benefits flow from saying how oppressive our common society is.Policy apartheid—giving special benefits on the basis of race funded by general taxes—generates resentment and ‘downward envy’. The combination poisons race relations in outback communities.

The guns issue expresses the same dynamic. The implicit message is ‘you bastards can’t be trusted with guns’, of saying ‘you are all potential psychopaths’. There are some very angry and insulted people out there, over the gun issue.

There is also the problem of divergences between general attitudes and official multiculturalism—the doctrine that indigenous advancement is a righteous stances on issues that cost the penditure of billions of dollars. Understandably, people who daily see the waste and failures stop believing in the wisdom of Canberra.

The politics of grievance encourages the idea that indigenous advancement is some sort of ‘gift’, and that financial benefits flow from saying how oppressive our common society is. Policy apartheid—giving special benefits on the basis of race funded by general taxes—generates resentment and ‘downward envy’. The combination poisons race relations in outback communities.

The politics of grievance encourages the idea that indigenous advancement is some sort of ‘gift’, and that financial benefits flow from saying how oppressive our common society is. Policy apartheid—giving special benefits on the basis of race funded by general taxes—generates resentment and ‘downward envy’. The combination poisons race relations in outback communities.

The guns issue expresses the same dynamic. The implicit message is ‘you bastards can’t be trusted with guns’, of saying ‘you are all potential psychopaths’. There are some very angry and insulted people out there, over the gun issue.

There is also the problem of divergences between general attitudes and official multiculturalism—the doctrine that the hosts should pay to adapt to the newcomers (see ‘Cultural Pluralism: The Case for Benign Neglect’ by Michael James in this issue). Since migrants have tended to achieve federation by discussion and consensus, and the Armenian and Rwandan slaughters—and any demural is treated as implicit approval of the original policy and indifference to genocide—then public moral discourse has become so decayed as to be worse than useless. It has, in fact, become a poison to the body politic—how many votes for One Nation did ‘National Sorry Day’ generate?

Of course, being a discoverer and denounced of a great sin, like genocide, gives high status.

The progressive politics of insult naturally alienates country Australians in particular who, either implicitly or explicitly, get treated as a bunch of A boriginal-dispossessing, environment-destroying, weather-whingeing, gun-happy, redneck racists. A patently morally inferior bunch, who should shut up and do as their told, while city folk sneer at them and destroy their job prospects. Tolerance does not extend to ‘rednecks’. The politics of insult is a natural, indeed a necessary, part of moral greed. How can one have status if there is not someone to whom one is superior? Such grandstanding then provides a rich vein of resentments into which Pauline Hanson and One Nation can tap.

If the media provides an accurate ‘mirror’ of society, these resentments will get expressed in normal debate and commentary, and have avenues for being discharged. If, however, the media systematically distorts or represses such views, considerable pressure can be built up, waiting for release. If the media are strong practitioners themselves of moral greed, they will be an enormous part of the problem. Honest discussion of issues will be worse than useless. It has, in fact, become a poison to the body politic—how many votes for One Nation did ‘National Sorry Day’ generate?

Of course, being a discoverer and denounced of a great sin, like genocide, gives high status.

The progressive politics of insult naturally alienates country Australians in particular who, either implicitly or explicitly, get treated as a bunch of Aboriginal-dispossessing, environment-destroying, weather-whingeing, gun-happy, redneck racists. A patently morally inferior bunch, who should shut up and do as their told, while city folk sneer at them and destroy their job prospects. Tolerance does not extend to ‘rednecks’. The politics of insult is a natural, indeed a necessary, part of moral greed. How can one have status if there is not someone to whom one is superior? Such grandstanding then provides a rich vein of resentments into which Pauline Hanson and One Nation can tap.

If the media provides an accurate ‘mirror’ of society, these resentments will get expressed in normal debate and commentary, and have avenues for being discharged. If, however, the media systematically distorts or represses such views, considerable pressure can be built up, waiting for release. If the media are strong practitioners themselves of moral greed, they will be an enormous part of the problem. Honest discussion of issues will become well-nigh impossible, or at least face huge, unnecessary hurdles. Hole sets of experiences, and possibly fruitful responses to them, will face denial or futu...
ous denunciation. This problem is particularly rife in discussion of indigenous issues—accusations of racism having been the prime device for policing moral 'correctness'. Thus, amongst the self-appointed 'moral vanguard', assimilation policies, or even those which merely treated people equally, are indicators of 'racism'—for instance, David Marr using the term 'egalitarian racism' for those moral delinquents who believe that policy should be colour-blind. The Canberra Press Gallery cheering the passing of the poorly drafted, unnecessarily complex and tendentious National Title Act from the Senate gallery was a notable display of progressive conformism in the media. The treatment of indigenous issues is quite different from, say, economic issues—the media is far more willing to give various views an airing in the latter than the former. This is so even for fellow journalists—as Chris Kenny found when his exposure of the Hinkmarsh Island fraud was consigned down to the 'memory hole'. The best comment I heard about the Hinkmarsh Island debacle was 'where was the gutter press when we needed it?' Quite.

If people see that the media is systematically not reporting what they see around them, then they are going to look for explanations of that. If widely held perspectives do not seem to get much of a go in the press, people are going to look around for explanations of that as well. Either way, the ground is made much more fertile for conspiracy theories—well known to flourish in rural Australia—which provide explanations for systematic mis-reporting and under-reporting.

Even if people do not fall prey to such explanations, there is certainly rich ground created for political exploitation—as Pauline Hanson has found. Much of the reporting of Ms Hanson has served to reinforce the perspective that she is merely expressing what many people think, but 'they'—the media—will not treat fairly. And the 'all put One Nation last' campaign continues the pattern of city-dominated public debate belittling rural and fringe-urban Australia—which provide explanations for systematic mis-reporting and under-reporting.

The archetypal comment about Ms Hanson is 'she says what others won't'. The suggestion that Peter Garrett [the cover story, Bulletin, July 28] is an arch-expo-ponent of the progressive politics of insult, is an appropriate person to wield out against Ms Hanson comprehensively misses the plot. The confrontational media lynx-mob treatment of Ms Hanson has been highly counterproductive, as was evidenced in the Queensland election. There is overwhelming evidence that confrontational approaches against racism, for example, can be significantly counterproductive—a recent survey found that the European Union's aggressive Year Against Racism campaign actually 'been marked by a growing willingness on the part of Europeans to openly declare themselves as racists.' It is perhaps not surprising that people react against being preached at, particularly when the preaching has strong overtones of moral condemnation and self-aggrandizement. A for the claim that Ms Hanson represents a revolt against 'economic rationalism' (despite the fact that talking about economic issues is not how she came to prominence and about which she has little distinctive to say) well, lots of commentators would say that, wouldn't they? If she represents a revolt on cultural issues, then she represents a revolt against them. Far better, and much more comforting, if One Nation (haven't they noticed the title?) represents a revolt against something they also disagree with. They do have similar inconsistencies—being against the GST but in favour of tariffs, for example (if a GST on food and clothing is immoral, as some Church spokespeople have said, why have they not denounced regressive tariffs on food, and textiles, clothing and footwear? But self-serving moral display does not require consistency). Ironically, Ms Hanson herself is rather more progressive on sexual issues than much of her public.

CONCLUSION

The role of the media is to report a nation to itself. If it fails to do that in a systematic way, then the opportunity is rife for resentment and frustrations to build up, waiting for an appropriate vehicle to express them.

It is perfectly true that a less rhetori-cally-challenged government—one which understood the massive mandate against domination of policy and debate by the Sydney-Melbourne-Canberra Triangle it had given, one more able to articulate a middle road between the sneering, moral-greedy, elitists of the guilt industry and more old-fashioned bigotry—would have dealt with the current stresses more effectively—but they did not create the underlying stresses.

The United States has dealt with Pat Buchanan—a much more imposing figure, pushing similar lines. The answer has been real federalism—allowing diversity and thus reducing alienation—and full employment—massively reducing serious insecurity and greatly ameliorating social problems. What lies behind all these, however, is respect. The self-respect that comes from having a job, and confidence that you can get another, the respect comes from having a political system which allows regional diversity to be expressed rather than imposing centralized homogeneity, the respect that comes from having your perspectives being a fully legitimate part of the political debate.

We can achieve the same answers to the Perils of Pauline, it merely takes the political perception and the will—and a media which does its job with more professionalism and less moralistic self-indulgence. Moral rage is poisoning our body politic far more than the ordinary garden-variety ever has, for it divides the country on the basis of sneers and insults and strikes at the root of 'government by discussion' which lies at the heart of democracy.

NOTES


2 For example, an Age article by Geoff Strong: 'The Green Game', Features, 17 August 1998.


4 In 'Primal Fear: Race, Politics and Respectable Australia', Sydney Morning Herald, 31 May 1997 (available at http://reconciliation.queer.org.au/other.htm). 'Egalitarian racism' is a term whose patent oxymoronic status should surely have screamed the stupidity of the usage.

5 A great achievement of 'social justice' that took three years and four months for its first determination of native title on the mainland.

6 Goot, page 69.

7 Millbank, page 4.