

Is This the End of the Line for Nationalism in Australia?

If this political moment lasts, the country's conservative movement could be transformed.

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April 16, 2019

MELBOURNE, Australia — Just two months ago, Australia seemed destined for what the country's commentariat calls a “Tampa” election. That's local shorthand for a campaign characterized by race baiting and scare tactics about refugees — a term derived from the 2001 election a few months after the government of Prime Minister John Howard ordered special forces to board a Norwegian freight ship called the MV Tampa, carrying more than 400 rescued refugees, to prevent it from reaching Australia.

A new law that allows refugees on Nauru and Manus Island to come to Australia for necessary medical treatment promised to put refugees front and center in the upcoming general election, scheduled for May 18.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison and his coalition government saw this legislation passed against their will. They had railed against it, warning that the law would allow “rapists” and “pedophiles” into Australia. An opinion poll around that time showed a significant bounce for the government.

How long ago that seems. In the wake of the Christchurch, New Zealand, terrorist attack on Muslims last month, the Morrison government now finds itself under pressure over issues that recently appeared to give it an advantage.

For the moment, this takes the form of relentless questioning about where the government plans to place the far-right, nationalist One Nation party on its “how to vote” cards in the election. Those cards, which are a consequence of Australia's preferential voting system in which voters list all candidates on the ballot in order of preference, are often a matter of political gaming, designed to maximize a party's likelihood of success. Normally, they're of interest only to political buffs.

But every now and again, they come to be read as a declaration of ideological affinity and become a mainstream issue. This is the case following the horror in New Zealand, given One Nation's history of racist politics, recently expressed in its leader's declaration that “Islam is a disease; we need to vaccinate ourselves against that.”

Will the government pledge to put One Nation last on its voting card?

The question has dogged the government — becoming a staple of news conferences and interviews with parliamentarians — because the government hasn't provided a straightforward answer. After some hemming and hawing, there is still disagreement within the government about what to do.

The whole question has arisen for the governing coalition because it flirts with these kinds of politics.

One of its members spoke at a far-right, anti-Muslim Reclaim Australia rally in 2015. Earlier that year, Tony Abbott, then the prime minister, suggested that Muslim leaders were insincere when they said Islam was a religion of peace.

Indeed, such was the hostility of numerous parliamentarians' rhetoric toward Islam that the head of Australia's top intelligence organization advised them to moderate their language.

Perhaps the government's most committed member on this score is the Home Affairs minister, Peter Dutton, who recently asserted that people in Melbourne were "scared" to go to restaurants at night because of an epidemic of African gang violence — a supposed epidemic that even the state of Victoria, where Melbourne is located, says is overblown "hysteria."

By contrast, Mr. Dutton has argued that Australia should give "special attention" to white South African farmers, whom he regards as especially persecuted. He says they would "abide by our laws, integrate into our society, work hard, not lead a life on welfare." He is not the only politician expressing these sorts of views.

In October, senators voted in favor of a One Nation motion incorporating the white supremacist slogan "It's O.K. to be white." The government later blamed an administrative error for the vote, after having initially trumpeted the move as evidence of its opposition to "racism of any kind."

The kindest interpretation of all this is that the coalition has been sloppy and inattentive to the problem of extremism, even under the previous prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, who would frequently celebrate Australia's success as a multicultural country, and contend that those peddling Islamophobia were helping the Islamic State.

A more likely interpretation is that several of the coalition's members are prepared to play the politics of race, either cynically or as a matter of conviction, and that the rising prominence of One Nation has emboldened them. And given that the government's natural areas of political strength are around the issue of border protection (especially asylum-seeker policy) and national security, there is every reason to suspect that the coalition profits when politics skirts xenophobic themes.

But the visceral reality of Christchurch has recast much of our politics in new light: not as straight-talking honesty about the threat of Islamism, but as contributing to a more polarized, extremist environment.

Polling in the aftermath of Christchurch found that a remarkable 63 percent of Australians agreed that “white extremism is every bit as dangerous as Muslim fundamentalism,” while 42 percent agreed that politicians “have deliberately stirred up anti-Islamic sentiment as a way of getting votes.”

What was once a benefit has become a liability. What was once populist is eroding the government’s political capital. It is perhaps for this reason that we’ve seen the government pivot to an economic message, based mostly on the virtues of tax cuts. The Tampa route to retaining power seems to be shut off.

There’s no guarantee this political moment will last. But if it does, it could be a truly transformative one for Australian conservative politics.

Since at least the 1990s, Australian conservatism has offered a highly successful, if philosophically incongruent mix of free-market liberalism and increasingly strident cultural nationalism. But slowly these pillars have begun to erode.

As in much of the world, economic liberalism is losing some of its luster in Australia. But perhaps more so than elsewhere, nationalist anti-immigrant politics is running aground, too. The times would seem to demand a renewed Australian conservatism, attentive to economic and social inequality, and comfortable enough with cultural diversity to search for political capital elsewhere.

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