

Berejiklian's Nats ban likely to backfire in Wagga

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Wagga Wagga independent Joe McGirr. Picture: Brad Newman

NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian is facing defeat in the Wagga Wagga by-election, with polling showing the primary vote of the Liberal Party candidate, Julia Ham, at 28 per cent — and any government loss post-mortem would be expected to focus on why the Liberals did not let the Nationals run for the seat.

Independent Joe McGirr, who is seen as the best chance to snatch the seat after the resignation of Liberal Daryl Maguire in ICAC disgrace, was under consideration as a possible Nationals candidate had Ms Berejiklian stood aside from the contest and let the Nationals run, *The Australian* has learned.

Instead, the academic and former head of medical services at the local hospital is running as an independent and has a hot chance to become the third independent in the Legislative Assembly at the by-election on September 8 — a result that would reduce Ms Berejiklian's majority in the house from seven to six.

Dr McGirr told *The Australian* he believed that had the Nationals run for the seat, the Coalition would have a better chance of retaining it.

Reachtel polling conducted for the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party last week — in the midst of the federal leadership turmoil — had the Liberals at 28 per cent in the seat, Labor at 22 per cent, Dr McGirr at 17 per cent, the Shooters party at 10.1 per cent and other minor parties at 6 per cent, with undecided at 7.4 per cent.

Ms Berejiklian has conducted a blitzkrieg in the seat — with five campaign visits so far and a sixth scheduled for later this week.

The Premier's seeming only hope is if Labor can come second in the seat, particularly after Dr McGirr recommended on his how-to-vote cards that voters not preference anyone.

Despite Labor anger that Dr McGirr is not swapping preferences, the party has recommended preferencing Dr McGirr above the Liberals.

This means if Labor comes second, it will not get the same flow of preferences as if Dr McGirr comes second.

The Shooters party is preferencing Labor ahead of Dr McGirr, but both candidates above the Liberals.

The Wagga *Daily Advertiser* splashed yesterday with the headline “Buying loyalty” after a series of multi-million-dollar promises by the Premier and her ministers.

Opponents of the government say “a minister a day” has visited the seat, with proof of that being Tuesday's visit by Tourism Minister Adam Marshall and Planning Minister Anthony Roberts, as well as Ms Berejiklian, with Attorney-General Mark Speakman visiting yesterday.

Dr McGirr said as an independent, he could put pressure on the government of the day to act.

“I ran in 2011 and it made a difference because it was the first time there'd been a challenge and I think as a result of that the hospital got complete,” Dr McGirr said.

He said this time he was running because of “this issue of the recent member resigning in disgrace”.

Labor candidate Dan Hayes said: “This is unique. We had a dodgy local member, looking after himself instead of local constituents, and people are angry about it.”

Ms Berejiklian defended her decision not to let the Nationals run when she spoke to *The Australian* on Tuesday, saying: “This is a seat that’s been held by the Liberal Party since the mid 1950s.”

The Australian revealed yesterday that Ms Berejiklian believed a Liberal win in the contest would be “miraculous”.

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/state-politics/berejklisans-nats-ban-likely-to-backfire-in-wagga/news-story/65e7fbfd736ea2f12539f3b3dc33b883>