

Why Cory Bernardi could be Labor's best friend in 2019

SMH 26 October 2017
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Over the past few weeks the apostate Liberal senator Cory Bernardi has quietly taken the first steps to establishing his fledgling Australian Conservatives party in NSW.

It's not exactly a political powerhouse quite yet: according to filings with the state Electoral Commission, the official Australian Conservatives (NSW) headquarters is a desk in a "co-working space" in a building near Wynyard station.



*Australian Conservatives merge with Family First
With Senator Bernardi set to gain thousands of members, finances and two state MPs, how will the new conservative marriage between him and Family First impact the federal political landscape?*

When Fairfax Media visited mid-week there was no sign of Bernardi or his state director, Sally-Anne Vincent, a former Family First Queensland chairwoman who now lives in Dubbo.

The manager of the workspace – utilised by a cornucopia of unrelated small businesses and start-ups – reported that Australian Conservatives representatives drop in "every so often".

Nonetheless the move towards formal registration at the March 2019 NSW election will be a worrying sign for the state Coalition as it focuses its attention on winning a third term.

As the recent byelections in Orange, Murray and Cootamundra have confirmed, the Nationals are under siege in the bush.



Senator Cory Bernardi's Australian Conservatives are set to contest the 2019 NSW election. Photo: Andrew Meares

In those contests their most feared opponent was the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party. While they held onto Murray and Cootamundra following last year's stunning loss in Orange, it wasn't by much.

Murray, once a safe seat on a margin of 25.2 per cent, is now firmly a marginal on 3.5 per cent. Cootamundra's margin was cut in half to 10.4 per cent.

While not yet registered for NSW elections, Pauline Hanson has indicated that her One Nation party will contest in 2019.

In the most recent ReachTel poll conducted for Fairfax Media, One Nation polled a healthy 8.2 per cent.

The poll showed that the primary vote of the Liberal, Nationals and Labor parties had slipped from December last year and that the minor party and independent vote has increased from 11.6 per cent in December to 14.2 per cent.

So Bernardi's Australian Conservatives represents yet another right-wing party option for voters if they, as many appear to be, are fed up with the Liberals and Nationals.

But the Australian Conservatives might be a different story altogether: the Ying to the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers party's Yang when it comes to bleeding votes from the major parties of the centre right.

The Shooters, Fishers and Farmers' MLC Robert Borsak told Fairfax Media recently that the party aims to be the party of choice for right-wing voters.

But he qualified the type of voter the party was courting: "I'm not talking about extreme radical ratbag right-wingers; I'm not talking about Hansons and things like that."

Those "extreme radical ratbag right-wingers" are arguably precisely the type of voter Bernardi will be welcoming with open arms.

Where will they come from? Likely the same hard right wing of the Liberal party Bernardi once called his political home.

How will this play out? As the ABC's election analyst, Antony Green, notes, NSW's optional preferential voting system disadvantages those parties whose vote is split and benefits their main opponent.

Green says while the Australian Conservatives will struggle to secure an upper house seat due to the well established presence of the Shooters and Fred Nile's Christian Democrats, it is likely it will split the Liberal vote in lower house seats where they run.

So there's a chance that the biggest impact that Bernardi – the self-styled champion of the "true conservative" Liberal – will have is to advantage the ALP.

Bernardi claims his party already has 4000 financial members in NSW and his raid on the Liberal party's right flank is well underway.

In June he lunched with disaffected ex-Liberal John Ruddick and Tony Abbott loyalist Walter Villatora.

Both men are leaders of the charge to overhaul how preselections are carried out in the NSW Liberals, with the strong backing of Abbott.

The play has the capacity to realign power structures within the NSW Liberals, currently ruled by the left and centre-right factions to the frustration of the hard right, who are mocked with the nickname "The Taliban".

How this push plays out at the Liberal party's AGM in December will have a big influence on whether the likes of Villatora and fellow travellers make the switch to Bernardi's embrace.

<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/why-cory-berardi-could-be-labors-best-friend-in-2019-20171025-gz8h72.html>