

Bruising country clashes rock Coalition in Cootamundra, Murray by-elections

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NATIONALS leader John Barilaro attempted to brush off massive swings against his party in two bitterly fought by-elections in its country heartland, declaring the Nats had “moved on from the mistakes of the past”.

Despite swings against the Nationals in Murray and Cootamundra of 20 and 10 per cent respectively, the defiant Deputy Premier instead declared the results were a sign his party had advanced since losing the seat of Orange for the first time since World War II in last year’s by-election, which was won by the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers.

However, the fight in Murray may not be over yet, with the Shooters flagging that they had contacted the NSW Electoral Commissioner

regarding counting irregularities in the ballots in that particular by-election.



Deputy Premier John Barilaro and NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian. Picture: Kym Smith

Mr Barilaro remained philosophical about the considerable loss of ground to the Shooters and Labor in the central-west seats.

“The nature of a by-election, together with some of the issues of the past meant we were always expecting a large swing against us,” Mr Barilaro said.

“But I think voters recognised that we have worked hard to fix the mistakes of the past, and that we are a good government that is in the midst of seriously improving the lives of people in regional and rural NSW.”

Nationals Murray candidate Austin Evans, a former Murrumbidgee Council mayor, told The Daily Telegraph that the party’s campaign warning that the Shooters “wanted US style-gun laws” had helped get him across the line against SFF opponent Helen Dalton, despite her receiving a 20 per cent swing.

As part of the campaign, the Nationals published an open letter from former prime minister John Howard that warned against the Shooters’ “dangerous” policies, which include introducing gun permits for children as young as 10.

“I’m not anti-guns. My father’s a target shooter and I’ve grown up around guns, but we don’t need to reduce the laws from what they are,” said Mr Murray, who keeps the seat vacated by former education minister Adrian Piccoli.



The 'SAVE Tumbarumba' group turned out to support Shooters Fishers and Farmers Party candidate Matthew Stadtmiller in Cootamundra, contributing to the swing against the Nationals.



Nationals candidate Austin Evans helped defeat the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party in Murray. Picture: Nathan Edwards

“I was surprised that Labor preferenced the Shooters given their policies, but from the results it looks like a lot of Labor voters actually ignored their how-to-vote cards.”

“If people had followed them it might have been a different result.”

Mr Murray said that his biggest priority in government would be advocating for water for irrigators.

In Cootamundra, the seat vacated by former water minister Katrina Hodgkinson, Nationals candidate Steph Cooke was holding Country Labor rival Charlie Sheahan at bay despite suffering a 10 per cent two-party-preferred swing against her.



Local businesswoman Steph Cooke helped the National retain Cootamundra.

In Blacktown, where a third by-election was held on Saturday, Labor candidate and Blacktown mayor Stephen Bali won former Labor leader John Robertson’s seat comfortably with 80 per cent of the vote.

Premier Gladys Berijiklian said she was pleased with her government’s performance in rural areas, despite the swings: “I think it also shows we’re continuing to work hard for what’s important to people.”

The NSW Electoral Commission also revealed that it would be conducting a compliance review after a Nationals staffer was accused by Labor and the Shooters, Farmers and Fishers party of handing out unauthorised election material at a booth in Young. NSW Nationals have denied the claims.



Stephen Bali, Blacktown's Mayor since 2014, easily won the seat of Blacktown for Labor, which Opposition Leader Luke Foley attributed to the M4 toll and power prices under the Liberals. Picture: AAP Image/Justin Sanson



Premier Gladys Berejiklian says she is "pleased" with the result. Picture: Jonathan Ng

<http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/premier-gladys-berejiklian-happy-to-retain-seats-after-big-swing-against-government/news-story/d45910820eba84730bfaf833cd2ac672>