

# Why Gladys Berejiklian threw convention out the window

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John Ruddick – Opinion

The NSW Liberal Party's preselection for the state seat of North Shore this week provides a disturbing insight into what drives the party's dominant faction. It has laid bare that while Gladys Berejiklian very much wants to retain government she has one higher duty ... preservation of the "moderates" control of the NSW party.



*Liberal Party preselectors handed North Shore MP Felicity Wilson a razor tight victory of just one vote. CREDIT: JAMES ALCOCK*

This week the Premier chose to increase the chances of defeat at the 2019 state election in order to preserve the machine that has been her life since leaving school.

The 2019 state election will be tight. No non-ALP government has had more than two consecutive terms in the past century bar Robert Askin (1965-1975).

Berejiklian is politically smart enough to know that if the incumbent member for North Shore, Felicity Wilson, is the Liberal candidate at the next election the seat will quite likely vote for an independent. Its not just that Kerryn Phelps' seat is in clear sight across the harbour and that the same seat has voted for an independent on three occasions in recent memory.

This very seat almost voted for an independent just last year. In that byelection a cascade of negative stories broke about Wilson but only in the last few days before polling day. Many votes had already been cast and others didn't catch the news in time to register dissatisfaction. Since Wilson's narrow byelection win over the independent she has had one negative story after another from across the press gallery.



*Trent Zimmerman on the campaign trail. CREDIT: JAMES BRICKWOOD*

So why did the Premier absolutely go all out to salvage Wilson's preselection? It's not unusual for a parliamentary leader to write an endorsement for a sitting member under preselection challenge ... but it is more than unusual for [a premier to phone individual preselectors](#) in the days leading into the preselection, begging them to vote for that member. We can safely assume those phone calls shifted some waverers. [Wilson won by one](#) ... so the Premier's intervention determined the result.

It is a longstanding convention in the Liberal Party that candidate selection is the domain of the organisational wing and not the parliamentary wing. But this week Berejiklian threw that out the window.

But why? There's got to be more to it than sheer factional loyalty to a fellow "moderate" like Wilson. The "moderates" may be dominant but it's not uncommon for them to back a conservative from time to time for a whole host of reasons. And if there is any conservative they could stomach it would be the squeaky clean, super-smart, perfectly presented [Tim James](#) who has worked for more local community causes on the lower north shore in the last 25 years than Joe Hockey, Trent Zimmerman and Wilson combined.

James would win the North Shore and Wilson very likely lose it. At a minimum Wilson has made North Shore a marginal seat which means cash and resources

will need to be diverted from traditional marginal seats to try and hold North Shore. And Wilson just being the candidate will likely attract negative press that will drag down the entire statewide campaign.

Berejiklian wanted Wilson as the candidate because she is desperate to protect the official boss of the "moderates" Trent Zimmerman. Zimmerman is the federal member for North Sydney and within his seat are two state seats – Lane Cove and North Shore.



Lane Cove is represented by Liberal Anthony Roberts who has a large and active local party membership simply because so many of his constituents meet him, like him and voluntarily chose to join a local branch of the party to support him. The Anthony Roberts Christmas Party is a highlight of the NSW Liberal Party calendar – several hundreds of people gather for a whole afternoon at an everyday bowling club and have a great time with kids running around everywhere.

*Tim James would gather true blue Liberals to the cause. CREDIT: TWITTER*

The "moderates" can't do events like this. Their only friends are themselves and there is few of them. If James became the member for North Shore he, like Roberts, would see an influx of sincere Liberals join the local branches because they like him.

New members are anathema to Zimmerman. His relationship with party democracy is akin to superman's relationship with kryptonite. The moderates struggle to attract new members, which is why they fought so hard to keep a tight grip on the party by fighting democratic reform for so long and so hard.

After the next federal election the NSW Liberal Party will select candidates on the basis of a plebiscite (a big win for democratic reformers). Every member of the party of two years standing or more and who lives within the federal seat of North Sydney will soon have a vote to retain or fire Zimmerman.

When Zimmerman won his preselection in 2015 less than 100 factionally hand-picked delegates got a vote but before long there could 1,000 or more with a say. The last thing Zimmerman needs is to have two state MPs in his patch with swelling branches of true blue Liberals.

If one of the first NSW Liberal Party plebiscites sees the boss of the "moderates" unceremoniously turfed out of Parliament the whole "moderate" machine could easily come crashing down. Other "moderates" would quickly sniff the wind and, worried about their own re-endorsement, promptly disassociate themselves from Zimmerman and Co.

The "moderates" are good at long-term planning and devising strategy. I suspect that at some point in the past month the above scenario was been presented to

Berejiklian by their top two or three strategists. It appears that Berejiklian has concluded: "Governments are temporary but the machine must be permanent – I've got to save Trent by saving Felicity."

Berejiklian has done little in life outside of politics. She appears to have calculated that Wilson might hold on but even if she loses to an independent it is a better outcome than having James as the member ... and anyway she could console herself that the independent would likely offer support to the Liberal Party in a hung parliament.

The introduction of plebiscites to choose our candidates for lower house seats is a significant step forward for the NSW Liberal Party ... but it was always just a first step. The end game of democratic reform is when the entire party membership elects our parliamentary leaders.

When this gigantic reform is ratified, the Liberal Party of Australia will commence a century of political dominance (just like the 20th century). This decade of mostly conviction free and bland parliamentary leaders out of NSW (Barry O'Farrell, Mike Baird, Malcolm Turnbull, Gladys Berejiklian, Scott Morrison) will feature collectively in our history as a mere case study on how far our great party stooped just prior to a democratically engineered renaissance of sound leadership.

**John Ruddick is the author of *Make the Liberal Party Great Again* published by Wilkinson Publishing.**

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