

Weekend byelections show Gladys Berejiklian faces 'it's time' factor

SMH EDITORIAL 10 April 2017

Lisa Davies

Premier Gladys Berejiklian's government has been spared the unmitigated disaster of losing safe seats to independents in its spiritual heartland, scraping through in byelections for Manly and North Shore at the weekend despite big swings against it in the primary vote.



Premier Gladys Berejiklian congratulates North Shore and Manly candidates Felicity Wilson (centre) and James Griffin. Photo: James Alcock

While Labor's Liesl Tesch won Gosford by a solid margin as expected, extending Labor's lead in one of the state's most marginal seats, Liberals James Griffin and Felicity Wilson will take their seats in Macquarie Street with severely reduced margins for their party.

Voters in their electorates of Manly and North Shore respectively have sent a clear message to the coalition. The primary vote swings against the Liberals were 15.4 per cent in North Shore and 24.7 per cent in Manly. It's not as big as the massive slap of a 34 per cent swing on the primary vote delivered to the Coalition at the October byelection, but it's a very hard slap nonetheless, especially in Manly.

The result is confirmation that unlike the 2011 election when the overhang of state Labor corruption gave the Liberals a head-start, and unlike the 2015 poll when the

then-premier Mike Baird was the nation's most popular politician, the "it's time factor" is building.

The polls were regarded as a litmus test of her performance as leader since Mr Baird quit the job and the seat of Manly in January after trip-ups on council mergers, greyhound racing and health.

The weekend results point to a torrid term for the new Premier up until the March 2019 election. As the *Herald* noted last month, she may well encounter similar forces to the ones that ousted long-time West Australian premier Colin Barnett in one of the largest electoral defeats in the nation's history.

Ms Berejiklian faces unfinished business on councils, with a recent NSW Court of Appeal decision complicating matters. The court ruled Ku-ring-gai Council was denied procedural fairness before its proposed merger with Hornsby Council. Legal challenges to another four proposed council mergers are still in the works.

Independents campaigned strongly against the council mergers for the byelection and Save our Councils volunteers were prominent at polling booths on voting day.

But the Premier claimed the issue of transport had even greater traction on the hustings. It's possible the government's promise to look at a billion-dollar tunnel to relieve the northern beaches traffic headache saved her from more of a drubbing this time around. But by the 2019 state election, the tunnel proposal – or some other viable alternative – will need to be much more than just an idea. Voters are rightly sceptical about yet another flirtation with yet another grand plan which may go nowhere.

The government will also be hoping that by 2019, the issue of council mergers will be well behind it. But there's no guarantee of that either, especially if legal proceedings drag out. The Premier is hanging tough for now, but as a gesture of faith with the people of NSW, she may yet need to wipe the slate clean on the unpopular policy she inherited from Mike Baird, and drop plans for the remaining mergers of metropolitan councils, as she has for regional ones.

Liberal James Griffin suffered from his association with a toxic local issue: the attempt to turn Manly oval into a car park while he was deputy mayor. Revelations in the *Herald* that a company he ran may have traded when insolvent also dented his campaign momentum. On the latest figures he picked up 42.13 per cent of the primary vote, ahead of his closest rival independent Kathryn Ridge who polled 21.69 per cent.

In North Shore, too, Felicity Wilson's victory was tempered with a promise to voters she had learnt her lesson and would be more careful with her words after she was forced to admit during the campaign that she'd signed an inaccurate statutory declaration. She'd claimed to have lived in the electorate for the past 10 years when the truth was she'd only lived in it for part of that time. The Independent Ms Carolyn Corrigan attracted 23.68 per cent of the primary vote as opposed to Ms Wilson's 41.82 per cent.

In a light-hearted response to the result Ms Berejiklian channelled former NSW Premier Neville Wran, along the lines of "You can have the swing, and I'll take the seat". But she knows as well as anyone that she has very hard work ahead to avoid a rout in two years time.

<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/smh-editorial/weekend-byelections-show-gladys-berejiklian-faces-its-time-factor-20170409-gvh0vc.html>