

Party over pragmatism: Berejiklian's big test

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When Premier Gladys Berejiklian stood her ground and refused to allow her junior Coalition partners to contest the Wagga Wagga byelection, she was taking a substantial risk.



NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian. Photo: Jessica Hromas

She was asking voters to back the Liberals despite their former MP Daryl Maguire quitting in disgrace after being embroiled in a corruption hearing. That alone was a big task.

But add the war that then erupted within her federal party and ended with a mortally wounded prime minister, and suddenly Berejiklian's task must seem almost impossible.

This weekend's Wagga Wagga byelection is not a test of the government's policies or performance, but of the Liberal brand.

Neither problems were of the Premier's making, but she has been caught in the fallout. And there is no doubt Berejiklian is increasingly nervous. So, she should be.

The Liberals are facing a serious threat from a high-profile independent. [Joe McGirr](#) is a local surgeon who has run the emergency department of the town's hospital as well as worked in health administration.

McGirr contested Wagga Wagga in 2011 and scored 30 per cent of the vote.

Polling from parties such as the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers has the Liberal candidate Julia Ham on about 28 per cent. If accurate, the Liberals cannot win.

Berejiklian, with the encouragement of factional warlords, insisted on running a Liberal candidate in Wagga Wagga, despite being on the backfoot. She put the party before pragmatism.

Not only had Maguire fallen from grace, but it took weeks for him to finally resign from Parliament. Berejiklian allowed the saga to drag on, and it reportedly took former premier, Barry O'Farrell, to eventually force Maguire to quit.

The Nationals made it clear that after Maguire's damaging behaviour, they had a right to run in the seat. But Berejiklian would not budge.

The executive of the Nationals was determined. Vocal members were demanding that Wagga Wagga should be a Nationals seat. The federal seat of Riverina overlaps Wagga Wagga and is held by Nationals leader and Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack.

In the end, for the sake of harmony, their NSW leader John Barilaro intervened, and the Liberals got their way. But it may be a win Berejiklian regrets.

At taxpayers' expense, a long line of ministers has been paraded through Wagga Wagga day after day with announcements.

They can get away with it because it is classed as government business.

In one month alone, more than \$100 million has been promised to the town.

Berejiklian has visited at least weekly and MPs, some of them begrudgingly, are expected to lend a hand on the ground.

“Sure we want to win, but I don’t see why we have to fork out to travel to some seat that we should have let the Nats have,” one MP said this week.

Others have bemoaned that the party is wasting crucial money that should have been quarantined for the looming general election, which will be a challenge in itself.

Berejiklian has told her party room that their “country cousins are eyeing off the seat”. What she really means is that if the Liberals lose, Wagga Wagga is over for them and the Nationals will be given the go-ahead to run in the March election.

And with this, the Nationals’ have been given an invitation to sabotage the byelection.

There is little doubt that Wagga branch members of the Nationals are supporting McGirr on polling booths. Young Nationals are also reportedly being used as foot soldiers to fight the Liberals.

The once-happy marriage of convenience in NSW is showing serious signs of strain.

In a curious twist, the Liberals are even willing Labor to poll well and finish second, ensuring McGirr does not leapfrog them, with preferences, to the top spot. What a strange world.

Berejiklian will own the humiliating loss if Wagga Wagga slips through the government’s hands. And her country cousins will be rubbing their hands with glee.

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