

One Nation: High Noon for Nationals after Orange byelection

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The extraordinary scenes that played out on the [floor of the NSW Parliament](#) were a fitting end to a remarkable week.

The spectacle of Education Minister Adrian Piccoli feigning the shooting of individual Labor MPs during Thursday's question time, shouting "Bang!" each time he lurched forward to point at them, shocked even the most jaded veterans of the Bearpit.



Adrian Piccoli: 'Bang! Bang! Bang!'

Education Minister and former deputy leader of the NSW National Party Adrian Piccoli pointed to members of the opposition and shouted the word "??bang?" several times during a debate in the House of Representatives.

Two days earlier, Piccoli had stepped down as deputy leader of the NSW Nationals – a job he had held for more than eight of his 18 years in Parliament.

The same day Police Minister [Troy Grant had fallen on his sword](#) as Nationals leader in response to a furious voter backlash in a byelection in the regional seat of Orange last Saturday.

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Troy Grant announced he would quit a day before facing a spill motion. Photo: Christopher Pearce

The Nationals suffered a record 34 per cent primary vote swing against them in a seat they have held since 1947. Voters normally loyal to the Nationals left in droves in favour of the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers party and its candidate Philip Donato.

Blame has been apportioned to the NSW government's ill-fated bid to shut down the NSW greyhound industry, a backlash against council amalgamations, the loss of 1500 jobs after the closure of the Electrolux factory and even the "Trump" or "Brexit" effect.

Citing the bungled greyhounds ban and council mergers, broadcasters Ray Hadley and Alan Jones had spent weeks pumping up Donato's profile and urging voters to put the Nationals last.

But on Thursday Piccoli was quite literally taking aim at Labor's decision to direct preferences to the Shooters party.

"Bang, bang, bang!" he yelled across the floor of the Legislative Assembly as he accused Labor of helping a party that wants to wind back Australia's gun laws to win its first ever seat in the NSW lower house.

Piccoli's theatrics might have been over the top, but they revealed the raw anger within the Nationals at the byelection result.

Coming as it did just days after Donald Trump's unexpected victory in the United States presidential election and following the resurgence of Pauline Hanson's One Nation in the Australian parliament, the electoral belting has plunged the party into deep self-reflection.

"I think for many voters to vote for another party like the Shooters and Fishers or Labor it probably goes against all their grain," said newly elected NSW Nationals leader and Deputy Premier John Barilaro.

"I think if Pauline Hanson's One Nation was in this race they would have done really, really well."

John Barilaro, new NSW Nationals leader.



New NSW Nationals leader and Deputy Premier of NSW John Barilaro. Photo: Janie Barrett

"I think for them it was like, you know, very difficult to justify. But they thought they had an opportunity to send a message to the Nats and the government that regional NSW is important, Orange is important."

But Barilaro believes the Orange byelection – sparked by the former member Andrew Gee moving to the federal seat of Calare – was "a blessing in disguise".

"If we didn't have a byelection and it was a general election, the Nationals today could be seven or eight seats down," he believes.

On that result, it is possible the Coalition would be thrown out of office.

Barilaro describes Orange as a "protest vote" but also concedes it demonstrates how traditional Nationals voters can increasingly be turned towards the minor parties, including One Nation.

Labor did not benefit from the backlash in Orange, also suffering a massive swing against it of 18 per cent on the primary vote.

"I think if Pauline Hanson's One Nation was in this race they would have done really, really well," Barilaro suggests.

Federal party leader and Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce insists he's not concerned about Orange because "we won every booth in that electorate at the federal election".

"The idea that this is some sort of seismic shift in the National Party that is evident over a long period of time is rubbish," he says. But he concedes the byelection could be a worrying precedent unless "you learn from it".

"The person who can make One Nation strong is not Pauline Hanson or One Nation, it's us, if we don't listen to people".

Robert Borsak, one of two Shooters members in the NSW upper house, says that after adding "Farmers" to the party's name in April, preparations were underway for a lower house campaign for the 2019 NSW election.

When the byelection was called the party quickly preselected a candidate and began campaigning.

"To tell you the truth we didn't expect [this result]," he said. "We thought we'd get a good swing. I didn't actually think we would out-poll the Labor party."

He says the Shooters party is positioning itself as "an alternative to the Nationals, who really have no competition" as many of the party's voters do not like Labor's economic message. The Shooters could run in up to 10 seats in the 2019 election but Borsak is realistic.

"I don't think we'll see the perfect storm in 2019 in every seat we run in," he says.

The sensational resignation of Troy Grant and Barilaro's election as leader on Tuesday were not solely a consequence of a single byelection result, although it was undoubtedly the catalyst.

Internally, there have been complaints about the NSW Nationals being increasingly disconnected from their base for years.

The pressure on Grant over the greyhounds decision – reversed after weeks of political pain – and the record byelection swing brought the matter to a head. It emboldened long-time critics like former minister Kevin Humphries and Coffs Harbour MP Andrew Fraser to call for a radical intervention in how the party is being run.

"As far as I'm concerned we've got to get back to tin tacks – listening to our constituents, not just dictating to them," Fraser said while pushing for the leadership change this week.

In an interview with Fairfax Media, Barilaro – the member for the marginal seat of Monaro near Canberra – acknowledged a disconnect with traditional Nationals voters on a number of levels.

"The message that is common is: the government seems to be focused on Sydney, Sydney, Sydney," he says. "Even though in some cases that's the perception, not the truth."

Barilaro believes part of the problem lies in the party's refusal to change, despite representing an increasingly diverse electorate.

"You think about our members in parliament and our candidates – they are all your local champions," he says.

"We've got police officers, teachers, nurses, business people, we've got some farmers. But the truth of the matter is the party we've got today, we're nowhere near the farmers we used to be. Our communities have changed, the diversity of our candidates has changed. I'm not sure if our policies actually represent that."

Barilaro believes that despite the NSW government promising billions of dollars' worth of infrastructure for the regions, it cannot rely on this alone.

"Does that excite people?" he asks. "I think for most people, they go 'well that's what my taxes are paying for. That stuff should come through what I pay in tax'."

"What's important to me is that my child can get access to preschool placement, that there is a bus that gets my child to school because of the tyranny of distance. Or when I need dialysis service, that it is as local as possible.' I think that's the part that we've got to fix."

Barilaro also worries about the Nationals' identity as part of the Coalition with the Liberals in NSW. "The perception is we have become one party," he says. "That is a perception that I'm going to change, that I have to change."

It's a view shared by former National turned independent Tony Windsor, who held the state seat of Tamworth before going on to win the federal seat of New England, now held by Joyce.



National turned Independent Tony Windsor says National voters are taken for granted by both sides. Photo: James Brickwood

Windsor warns the Nationals will remain vulnerable to third parties if they do not carve out and retain a sufficiently separate identity when they are in coalition with the Liberals.

"The good old loyal National voter is never treated like a loyal servant should be, they are always taken for granted by both sides," he says.

"Country people are slow on the uptake in terms of how they can influence the political arena but I think they are starting to wake up [after Trump and Brexit]."

He says Grant was seen as a "head-nodder" falling too much under the shadow of Premier Mike Baird.

"I think there was an assumption that Baird was so popular and Labor was on the nose so it didn't matter, people would have to vote for them."

Barilaro agrees there was a perception that Grant was subservient to Baird but argues: "The truth is that I know Troy behind closed doors has had many fights to get the outcomes on behalf of the Nationals."

ABC election analyst Antony Green believes the Orange loss is reminiscent of the 1998 debacle in Queensland when "One Nation burst onto the scene and savaged the Nationals' base vote there".

But he says the country vote has been volatile for a long time. "The National Party in NSW and federally and in Queensland has consistently lost seats to independents on these sorts of issues ... the supposedly rusted-on National party vote has deserted before in the last two decades so I don't think this is a new phenomenon."

Publicly, at least, the federal National party is putting a brave face on the Orange byelection, pointing to its comparatively strong showing at the most recent federal election contrasted with the drubbing handed out to the Liberals.

Party officials say the 2016 federal poll was the first time in decades that the Nationals managed to pick up a seat from a position of being in government.

They currently comprise 20.8 per cent of the coalition party room, compared with 23.8 per cent in 1975.

And in NSW, the Nationals had a successful 2015 state election, winning 18 of the 20 seats the party contested after wrestling back in 2011 the key regional seats of Port Macquarie and Tamworth from independents.

What does Joyce see as the lessons from Orange?

"Well, a couple of really bad decisions – don't make them again. And talk about things that people can touch," he says, citing roads, dams, mobile phone towers, and access to health services. "Don't talk about philosophies or people's personal life."

"If you say, I want to sit down with you and have a long, in-depth conversation about 18C [of the Racial Discrimination Act] and the definition of marriage, they go, are you for real?"

"I believe in the traditional form of marriage. For people who believe in something different, fair enough but I'm not going to spend every waking minute talking about it. It fascinates people in the fourth estate in Canberra and it drives people bananas everywhere else."



Barnaby Joyce says lessons need to be learnt from the Orange byelection.

Photo: Alex Ellinghausen

He is scathing about the two big issues which he says cost the Nationals the byelection: forced council amalgamations and the greyhound racing ban.

The councils controversy was even bigger in the bush than in the cities, he says. "In many regional areas, people see their council as their country. A council area [hinges] around a town, which has its hospital, its own graveyard, its church, its football team – there is a real attachment to the 'colours' in country areas."

Joyce lobbied successfully to have the Baird government overturn a proposed merger of Walcha and Tamworth councils in the run up to the July federal election.

"The strongest booth for the coalition [subsequently] was Nowendoc in New England [his electorate] where we got 97 per cent of the primary vote. So only two people out of 100 didn't vote for us. I've got no doubt that if Walcha had been amalgamated, it could have been the other way around."

The greyhounds decision amounted to "bullying people", he says. "You are throwing your weight around and making moral judgments about other people. Leave them alone, especially if someone is doing it a bit tough."

Joyce is at pains to play down the threat of One Nation, whose greatest triumph prior to bagging four Senate seats this year was in 1998 when it cut a swathe through the Queensland state parliament, picking up 11 of 89 seats.

"I've campaigned against Pauline before and won, and I didn't have to go to the crazy right to do it," Joyce insists.

"Stay humble, don't get into personal attacks, have a tactile vision, , give them something to aspire to, don't talk in philosophical riddles."

A senior National Party source argues that Joyce is the best "immuniser" the party has against One Nation, in part because of his personal conservatism.

Barilaro's personal brand is also important in his pledge to rebuild the state machine.

Prior to entering cabinet, he led the charge against electricity privatisation when Baird first placed it on the agenda. At least in part due to his advocacy, Baird agreed to carve out the regional electricity supplier, Essential Energy, from his privatisation plans.

"Between now and [the next state election] in 2019 people are going to know exactly what the Nationals stand for, who we are and what our vision for regional NSW will be," he promises.

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