

Wagga slogga timely lesson

COMMENT

ANNA CALDWELL
STATE POLITICAL
EDITOR



IF Gladys Berejiklian fails to hold the seat of Wagga Wagga today, she and party strategists will need to do some serious soul searching so they don't make the same fumbles next March.

If, by the Premier's own words, there is a "miracle" and the government holds the seat, there are still lessons to be learnt.

In a desperate final press conference yesterday, Ms Berejiklian repeated almost 20 times that her intention was to "focus on the community". The repetition, ad nauseam, was an unsophisticated tactic that offered little of substance to those looking for a reason to vote for her.

Senior government sources complained privately that saying repeatedly "we will focus on the community" was an acknowledgment you had failed to do just that.

The strategists behind Berejiklian's campaign argue they are battling voter disgust at the Canberra instability. That may play a role, but Berejiklian and her strategists must take ownership of whatever swing they are dealt today. Failing to do so will only harm their campaign in March.

The Liberals poured millions into Wagga Wagga during the by-election campaign, and sent federal ministers there almost daily. Senior government sources familiar with successful campaigns in regional seats believe this seemed disingenuous, and drove voters towards the independent Joe McGirr.

There is no doubt Ms Berejiklian is one of the government's strongest assets, and that is what prompted the party to send her repeatedly to the seat. They will learn tonight whether it was too little too late.

The Liberals have held this seat since 1957.

If they lose today, it cannot be blamed on the vagaries of Canberra alone.

ONE LAST PITCH

Premier makes final plea as Liberals prepare for the worst



Premier Gladys Berejiklian in Wagga Wagga with Liberal candidate Julia Ham yesterday. Picture: Dylan Robinson

DANIELLE LE MESSURIER IN WAGGA

AS the people of Wagga Wagga turn up to vote today in a critical state by-election, lifelong Liberal voters have warned they won't support the party in its hour of need.

And that's despite Premier Gladys Berejiklian making a desperate eleventh-hour plea for voters to support Snowy Valleys councillor Julia Ham.

The seat has been held by the Liberals since 1957 but the party is bracing for the 12.9 per cent swing required to lose it, with internal polling revealed in *The Daily Telegraph* this week showing Ms Ham's primary vote could be as weak as 25 per cent.

Ms Berejiklian's insistence that she understood voters wanted her to deliver for the community came too late for residents like Fay Thomson, 78, and husband Bob, 80, who said they were voting independent for the first time.

"I reckon we've got a bunch of billygoats running the country at the moment," Mr Thomson said, adding he didn't trust the party to get its act together. "They're all attacking one another, they can't get on with running the country."

Ms Thomson said she couldn't support Ms Ham because she didn't know her.

"We normally vote Liberal but we don't know the lady standing for the Liberals, Julia Ham — she doesn't come from Wagga, she comes from Tumut," she said.

"I know she's been busy but only just in the little while we've heard of her ... she hasn't done well in the town."

In a bid to manage expectations, the government has already attempted to shift potential blame to Canberra. However, Ms Berejiklian and her strategists will face recriminations from the Nationals if they lose, after they insisted on not running a Nationals candidate. Nationals supporters have for weeks been supporting high-profile independent Joe McGirr. Ms Berejiklian pointed to the Canberra chaos again yesterday.

"It's fair to say ... there's a lot of disappointment in the community when elected people, politicians, spend too much time talking about themselves," she said.

High-profile independent candidate Dr McGirr — who ran as an independent in 2011 and secured 30 per cent of the vote and has been touted as the Liberals' biggest threat — said people had become "quite disillusioned" with the party system.

"They want local representatives they will be confident will take their concerns to the government. I don't think they have confidence that will happen through the party system," he said.

Labor leader Luke Foley, in Wagga Wagga for candidate Dan Hayes, encouraged voters to register a "protest" vote. "If you voted Liberal all your life this is your one chance to say it's not good enough," he said.

The by-election was triggered by the resignation of disgraced former Liberal MP Daryl Maguire.