

The bush hounds the Nationals out of town

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Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

Last Saturday there were three by-elections in NSW. The results represent a seismic shift in voter intentions in that state. The biggest anti-government swing occurred in the prosperous rural city of Orange. It has been in conservative hands forever.

You would be entitled to believe that a state in which the government has plenty of cash in its coffers to build much needed infrastructure in road and rail would be content with its political leadership. Premier Mike Baird has flogged or is flogging every piece of state assets that isn't nailed down.

At the state election last year Baird was triumphant and his poll ratings took on a godlike status. It is therefore astonishing that in all three by-elections his party was smashed or avoided shame by not running a candidate.

Baird is now paying the price for breaking promises and having an enormous aversion to consultation. His deputy premier, Troy Grant, fell on his sword and resigned as Nationals leader on Monday. He suffered greatly for being loyal to his boss.

There were several factors at work in Orange, but obviously the proposed ban on greyhound racing was the standout. Although the ban was reversed a few weeks

back, the rural communities could not believe that the Nationals, for decades the political voice of the bush, had deserted them.

Dog tracks abound in rural NSW. Every fair-sized town has a track and it is fair to say that greyhound racing is an industry.

Having led his party to the worst by-election result ever meant Grant had to resign. But that is not where it should end. The architect of the ban was Baird and he also should have done the honourable thing and resigned.

Lurking in the foreground was the forced amalgamation of councils. This was a big deal in the bush and, in a sense, a greater betrayal of trust.

Under Baird's predecessor Barry O'Farrell there was a clear promise not to proceed with forced amalgamations. Baird took that through the election last year, then promptly broke the promise. In the country, he still has not been forgiven.

At this stage of the electoral cycle, the Premier of NSW looks like a kangaroo transfixed by the light with the guns of trained hunters pointing at his heart.

No matter how many times he announces a new road tunnel or a new railway he has yet to realise that the mob has stopped listening. The man who loved the limelight and the adulation no longer exists. Now the Premier looks older and unhappier. I can't recall a by-election in the past four decades where the premier was missing. He was AWOL for this campaign because he knew he had made a colossal political error and he could not face an angry crowd in an allegedly safe seat.

In Orange, the swing was unbelievable. On first preferences, it was 33.8 per cent. On a two-party preferred basis, the swing was 21.8 per cent. Given those numbers it is staggering that on the Sunday Grant was ringing his colleagues in a bid to keep his job while ensuring that he tipped a bucket on John Barilaro, his most likely successor.

Now the whole world knows that the new leader supported the greyhound racing ban originally. In the minds of Nationals voters this will pose serious danger and perhaps provide a springboard for the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party. The party recently inserted the critical word — farmers — in its name. Given its victory on the back of Labor preferences, it could give the voters in country NSW a real conservative alternative to the Nationals.

Right now, voters are angry in the bush because they see the Nationals sticking with the Liberals to their disadvantage. The Shooters are not similarly constrained. They are free to do what they want and that mostly accords with what country voters want.

Also, Baird has managed to alienate the two most successful conservative radio commentators in Australia. Having Alan Jones and Ray Hadley bucket you every day on the most popular radio station 2GB from 5.30am until noon can't be good for poll ratings. Alienate one of these two and you have trouble. Alienate the two of them and you have a juggernaut coming straight at you. Both Jones and Hadley travelled to Orange for a public protest meeting. The crowd was hostile towards the

government anyway but by the end of the meeting was calling for blood. Hostility had become fury.

All three by-elections demonstrated that Labor in NSW is back to its campaigning best. Party secretary Kaila Murnain handled negotiations with the Shooters really well. In Wollongong, virtually every home was doorknocked or rung. That seat had been lost before to an independent lord mayor but any fears of that recurring were dashed within an hour of counting votes.

Labor achieved an 8 per cent swing in its favour and won the seat comfortably. The Liberals did not run a candidate in Wollongong or Canterbury and I congratulate whoever made that decision. A 12 per cent swing to Labor in Canterbury demonstrated that the Baird government is well and truly on the nose.

Suddenly, from a truly hopeless position, NSW Labor can see a light at the end of a long, long tunnel. Leader Luke Foley was the first public figure to protest against the greyhound racing ban. He is a man who has grown in the job since becoming Opposition Leader. Labor is back in the game in NSW. Foley's biggest asset is Baird. I can't recall a fall like his in such a short time.

The mob has the NSW Premier all worked out.

COMMENTS

Dear Watson

The trouble with Baird is that he tries (and mostly succeeds) to convince everybody that he is "mr nice guy". Yet the reality is that he makes ruthless, cold-blooded decisions, regardless of their damage.

Think of the damage done to all people hugely disappointed by his callous council mergers. The damage, stress and uncertainty caused to all in greyhounds. The damage by ICAC that he has left unrepaired, and he has left Murray Kear, Stuart Pearce and Mike Gallacher's lives in limbo.

These aren't the actions of a caring, sensitive, god-serving man.

John

Your summary of Baird is correct though you carefully omit the secrecy of Baird in his decision making even though spending a huge sum on expert reports which he is not prepared to release. One can only question why this blind arrogance of him.

Brian

The Orange revolt was aimed at Grant not Baird. Grant, in fact all the Parliamentary Nationals with the exception of the three that crossed the floor to vote in accord with the wishes of their constituents treated their rural base with contempt. While Grant fell on his sword the Nationals elevated a member that voted against the wishes of

the rural base and who has continued Grant's punishment of the three who rightly opposed the legislation. If they think that replacing Grant with someone exactly the same will appease their base they are dreaming.

Amalgamation of councils has a far greater impact on the welfare of those in rural areas than it does for the overcrowded, self indulgent city dwellers. The fact that the Parliamentary Nationals let those changes slip through without a whimper has also alienated them in the eyes of their constituents. Labor will not benefit from this, but the number of minor parties getting a foothold will increase.

Glenn

Regional constituencies count. Ignore them at your peril. The American mid-West is a solid block of Republican Red, because the Democrats ignored rural concerns.

Michael

It's a repeat of the Newman debacle in Queensland.

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/columnists/graham-richardson/the-bush-hounds-the-nationals-out-of-town/news-story/2050cd3fa9ffca002426650b034bc049>