

# The National party has more to worry about than a Trump wave

Blundering Coalition decisions perceived as taking rural and regional Australians for granted have left the Nationals vulnerable to voter fury

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*Participants at a rally against forced council amalgamations in Sydney, where Alan Jones stressed the Orange byelection was a prime opportunity to send a political message from regional Australia.  
Photograph: Dan Himbrechts/AAP*

It is tempting to see the [huge swing against the National party at the Orange byelection](#) as a Trump/Brexit-style wave hitting the Australian shores.

The truth is that council amalgamations and the greyhound ban were the policy equivalent of Dumb and Dumber in the central west [New South Wales](#) state seat.

It was those policies that led to the downfall of Troy Grant and the serious tarnishing of “Magic Mike” Baird. If anything, the Trump “up yours” result may have simply stiffened the spine.

## Double dose of double standards

If you live in a small country town, chances are that a local council is the biggest employer in the area. It is a big deal.

When Baird first proposed council amalgamations on grounds of economic efficiency, self-determination was the buzzword. The NSW government told councils to get together with like-minded councils, work out an amalgamation plan and we – the government – will listen to you. Otherwise it will be imposed from above.

**NSW Nationals leader Troy Grant and deputy Adrian Piccoli stand down** [Read more](#)

Smaller councils which were most vulnerable to amalgamations took the hint. They invested financially and emotionally in the process. Much angst and town hall venting took place, but a basic plan was settled.

[But a week before Christmas last year](#), councils were hit with the left-field news that their proposals had been chucked in the bin and the government had its own unilateral plan. There was an appeals process, but the writing was on the wall.

The anger in my own community was white hot. Even more galling than the decision itself was the feeling that the community was hoodwinked, tricked into a useless process. The government was not listening. Lifelong conservative voters vowed to vote out the [Coalition](#).

Following hot on the heels of that decision came the [greyhound racing ban](#). You can argue with the merits of council amalgamations on economic grounds, just as you can argue the merits of greyhound racing on animal rights grounds.

But was the NSW ban on the “battlers’ sport” going to extend to horse racing – “the sport of kings” – which is implicated in just as many animal deaths? Not likely.

It was these two issues, more than any other, that really crystallised the frustration of voters tired of being taken for granted.

## Powerful friends

Enter the [Shooters, Fishers and Farmers party, with its candidate Phil Donato](#), which organised and attracted some powerful backing from 2GB broadcasters Alan Jones and Ray Hadley.

They ran a simple campaign, with some very familiar themes from other protest parties, such as One Nation. They promised to Listen. They promised to [Stand Up for rural people](#).

Shooters upper house MLC Robert Brown encapsulated the mood: “I don’t know if we will get there, but this will teach the Nationals a lesson. They have to grow a spine and not kow-tow to the Baird government.”

In the week before the byelection, [Jones broadcast](#) from Orange Ex-Services Club and instructed voters to go in with baseball bats and “put the Nats last”.

“I want people here to be angry. If it’s a little trifling swing, they’ll say, ‘see, Jones and all those people they don’t understand, the electorate are quite happy with us’ and away we go,” [Jones said](#). “You don’t get many chances like this.”

**[Barnaby Joyce may be a party heavyweight but he's still light on policy](#)** [Gabrielle Chan](#) [Read more](#)

It was a [strategy](#) employed in last year’s state election by the Greens in the seats of Lismore and Ballina. The state Nationals suffered a 21.7% swing in Lismore and a 27.8% swing in Ballina. The Greens candidate Tamara Smith won Ballina.

On Saturday, the baseball bats came out and in some booths, such as Molong, the campaign resulted in swings of 60% against the Nationals.

It was such a devastating result that the [Nationals leader Troy Grant and his deputy Adrian Piccoli stood down](#) to make way for a new leadership team to push the “reset button”.

## A rural revolt gathering strength

If there was a lesson from Trump, it was reflected in my Saturday paper run. As I wandered in to my little newsagent, I asked the first person, what about Trump hey?

“I reckon it’s a good thing. Something might happen at last.”

And that is the point. People in main streets are sick of the status quo. By their measure, it has got them nothing. Marginal areas like the fringes of Sydney and Brisbane have felt this way for a while. It has just spread to one of the safest conservative seats in NSW.

There are two issues here.

The issue for the new National leader is to contain the blaze. His challenge is that he will be flat-out just defending his current seats, [now four of the six most marginal seats are National](#) – five if they manage to hold on to Orange.

My bet is that we will now see the Nationals taking more separate stands. Strategists inside the federal party know Barnaby Joyce's appeal is to shout like a Trump, even if it comes to nought in policy terms.

The other issue is for the Coalition more generally. I have written before on the [contradiction at the heart of the two Coalition constituencies](#) – diametrically opposed in need. If the Nationals voters peel off, heading for the likes of One Nation and the Shooters party, where to for the Coalition? Liberal MPs already believe the Nationals get too many resources for small, widespread populations.

Country people have been notoriously slow to use their balance of power. Western Australian Nationals leader [Brendon Grylls has done so with his Royalties for Regions](#) policy. More recently he has tried to do the same with a [mining tax](#). The next test on this front will be the Western Australian election in March.

If the rural giant ever wakes across the country, it will change the landscape. The Orange byelection is the tip of the iceberg.

[https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/nov/14/the-national-party-has-more-to-worry-about-than-a-trump-wave?CMP=share\\_btn\\_fb](https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/nov/14/the-national-party-has-more-to-worry-about-than-a-trump-wave?CMP=share_btn_fb)