

# Australia: National Party decimated in New South Wales by-election

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An unprecedented 32 percent swing against National Party candidate Scott Barrett in last Saturday's by-election for the seat of Orange in central west New South Wales highlights the depth of popular hostility towards the state Liberal-National Coalition government and Australia's two-party system.

Although the results have not yet been finalised, the by-election could be won by Shooters, Fishers and Farmers (SFF) candidate Philip Donato, a police prosecutor, with about 24 percent of the vote, after the allocation of voting preferences.

The SFF, which has two upper house seats in NSW, is a right-wing populist formation that opposes gun control laws, demands "right of access" to public land and calls for economic protectionist measures. In March, it voted with the Christian Democratic Party to ensure that the state government passed draconian anti-protest laws that reverse a range of basic democratic rights.

The electorate, covering the regional city of Orange, which has a population of about 40,000, and its surrounding rural districts, was regarded as the National Party's safest seat.

Last weekend's ballot, however, recorded the largest shift against an incumbent government in NSW's electoral history. Polling booths in Cabonne, Molong and Blayney registered swings against the Nationals of over 60 percent. The National Party, and its forerunner the Country Party, have held the seat continuously since 1947.

National Party state leader and NSW deputy premier Troy Grant initially declared he would not resign over the election debacle, but quit on Monday, after a National Party MP threatened to move a spill motion. Education Minister Adrian Piccoli also tendered his resignation as the party's deputy state leader.

NSW Premier Mike Baird will be forced to reshuffle his cabinet as a result. Although the Coalition retains a large majority in the state parliament, the by-election is a clear protest against the government. If replicated state-wide and federally, numerous MPs—Liberal, National and Labor alike—would be ejected from their positions.

The corporate media described the implosion in the National Party's vote as a "Donald Trump-style" revolt against the government. SFF party leader Robert Borsak claimed it as "a victory for the deplorables in the bush."

In today's *Australian* newspaper, Graham Richardson, a former minister in the Hawke and Keating Labor governments, claimed that the Orange result and two other NSW by-elections on the same day demonstrated that "Labor is back in the game in NSW."

Richardson's pompous claims are empty. The extraordinary repudiation of the Nationals failed to produce any increase in Labor's vote. In fact, there was a 5 percent swing against Labor in Orange, with the party receiving just 18.4 percent of the vote.

Although Labor candidates were easily returned, with slight vote increases, in by-elections in the working-class seats of Wollongong and Canterbury, this was because the Liberals did not run candidates in those electorates.

The massive swing in Orange was partly animated by hostility to the state government's forced amalgamations of local councils and its sudden announcement this year that it would shut down the greyhound racing industry. These issues are more broadly related to the growing anger over the decimation of jobs, living standards and social services throughout Australia.

According to official figures, unemployment in Orange city is 5.56 percent, which is slightly lower than the state average of 6 percent. This figure, however, excludes those who have given up looking for work, while those who work for as little as one hour a week are classified as “employed.”

Greyhound racing is popular in regional areas—many towns have racing tracks—and provides some employment and tourist income. The government ban produced protests throughout the state and scores of resignations from the National Party. Three National Party MPs crossed the floor and voted against the legislation in state parliament.

Such was the opposition that the government was forced to reverse the ban a few weeks before the by-election.

Widespread hostility to the council amalgamations—a cost-cutting and job destruction measure to reduce council spending by \$2 billion over the next 20 years—was another key factor. The government wants to reduce the existing 152 local councils to 112, supposedly to “reduce waste and red tape.”

Keith Rhoades, president of peak industry body, Local Government NSW, told Fairfax Media that local residents were “outraged” because they were not consulted over the amalgamations.

An estimated 50,000 people currently work for local councils in NSW. In regional and rural areas, where work is often seasonal, councils provide rare full-time jobs. In some rural areas, councils are the biggest employers.

The Orange electorate overlaps four local councils, which face being merged into one entity. Residents feared job losses, cuts in services and income, and a loss of opportunities for youth, which would see more people leave the area.

These concerns were exacerbated earlier this year with the closure of the Electrolux white-goods manufacturing plant in Orange and the axing of its remaining 300 jobs. At its peak during the 1970s, the factory employed about 2,000 people. Neither Labor nor the trade unions opposed the closure.

The SFF, which has connections with shooting clubs across Australia, reportedly mobilised 1,500 supporters for the by-election. Right-wing radio shock jocks Alan Jones and Ray Hadley also campaigned in the area, broadcasting their shows from Orange and urging a

vote for the SFF.

The fact that the SFF was able to posture as a friend of regional and rural workers, small business operators and farmers is a damning indictment of the Labor Party and the unions.

The worsening social conditions confronting workers and lower middle-class layers in rural and regional areas, and the destruction of basic services—health, education and government utilities—are a direct product of the big business programs of Labor and Liberal-National Coalition governments alike, at the federal and state level.

Like other right-wing populist formations, such the Nick Xenophon Team in South Australia and Pauline Hanson’s anti-immigrant One Nation, the SFF has no program to address any of the social needs of ordinary people and is totally committed to the maintenance of the private profit system.

Irrespective of who is ultimately declared the winner of the Orange by-election, the vote is another sign of the fragility of the two-party system and an indication that masses of people are seeking a way to fight the escalating assault on their jobs, living standards and basic democratic rights.



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