

Chapter Eleven

The National Party campaign

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I have to go back to the beginning of the year to paint a true picture of the federal campaign through National Party eyes. In February 2001, the Nationals had several focus groups commissioned that highlighted the need to promote the Nationals' achievements in Government to their constituents. In the early part of the year and after the poor results in the Western Australian and Queensland state elections, many journalists were "writing off" the National Party. Headings such as "Voters Desert the Nats Despite Strong Growth" (*Stock and Land*, 1 March 2001) and "Anderson Feels the Heat of the Burning Bush" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 February 2001) were prolific in the first quarter of the year.

It was time for the Nationals to do something about it. Under the leadership of John Anderson, the members and the organisation set about to try and rectify the problem by focusing on their achievements and what the party stood for. Anderson was determined to tackle head-on the negative media and the perception in the bush that the Nationals had achieved nothing. He gathered his team around him, with several meetings, including the much publicised Corowa meeting held in February and, with the aid of regular communiqués, the Nationals endeavoured to sell their long list of achievements and position themselves as a party with strong family values and the champions of small business.

At every opportunity the Nationals endeavoured to "brand" their party as committed to bridging the divide between city and rural and regional Australia and between small business and big business by delivering to country people their fair share of funding, telecommunications, roads and transport and community services. With the aid of a positive Budget, the dumping of the Central Price Index (CPI) automatic fuel price increases and team discipline (a lot easier after the resignation of Bob Katter, member for Kennedy), the Nationals were on the way back by the middle of the year.

The state of the party

The election for the Nationals was always going to be difficult. The party had three members retiring: Tim Fischer (former leader and Deputy Prime Minister), Garry Nehl (Deputy Speaker) and Tony Lawler (member for Parkes). As well, Senator Ron Boswell was on a separate ticket (that is not in coalition with the Liberals) for the Queensland Senate and going head to head with Pauline Hanson (One Nation). With only weeks before the election, the popular NSW Independent for Tamworth, Tony Windsor, announced that he was resigning his state seat to contest the federal seat of New England, held by the Nationals' Stuart St Clair. Added to that, the seat of Kennedy would be contested again by Bob Katter, but now standing as an Independent.

The timing of the Ansett collapse, which came under the responsibility of Anderson's portfolio, was particularly bad timing for the National Party. Even though, on the whole, the public did not see the collapse of Ansett as a Government responsibility, it took up a large part of the Deputy Prime Minister's time, and that of his staff, in the lead up and during the election.

The contest

The Nationals contested 33 seats in the House of Representatives and stood 8 Senate candidates. The party won 13 House of Representative seats and two Senate places. The seats lost were: New England to popular NSW Independent Windsor, Farrer to the Liberal Party and Kennedy to Katter. The vote in NSW was up 1.32% from last election, while in Queensland it was down 0.86% due mainly to the large loss of votes in Kennedy. Victoria and Western Australia were similar to the 1998 results. The Nationals did not stand in South Australia or Tasmania. The Nationals overall primary vote was up on the 1998 election from 5.29% to 5.61% but it was significantly less than in previous elections.

It was certainly a blow to the Nationals to lose Farrer. A number of factors were responsible including: the contrasting style of candidates; the strong Howard factor, particularly in Albury; difficulty following on from the high profile retiring member Tim Fischer; and varying degrees of experience on the campaign team. There was probably not one single explanation, but a combination of them all. New England was also heart wrenching, as Stuart St Clair was a good politician with leadership qualities. However, the Nationals do have an opportunity to regain the seat in the not too distant future. Katter resigned from the National Party early in July after months of procrastination, and sat on the cross benches as an Independent. Well known as a maverick, and a very popular figure in his far north Queensland seat of Kennedy, Katter was

always going to be very hard to beat. This proved to be the case. It will be interesting to see how he performs in his new status and without the back up and support of a party. Richmond, always a difficult seat due to its changing population, was won handsomely by Larry Anthony, even though the ALP mounted a massive “marginals” campaign and completely outspent the Nationals. Anderson also won his seat with an increased margin. Other excellent wins were Riverina, Dawson, Wide Bay, Parkes and Cowper to name a few. Most of the National Party sitting members polled extremely well and increased their margin.

The seat of Hinkler was an important win for the Nationals. Even though Paul Neville only won the seat by 64 votes, it was a major achievement given that it had only been held by 490 votes in the previous election and, as with Richmond, the Labor Party and the unions once again mounted a massive marginals campaign in an attempt to win the seat. In addition, there was a strong conservative Independent candidate who did not direct preferences and the One Nation candidate who put Paul Neville last. The so called “donkey” vote did not favour the National candidate either. The ALP, with the help of the unions, outspent the Nationals in all their targeted seats. The ALP continue to mount city style campaigns in rural electorates, in comparison to the Nationals grass roots and local campaigns.

Senator Boswell stood on a National Party only ticket. This meant that the Queensland Party had to man Brisbane booths as well as their country booths to secure his position. Boswell made it clear from the outset that it was a head to head contest between him and Pauline Hanson. It was a do or die effort for him and he succeeded with the help of Liberal Party preferences. With the defeat of Hanson in the Senate and the One Nation House of Representatives vote halved, One Nation has loosened its grip on the power it once enjoyed.

The issues

The *Tampa* issue produced an unusual situation that was to prove a sting in the tail for the Nationals. The issue polarised the electorate between Liberal and Labor, generating a presidential style election based on security, stability and strong leadership. As part of the Coalition this had its positive effects but in the case of the National's three-cornered contests it was difficult to overcome the Howard factor. The Coalition's strong stand on illegal immigrants was seen by Australians as Howard's initiative, along with East Timor and tax reform (whether the voter liked it or not). The Prime Minister's role was one of the

most influential in the election. Beazley was seen to “flip flop” on matters of security and strength of leadership.

The Labor Party also left it too late to start defining their policies, which included “Knowledge Nation” and GST Rollback. When they did not get traction with these issues, they resorted to negative campaigning. In fact some of their tactics, such as instilling the fear that the Coalition would put the GST on food and also sell Telstra as soon as they were elected, were blatantly misleading. These messages were conveyed in TV and radio advertisements and also in push polling, particularly in the last few days when there was no opportunity to refute their phoney claims.

The National Party has always relied heavily on local grass roots campaigns and this election was no exception. Each candidate localised their message as much as possible while still keeping within the main message of “bridging the divide” with the added theme of maintaining a stable and strong Government in times of international insecurity. Good economic management over the past five and a half years had brought low interest rates and low inflation, which was of particular importance to the National’s constituency. Against a background of 11 September terrorist attacks and the economic global downturn this was a major influence in the Coalition winning Government.

A major setback during the campaign occurred when the Government’s position on its stand on the sale of Telstra was not clearly defined. This sent shock waves throughout many of the electorates particularly in Queensland. It took over a week for the negative publicity to die down. The Labor Party used it extensively in its advertising right up to polling day, where they claimed on their polling booth “wrap” that the Coalition would sell Telstra.

The aftermath

The good result of a Coalition victory was somewhat overshadowed by the loss of Farrer and New England. Overall, the Nationals are elated to be back in Government. The party needs to address two main problems in the aftermath of the election. First, it needs to re-assert itself as the party truly representing rural and regional Australia. Second, the party organisation requires ongoing reform. It needs to re-assess its preselection process and establish better coordination between state and federal campaign strategies. The party has two new members, Luke Hartsuyker and John Cobb, that will instil new blood into the parliament and help in the work to rejuvenate the party.