

‘STUNNING VICTORY’ IN BY-ELECTION

The Federal Government had a surge with the re-election of Nationals leader Barnaby Joyce, with a big swing in his NSW seat of New England.

With around half the vote counted, Mr Joyce had won a swing on primary votes of about 11%, polling about 63% compared with 52% at the 2016 election.

A delighted Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull called it “the largest swing to the government in the history of by-elections in Australia,” at a victory celebration with Mr Joyce in Tamworth. He said that it was a “stunning victory.”

Surrounded by his parliamentary team, Mr Joyce said it was a massive win for the Nationals. He also paid tribute to the embattled PM Turnbull.

The vote follows a week in which rebel Nationals forced the government into a royal commission into the banks. On Friday, the Nationals’ deputy NSW premier, John Barilaro, launched an extraordinary attack on Mr Turnbull, saying he should quit by Christmas. The by-election campaign was dirty at times, with persistent chatter about Mr Joyce’s personal life. The High Court had ruled him ineligible for parliament under the Constitution because he was a dual citizen, via his father.

The result shows voters did not blame Mr Joyce for his failure to do the proper checks, instead extending something of a sympathy vote to him, according to Michelle Grattan, an online commentator with The Conversation:

HIGHLIGHT IN A BAD WEEK

“Mr Joyce was expected to win comfortably, but the swing is a morale booster, for the Nationals in particular and the government generally. His return to parliament and as deputy prime minister will bring the Government’s numbers in the lower house to 75.”

<https://theconversation.com/barnaby-joyce-storms-home-in-new-england-byelection-victory-88534>.

But for Turnbull, the test will be in Bennelong at the December 16 by-election, where John Alexander, who resigned in the dual citizenship crisis, faces a tough battle to hold the seat against Labor’s Kristina Keneally.

The Nationals’ federal president Larry Anthony told the Saturday night celebration: “This is the reset, but not just for the National Party ... but for the government”. It remains to be seen whether the result will embolden the Nationals to further differentiate their brand over coming months.

This could in part depend on how Bennelong goes, as well as whether the opinion polls remain strongly against the government. If so, the Nationals’ vote at the next election may be best maximised by running their own race.

In an interview with Sky, Joyce acknowledged there were some issues in the Coalition that needed to be “ironed out ... (and) we are doing that”.

Joyce has picked up a sizeable portion of the 29% of the vote that went at the 2016 election to Tony Windsor, the former independent who held the seat previously. In the field of 17 candidates, Labor, on a vote of around 11%, has achieved only a minor swing of about 4%.

The ALP put little effort into the seat, with Bill Shorten never appearing in the campaign. Turnbull ridiculed the Labor performance, saying its vote was comfortably ahead of the informal vote.

Rebel Nationals backbencher George Christensen, whose possible defection had been a matter of speculation, confirmed to Joyce by text that he would be staying in the party.

In a social media post on Saturday, Christensen said that since the banking royal commission was announced on Thursday, he had reconsidered what could be achieved within the framework of government.

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