

Barnaby Joyce storms home in New England byelection victory

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Nationals leader Barnaby Joyce has been returned to parliament with a big swing toward him in his New South Wales seat of New England.

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

A delighted Malcolm Turnbull, appearing at the Tamworth victory celebration with Joyce, told the crowd it appeared to be “the largest swing to the government in the history of byelections in Australia”.

Turnbull said it been a “stunning victory” and he would relish “getting the band back together”.

Surrounded by his parliamentary team, Joyce said it was a massive win for the Nationals.

He also paid tribute to the embattled Turnbull, saying running a country was a little bit harder than running sheep through a gate – and “you need someone with the skillset of this fellow here”.

The vote follows a week in which rebel Nationals forced the government to launch a royal commission into the banks. On Friday the NSW Nationals’ leader and deputy premier, John Barilaro, launched an extraordinary attack on Turnbull, saying he should quit by Christmas.

The byelection campaign was dirty at times, with persistent chatter about Joyce’s personal life. It was forced by the High Court ruling that Joyce ineligible to sit in parliament because he was a dual New Zealand citizen via his father.

The result shows voters did not blame Joyce for his failure to do the proper checks, instead extending something of a sympathy vote to him.

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Joyce had always been expected to be comfortably returned but the swing is a morale booster for the Nationals in particular and the government generally. Joyce's return to parliament and the role of deputy prime minister will bring the government's numbers in the lower house to 75.

But for Turnbull, the test will be in Bennelong at the December 16 byelection, 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

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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.

He had also had discussions with local mayors and community leaders, local LNP members and party elders, and Nationals colleagues.

“The consensus is that the Nationals need to be a stronger force within the government for both conservative values and country Australia and that people like me need to remain in the Nationals and government to ensure that happens,” he wrote.

“I am assured that, with Barnaby Joyce set to be returned to Canberra by the good people of New England today, we will have a more assertive and independently minded National Party with a reinvigorated leader at the helm.

“That’s good news for the people of Australia and should point the government in a new direction. That’s why, despite serious earlier misgivings, I will remain completely with the Nationals and, ultimately, with the government.”

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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