

## McCormack has tough task to match Barnaby Joyce's 2016 electoral gold standard

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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One man's disaster is another man's serendipity. If Barnaby Joyce hadn't fallen spectacularly, Michael McCormack, 53, the new deputy prime minister, would likely never have become the Nationals' leader.

In the normal course of events, by the time Joyce had moved on the party probably would have been ready for generational change – for example, to Queenslander David Littleproud, 41, who counted the numbers at the weekend but found he did not have enough for a tilt at the leadership on Monday.

Littleproud, a former agri-banker who was elevated by Joyce in December from the backbench to cabinet, potentially had as many as eight or nine out of the 21 Nationals, according to his supporters.

McCormack, the one-time editor of a regional newspaper who holds the New South Wales seat of Riverina and was a junior minister, comes to the top job with no blood on his hands, and with the Nationals knowing it is in their interests to get solidly behind him ahead of a difficult election next year. Those are significant advantages.

On the other hand, McCormack faces an uphill and possibly hazardous path, as he tries to establish himself within the government – where he's unlikely to be a Joyce-type squeaky wheel and so could lose battles – and in regional Australia.

Joyce set the electoral gold standard for the Nationals at the 2016 election. When Turnbull was losing multiple seats the Nationals kept all theirs (and took one from the Liberals).

To replicate this or come close, McCormack must project the Nationals as having a distinct identity and relevance, and to cut through with their messages.

As one Nationals source puts it, when the Liberals are in the ascendant, as in 2013, the Nationals can ride on their coat-tails. But when the major partner is struggling, as in 2016 (and

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likely in 2019), it's vital for the Nationals to distance themselves and establish their own pitch for support.

For all that Joyce's position was untenable and [his resignation](#) a relief for the government, most of the Nationals – apart from Joyce's known enemies – lament what they've lost. They recognise that even if McCormack proves a good leader he will never resonate in the bush the way Joyce has in the past (how he will in the future, after everything that's happened, remains to be seen).

McCormack will need to work especially hard in Queensland, a state vital to the Nationals at the election (and where the Liberals and Nationals are formally joined in the Liberal National Party). Joyce was uniquely placed – a sort of dual citizen, the cheeky might say, who holds a NSW seat but previously was a Queensland senator.

Even after he moved to NSW, the Nationals from Queensland still saw Joyce as one of them. They had him there in the Queensland election, which was on when he was fighting his New England byelection. McCormack doesn't enjoy such a convenient dual identity.

It will be important for McCormack to establish a good relationship with Littleproud, who's well placed to help with the formidable task of Queensland campaigning. Those who know Littleproud say he is by nature loyal and would not seek to undermine McCormack.

Another Queensland challenge is maverick Queensland backbencher George Christensen – who made a [token run](#) in Monday's leadership vote. He was difficult enough for Joyce to handle, though the two were personally quite close. Christensen won't be any easier for McCormack, and could be harder.

How Joyce plays things in the next few months will be relevant to McCormack's ability to run a united team.

As well as always being a centre of interest because he's such a colourful character, in the minds of some in the party and the media Joyce is not dead forever. Immediately after he was

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elected as leader, McCormack was asked whether he was “keeping the seat warm for Barnaby until he can mount a comeback”.

Such questions (though I think far-fetched) must be annoying for the new leader. But whether Joyce’s presence becomes a serious irritant depends as much on McCormack’s performance as on Joyce’s behaviour.

Most immediately, Joyce’s travails aren’t over. It was revealed in Senate estimates on Monday that last week Malcolm Turnbull asked the head of his department, Martin Parkinson, to look into whether Joyce had broken the ministerial code of conduct. This investigation has now been abandoned with Joyce’s resignation.

But the Independent Parliamentary Expenses Authority is still probing whether there was any misuse of entitlements by Joyce and his former staffer – now partner – Vikki Campion.

More seriously, the Nationals’ organisation has on its plate the complaint from former Western Australian Rural Woman of the Year Catherine Marriott, [accusing Joyce](#) of sexual harassment.

Leaving aside the row over who leaked the woman’s name (the Nationals deny it was them), this matter is surely a nightmare for the party. How is it going to inquire into it? Is the matter going to be tied up in a protracted legal argument? Will Joyce and his accuser be summoned for questioning?

To state the obvious, the outcome of this inquiry is critical to Joyce’s personal reputation. He’s called for the allegation to be referred to the police. He has also claimed in private conversations that his rejection of the allegation would be backed by text messages.

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

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