

Bhathal or Kearney: either way, it's a step up for Batman

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

With two high-profile female candidates battling out the contest, some “soft” voters in Batman regard Saturday’s choice as a “coin toss”, according to focus group research done in the final week of the byelection campaign.

Labor’s Ged Kearney, former ACTU president and one-time nurse, is fighting to retain Labor’s grip on the seat against six-time Greens candidate and social worker Alex Bhathal, who came within a whisker of victory in 2016. There is no Liberal in the 10-candidate field.

“Two great women – you can’t go wrong,” an executive assistant from Thornbury said. A woman from West Preston had “heard the two of them on an interview on Triple R and it was like two best friends having a cup of tea”.

Both male and female participants were in favour of more women in parliament, and pointed to the value of more diverse opinions than just those of “middle-aged white male lawyers”.

Four focus groups, each of eight to nine voters who hadn’t made a definite decision how they would vote, were held on Tuesday and Wednesday in a project for the University of Canberra’s Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis. The groups were conducted by Landscape Research, with a mix of age, gender, and socio-economic backgrounds and people drawn from different suburbs across the seat.

There was real ire against the former Labor member, David Feeney, whose resignation over his dual citizenship prompted the byelection. “He had his snout well and truly in the trough,” said one participant. “He didn’t declare his million dollar property”.

A female student from Northcote said Feeney had represented Batman “terribly. He was one of the most rightwing members of the Labor party in a seat suggested as the most progressive in Australia. And he was just parachuted in, he didn’t live here. He owned a house which he forgot to declare. He wasn’t connected to the electorate or the people or the issues He was an inappropriate fit”.

Bhathal or Kearney: either way, it's a step up for Batman

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Kearney was universally regarded as a strong candidate. About the worst thing said of her was that she's not a local (though people had a vague impression of her roots in the area). But her nursing and union background seemed to completely offset any handicap of coming from outside.

Bill Shorten's union history plays badly even in Labor heartland here, as it does elsewhere. But for Kearney, her union past is a strong positive. "She'll be a good negotiator and knows how to help people," said a woman from Reservoir.

These soft voters had no real idea of the policies Kearney was putting except for a "more humane treatment of refugees".

Conversely, younger voters credited Bhathal with running the better campaign because it had been "more visible", with "corflutes and posters all over the south". They also noted the Greens had profiled the Adani mine issue on their advertising, which had elevated voters' awareness of it.

For some younger soft voters, offshore detention was the defining issue in this byelection. They believed Kearney would have to "toe the Labor party line" if elected. For this reason they leaned towards Bhathal, who they believed would be a loud, albeit "powerless" (in a parliamentary sense), voice against offshore detention.

But others disagreed, thinking it would be better to have that loud progressive voice within the Labor party, trying to get policy change that could be implemented by a future Labor government.

The byelection, with less at stake than in a general election, allows soft Labor voters some luxury in sending their party a message. Kearney is likely to lose some votes because people feel rather "taken for granted" by the party; on the other hand, she is regarded as an infinitely superior candidate to Feeney and so will win back voters he lost. "Putting Ged Kearney in is a strategic move for the votes that would otherwise have gone to the Greens," a female public servant said.

Quite a few older soft voters had some regret about the drift of the Greens towards being a more mainstream party, and that “the environment had taken more of a back seat these days to the treatment of asylum seekers”. Others favoured the broadening to represent social justice issues perceived to be neglected by the major parties.

There is still a nostalgic harking back to Bob Brown. “Bob Brown was such a pivotal focal point”; “he had a bit of guts and passion”; he “turned his back on Bush – he stood for something”.

The notional political divide in Batman, in physical terms, is well known – Bell Street dubbed the “hipster-proof fence”, separating the gentrified Green south from the working class and historically European migrant northern suburbs with their stronger Labor allegiance.

Some soft voters think there is a Green creep – a progressive expansion of Melbourne’s Green core, which includes Adam Bandt’s seat of Melbourne, many councillors and a clutch of state lower and upper house seats. The Greens won the November state byelection in Northcote, which is within Batman. Some feel the greening is already crossing Bell Street. “The Greens are marching up the highway”.

If the political awareness of these soft voters is representative, the Batman campaign has been a very low-key affair. Their letterboxes have been stuffed with material and a few had received live and robocalls. But they could hardly recall any appearances or activities by the main candidates, let alone by Shorten or Greens leader Richard Di Natale. Indeed many of them didn’t know Di Natale’s name.

Saturday is seen as important to both Labor and Greens. This is Labor heartland and “if they can’t win this what does that say about them?” If the Greens won, they would both get a second House seat and boost their national profile. “They’ll have this epicentre and grow,” said one participant.

Several soft voters refer to the “domino effect” - potentially more Labor losses if the ALP loses Batman to the Greens. “If they lose it will be a sign that they have lost their base.”

Bhathal or Kearney: either way, it's a step up for Batman

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

But despite being at the centre of a byelection, many of these soft voters seemed quite disengaged from national issues and leaders.

They struggled to spell out federal issues of concern to them, although they were critical of Labor's tax announcement this week and don't trust Shorten on Adani, and were disappointed in Malcolm Turnbull's failure to deliver on progressive policies he once supported, notably climate change. Mostly, when they discussed national issues, they did not have dominant themes. They tended to be more concerned about local issues, such as crime and home invasion, and traffic congestion.

In general, they have little time for thinking about politics – and when they do, they often feel powerless and taken for granted in what used to be a safe seat.

Michelle Grattan ne travaille pas, ne conseille pas, ne possède pas de parts, ne reçoit pas de fonds d'une organisation qui pourrait tirer profit de cet article, et n'a déclaré aucune autre affiliation que son poste universitaire.

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Read more <http://theconversation.com/bhathal-or-kearney-either-way-its-a-step-up-for-batman-93445>