

Crucial Super Saturday Labor victories a major fillip for Shorten

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Bill Shorten has received a major boost from the Super Saturday byelections, retaining the crucial seats of Braddon and Longman and putting his hold on the Labor leadership beyond any doubt.

A triumphant Shorten, appearing on Saturday night with a victorious Susan Lamb in Longman, declared: "What a great night for the Labor party! What a great night for Labor women candidates!" Labor had won "four from four" of its seats in the Super Saturday contests.

Late Saturday night, on counting so far, Lamb led the Liberal National Party's Trevor Ruthenberg by 55-45% on the two-party vote – a swing to Labor of about 4%.

The Liberal National Party primary vote plunged in the Queensland seat by around 10 percentage points, to about 28%, a big concern for the government in what will be a vital state at next year's election. Pauline Hanson's One Nation polled 15% - six percentage points higher than at the last election.

The ALP's Justine Keay in Tasmania's Braddon had a two-party lead of 52-48% over her Liberal opponent Brett Whiteley, almost no change from 2016.

The Liberals received a whipping in the South Australian seat of Mayo, where crossbencher Rebekha Sharkie held off a challenge from the Liberals' Georgina Downer. Sharkie was leading 58-42% on the two-party vote, a swing towards her of about 3%.

In the other two contests, Fremantle and Perth in Western Australia, where the Liberals did not run, the ALP has predictably held its seats. Josh Wilson has been returned in Fremantle. Patrick Gorman, a one-time staffer to Kevin Rudd, is the new member for Perth, replacing Tim Hammond, who quit for family reasons.

Apart from Perth all the byelections were caused by the MPs having to resign in the citizenship crisis.

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The Braddon and Longman outcomes dash the hopes of ALP frontbencher Anthony Albanese of wresting the opposition leadership from Shorten. Albanese had positioned himself in recent weeks in case the ALP had bad results.

The results also scotch any possibility of a premature election, although Malcolm Turnbull has always been adamant the poll will be next year.

Both government and Labor put enormous effort and resources into the battles in Longman and Braddon, with multiple visits by Shorten and Turnbull.

Despite it talking down expectations, the results are a deep disappointment for the government, which had hoped it might snatch at least one of Braddon or Longman, and at the start of the campaign had hopes of winning Mayo although it quickly gave these up.

Shadow treasurer Chris Bowen tweeted: "Malcolm Turnbull said these by-elections were a referendum on leadership. Labor is winning four and the Libs can't regain the formerly safe seat of Mayo".

The president of the Queensland Liberal National Party, Gary Spence said of the Longman outcome: "It wasn't the result we were hoping for"; it was "somewhat of a disappointing result".

He said it reflected that the Australian people were over the citizenship issues and wanted to pay respect to the 2016 election result. Other reasons included that byelection history was against the government, and Labor, with its leader under pressure, had spent a huge amount on advertising in the final week, Spence said.

Conceding in Longman, Ruthenberg said it had been "a strange election - in that while I have lost, the community will still benefit from the commitments I've been able to secure from the Prime Minister and his team of ministers."

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Liberal backbencher Trent Zimmerman, reflecting the government's line, claimed on the ABC that the government had "done very well", containing the swing.

In her victory speech Sharkie, from the Centre Alliance which was formerly the Nick Xenophon Team, said her win was "because of people power". She said it showed "you don't need huge wads of money", "you don't need huge political machines". She had been "crushed" the day she resigned, "but today is really sweet".

Among her thanks, she paid tribute to former senator Nick Xenophon, saying he had given her a chance in 2016, when she won the seat.

Downer said that "a byelection is always tough for a government". Liberals expect Downer to run again for the seat at next year's election. Senator Anne Ruston told the Liberal campaign function: "I have no doubt one day Georgina will be the member for Mayo".

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.

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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