

# 14

## The National Party of Australia's Campaign: Further 'Back from the Brink'

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In this chapter, the Nationals' 2016 election campaign and results are considered in light of three perennial questions about the party: How long until they die out? What or who do they represent? How should they relate to the Liberal Party? On the first question, we argue that the Nationals have stepped further 'back from the brink', following the terminology of Geoff Cockfield and Linda Botterill (2011) that was used in identifying an apparent halt to the party's decline at the 2010 election, something also noted by others (Curtin and Woodward 2012; Woodward and Curtin 2010). Along with their usual advantage of regionally concentrated support, the Nationals ran an effective campaign in 2016, which was locally, rather than nationally, focused and quite traditional in terms of the issues covered and the support received on the ground. Their performance, relative to the Liberals, even allowed for a post-election increase in cabinet representation. Nationals' Leader Barnaby Joyce claimed that the election was 'a stepping stone' and there should be an 'ambition to continue to grow the party' (Chan 2016a). We suggest, however, that with this result, the party is close to its limits, given Australia's seemingly relentless urbanisation and competition from the Liberals, Pauline Hanson's One Nation (PHON) and Independents.

On the second question, in 2016, there was a notable focus on issues, such as services, communication and small business viability, to support regional economies and communities. This is consistent with the Nationals' efforts to become the party of the regions and not just farming regions. Furthermore, the party's candidates, while overwhelmingly having rural or at least regional origins, were much more likely to have a small business or corporate working history than they were to be farmers. The limits to moving from a rural to a regional identity were, however, evident in the campaign issues and the results. First, the Country Party has distinctive sectoral and agricultural origins and farmers have provided a long-term support base (Bean 2009). The party must be attentive to their needs, especially when there is a crisis, such as the pre-election crash in milk prices. Second, the Nationals are vulnerable to competition from populist parties in regional areas, and a key part of Australian populism is looking after the farmers. Joyce, considered by some in the media to be a 'maverick', is by inclination and probably intention an agrarian populist; no easy identity to maintain in a market-oriented party or coalition. Third, this election again shows that the federal National Party is not 'the' party of regional Australia but rather the party of particular regions, largely those in the predominantly agricultural areas of the eastern, mainland States. The gains of 2010, 2013 and 2016 were confined to recapturing some House of Representatives seats that had been held by the Nationals in the past. In 2016, the South Australian Nationals did not contest federal seats and the Western Australian Nationals failed in a bid to re-enter the federal sphere.

On the third question of the relationship between the Nationals and Liberals, the 2016 election was a classic case of the capacity for the Nationals in the Coalition to be somewhat independent on the campaign trail, and perhaps behind closed doors in post-election negotiations. Otherwise the positioning of the Nationals reinforces the impression that Australia has a two-party system. The Nationals need their independence, as well as the Joyce-style populism, to fight off PHON, the Katter Party and other rural start-ups. We argue that in this campaign the Nationals necessarily separated themselves from the Liberals to some extent, in order to address the issues of the bush, and with some success, but the difficulties of delivering as part of a market-orientated, big-business friendly, internationalist government will keep that populist space open for competition. In addition, the election results did not give encouragement to thoughts of greater independence from the Liberals,

a perennial aspiration for many supporters. The WA Nationals, on the back of a distinctly independent stance in State politics and a consequent track record of securing funding for the regions, made no gains.

For this review, discussion of the National Party includes all the State National parties that ran candidates in the election (Western Australia (WA), Victoria (VIC) and New South Wales (NSW)) and the candidates from the two amalgamated parties, the Country Liberal Party (CLP) in the Northern Territory (NT) and the Liberal–National Party (LNP) in Queensland (QLD) who contested the election and were listed as ‘Nationals’ candidates on the federal party’s website. To examine levels of support for the House of Representatives, we add the primary votes allocated to those CLP and LNP candidates to the formal count for the Liberal and National parties. This may not capture true voter preferences, but three-cornered contests in QLD had become rare prior to the 2008 merger to create the LNP, so this approach is reasonably consistent with the preamalgamation situation and enables an examination of the trend in support for the federal party. The NSW and Victorian parties limit three-cornered House of Representative contests by agreement and run joint tickets, which look very like the LNP ticket, for the Senate in terms of Liberal–National order allocations. The exception was the WA Nationals, who ran with an independent ticket.

## The candidates and the campaign

Joyce was by far the most high profile of the Nationals candidates. Joyce was first elected as a Nationals Senator for QLD, commencing his term in July 2005, defeating former PHON Senator Len Harris. In 2013, he resigned from the Senate and stood for the NSW House of Representatives seat of New England. He became deputy leader of the Nationals in the same year, and took over the leadership after Warren Truss’s resignation in February 2016. Joyce is from a rural family but also has experience in running a regional business—in many ways he is a prototype for contemporary Nationals candidates. Analysis of the candidates’ backgrounds reveals the Nationals are mostly a party of regional small to medium business owners or people from regional branches of the finance industry. A number indicate origins in family farms and/or having been involved in a farm business, and some may still have rural investments, but the vast majority identify as having other primary occupational backgrounds. There were

only three candidates who identified as farmers, all of whom were standing for the House of Representatives in the very traditional agricultural regions of the western (John Hassall for O'Connor) and south-eastern (Andrew Broad for Mallee; Mark Coulton for Parkes) grain belts. Thus, of the 42 candidates (12 for the Senate and 30 for the House of Representatives), only 7 per cent were (primarily) farmers and, of the total Nationals elected (22, including six Senators), only two were farmers (Broad and Coulton).

The tradition of the Nationals being a party of farmers might well be history, but the tradition of it being a party of men remains. In 2016, the candidates were overwhelmingly male, especially in the House of Representatives. Of the 30 candidates for that house, only five (16.7 per cent) were women, only two of those women contested winnable seats (Michele Landry for Capricornia, QLD, and Tina MacFarlane for Lingjari in the NT). Only Landry was elected, and she performed something of a minor miracle in holding a seat with a 0.6 per cent margin and a significant Labor history. Indeed, it was proclaimed by Malcolm Turnbull during counting that if she held the seat it would have 'saved the nation' by ensuring the Coalition reached 76 seats (Gately 2016). There was some small moderation of the overall gender imbalance in the Senate, with Fiona Nash (NSW) and Bridget McKenzie (VIC) returned as the Nationals' highest-ranked candidates on the respective joint tickets. However, the end result was that only three women were elected (13 per cent of all Nationals parliamentarians) and only one of those was selected for cabinet (Nash). The post-election speculation that Senator McKenzie, seen as having considerable potential, would get an outer ministry spot was not realised (Harris and Smethurst 2016).

In the end, it was to be Joyce, as both candidate and leader, who attracted most attention during the campaign, in part because of his self-titled 'vaudeville' style (Bettles 2016b) and because he was required to campaign locally to ensure he did not lose his seat to former Independent and arch rival Tony Windsor. It is rare to see the national or State-wide press deviate from their focus on the two major party leaders, but Joyce's populism and larrikin-like style ensured the party was able to maintain a profile beyond the regional country newspapers. In April 2016, Joyce released a short video of Johnny Depp and Amber Heard apologising for bringing their two miniature dogs into Australia without clearance (Department of Agriculture and Water Resources 2016). Joyce claimed the video's message highlighted 'the importance of biosecurity in Australia. The consequences of a disease outbreak could have been terrifying. We can't take the

risk' (Joyce 2016). Although the clip was both ridiculed and satirised, Joyce benefited from the attention it brought. In May, on day 17 of the campaign, Joyce's announcement of a package of concessional loans for struggling dairy farmers was accompanied by what Michelle Grattan termed 'another episode of the Depp-Joyce show' (2016). Appearing on American TV, Johnny Depp described Joyce as looking like he was 'inbred with a tomato'. Joyce's rejoinder was to state 'I think I'm turning into Johnny Depp's Hannibal Lecter' (ABC 2016). On his Facebook page, Joyce then posted a picture of himself with a bunch of tomatoes and the line 'just catching up with a bag full of cousins at Bingara' followed by a poll on whether the public preferred his old brown Akubra, a new white one or the third option: 'Keep both hats, lose the head' (Gannon 2016).

He was never shy of hyperbole. For example, he linked Labor's suspension of the live export trade to Indonesia and asylum seeker boats from there, implying that the Indonesian government was retaliating in the latter. Joyce also has the capacity to portray himself as a regular guy, and the 'regional whisperer' was important in keeping the Nationals in the voters' minds nationally (Madigan 2016) as well as in his own electorate of New England (Grattan 2016). In late June, when Turnbull officially launched the government's campaign, it was Joyce who was reported as getting the 'biggest laughs for his description of a Greens, Labor and Independent alliance as the Glee Club' (Tillett 2016). Some in the media even suggested that his style was 'Trumpesque' (Gannon 2016).

More generally, however, the presence of Joyce, the normally ubiquitous, indefatigable and effective, retail politician, was necessarily inhibited by the latter's need to fight off the challenge from Windsor in New England. Joyce employed a lot of media work directed at announcing actual and promised spending on sports facilities and even the transfer of a Commonwealth agency administration from Canberra to Armidale, along with considerable personal sparring towards the end of the campaign (see Curtin, Chapter 16, this volume).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Joyce juggled both. Early in the campaign, he had heralded the Coalition's Budget as delivering much for regional Australia (Bettles 2016a). Then his 'wombat trail' began in earnest, starting in the marginal regional electorates of central QLD before moving south into coastal NSW, visiting the

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1 In November 2016, Joyce confirmed he was moving the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority from Canberra to Armidale in New England at a cost of \$157 million a year and 365 jobs from the ACT economy (Towell 2016).

challenging seat of Richmond, where the Greens are strong and mining is a key issue. By week three, Joyce was visiting regional VIC, seeking to boost the fortunes of Marty Corboy in Indi and Damian Drum, former AFL player and coach and candidate for the seat of Murray. This seat had, most recently, been held by a Liberal but further back it was a Country–Nationals stronghold. Joyce followed up in later weeks with visits to central rural NSW and WA. He also experienced some spillover coverage as he accompanied, or perhaps chaperoned, Turnbull on regional visits, selling ‘the “toff” Turnbull to the regions’ (Marzsalek 2016). For the most part, Joyce tended to spend three days on the ‘trail’ then return to his electorate for weekends, in what was dubbed his ‘yoyo tour’ (Bettles 2016b). In between times, Nash continued the national campaign with support from Darren Chester (Member for Gippsland) and other higher-profile Nationals.

At each of his stops, Joyce announced funding for regionally specific initiatives: inland rail and cotton promises in NSW and a package to address the dairy crisis and the fall in dairy payouts from both Murray Goulburn and Fonterra in VIC (Bettles 2016c). In WA, issues such as funding for the Australian Sheepdog Championships and battles between the Liberals and Nationals for the right to represent ‘the bush’ featured, while farmers railed against the government’s refusal to overturn its decision on the backpacker tax increase (Bettles 2016d; Chan 2016b).<sup>2</sup> In regional QLD, the promise of water in electorates reliant on agriculture and mining was a feature; in Landry’s electorate alone, the Coalition promised \$2 million for a feasibility study on Rookwood weir and another \$130 million to cover construction costs (Madigan 2016). Between Joyce’s visits, the Nationals’ campaigns were locally focused, relying heavily on party volunteers, with candidates targeting local and rural media, and addressing local, State-wide and sectoral issues (Bettles 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2016d; Chan 2016c).

Alongside these local issues, there were broader campaign messages that addressed traditional, rural and regional issues that have been a feature of elections past (Curtin and Woodward 2012). Roads, communications, services, water and primary industries were discussed around the country.

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2 One senior Liberal Party source said if former WA National Party leader Brendon Grylls had chosen to run for the federal Senate and leave the WA parliament, it would have forced the WA Liberals to look more closely at their regional representation credentials in deciding the Senate ticket’s order of priority (Bettles 2016e).

In contrast to the Liberals, the Nationals largely avoided the 'economy in transition' and 'innovation' themes, which was wise considering the regional impact of downturns in mining investment, continuing structural adjustment in agriculture and population and business loss in some small towns. The Nationals generally stuck to more fundamental messages about improving communications and infrastructure and looking after small business. In addition, the party demonstrated a more overt agrarian populism than it has in elections for some time. Under Truss, the Nationals had previously used the Liberals' change of leadership to Turnbull to forge a new Coalition agreement, which was generally supposed to include the return of the water portfolio to the Nationals, the introduction of an effects test into competition policy and a commitment to a same-sex marriage plebiscite. Truss, as with his predecessors Mark Vaile, Tim Fischer and John Anderson, was a strong coalitionist, keeping policy debates behind closed doors. Joyce was more combative, expressive and inclined to independent policy positions. Joyce openly campaigned for greater restrictions on overseas investment in agriculture, which resulted in tighter reporting requirements and record keeping and the disallowance of some high-profile applications, such as that for the sale of Kidman properties to a company with considerable Chinese investment (Owens 2016).

A tendency to agrarian populism does not, however, always easily translate into policy or rhetorical coherency. There are at least three major issues that proved difficult for the Nationals, both generally and on the campaign trail. First, opposition to foreign ownership of farm land, while having populist appeal, including well beyond rural areas, is not universally supported in rural industries. Major farm organisations see foreign investment as having the potential to boost agricultural productivity, support existing enterprises, provide employment in some circumstances and enable some landholders to realise their 'superannuation' on selling out to cashed-up buyers. Nonetheless, it was probably politically advantageous to have some strong rhetoric on this in order to fight off competition from the economic nationalism of PHON, Katter's Australian Party and start-ups such as CountryMinded. The farm organisations largely kept silent on this during the campaign, but will likely quietly lobby to limit further constraints.

The second issue, and more of a flash point, is the tension between mining developments and agriculture in some areas. Joyce is generally in favour of protecting 'agricultural' land but then was burdened with

a decision in his electorate to approve a Chinese mining development, leading to some definitional gymnastics around 'prime agricultural' land. Furthermore, the party has a taint of association with the mining industries. Former leaders John Anderson and Mark Vaile were both involved in mining developments after leaving parliament, and Joyce is dogged by the allegation that he was at least interested in profiting from that sector, not to mention his self-declared friendship with, and advocacy for, mining magnate Gina Rinehart, although Rinehart does also have considerable agricultural interests. The Nationals were also members of a Coalition that under Tony Abbott was particularly supportive of resources development, giving the necessary approval for the Adani mine in central QLD—a development that also faced strong opposition from some landowners.

This is a difficult issue for the Nationals. At best, many people in rural areas 'accept' resources development but are not necessarily particularly supportive, while there are others who are extremely active in opposition. The political problem for the Nationals, and indeed all governments, is that there are now alliances between the Greens and landowners, which Rebecca Colvin, Brad Witt and Justine Lacey (2015) see as not just about common cause but some degree of values alignment. Development disputes could see contests between locals, no matter their political history, and big business and State and federal governments (Sherval and Hardiman 2014). The Nationals have developed a narrative, evident in this election, about protecting prime land and implying that they fight against development in the joint party room, while trying to argue the regional benefits of particular projects.

A third and related—but so far much less significant—issue is renewable energy, especially wind energy. This is a flashpoint issue in some regions, with strong networks opposing developments, but there are also those in the regions who see a new regional industry and income replacement or supplement for farmers. Joyce had generally aligned with those Liberals, including Abbott, and some Senate crossbenchers who are antagonistic to renewable, especially wind, energy. He maintains the line that wind farms are not suitable in some locations and was consequently confronted by farmers and regional communities that want such investments, yet he also supported the development of the White Rock wind farm in the New England electorate (Chan 2016a). This was not a major issue in the 2016 election but is an interesting one for the future and reveals yet



another challenge for the Nationals in balancing support for old and new industries in the regions, as well as dealing with the changing nature of some electorates.

While strongly agricultural, pastoral and mining electorates have little in the way of a green tinge, there are some signs of change in other regional electorates. The Greens contesting a number of the regional coastal seats, once the traditional heartland of the Nationals, have become a feature of recent elections (Curtin and Woodward 2012). In 2016, the Nationals placed a strong emphasis on the environment in their party material and addressed the issue in local campaigns. Yet, the Greens won more than 20 per cent of the vote in some coastal electorates, attracted more than 10 per cent in electorates with major regional centres and more than 5 per cent even in agricultural electorates. While the support for mining and fossil fuel industries, with accompanying anti-Green overtones, plays well in the culture wars debates of national media and commentary, they are not necessarily long-term winners in regional areas, some of which contain coal mines and coal seam gas wells and pipelines. Furthermore, populations and regional economies fluctuate with resources investment, and some towns have had to deal with significant population and economic decline after the construction phase led by extractive industries has been completed.

The Nationals were, however, on generally firm agrarian ground in focusing on farm viability. Joyce had already proposed some form of rural development bank but pushed this hard during the election campaign. This has been a longstanding populist favourite in rural areas, given a deep hostility to large commercial financial institutions and the persistence of farm debt that accumulates in drought years. Furthermore, the rapidly evolving dairy crisis, triggered by a sudden reduction in the price offered by processing companies, required considerable attention from the Nationals and the Coalition more generally. Emergency and rural development loans are not quite as generous as they first appear, since around the election period governments could potentially borrow at favourable interest rates and lend at slightly higher but still historically low rates. Just how emergency loans for dairy farmers and rural development loans to those already in debt will help long-term farm viability is unclear, and this links to a more general issue of farm finance and thence to the thorny issue of foreign investment. Nonetheless, the government's swiftness in making the announcement was probably sufficient for the heat of the election campaign, where details were for the moment of lesser importance.

## Election outcomes

The Nationals contested 30 House of Representative electorates and won 16 of those.<sup>3</sup> It held off challenges from two Independents and former MPs, Windsor in New England and Rob Oakeshott in Cowper. In almost two thirds (19) of these electorates, there were swings against the Nationals' candidates on primary votes, but in 12 of those they had gains, or very minimal losses, for the two-party preferred outcomes. This suggests that the preferences of the minor parties generally flowed favourably for the Nationals.



Figure 14.1. Proportion of seats and primary votes for the Country–National Party for the House of Representatives

Source. Compiled by the authors from the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) Election results 1996–2016 and the University of Western Australia, Australian Politics and Elections Database.

Essentially, the Nationals continued to recover ground from their low point of the 2007 election (see Figure 14.1). They received approximately 6.7 per cent of the total votes for House of Representatives candidates and ended with more than 10 per cent of seats. The seat/vote ratio, as implied by the gaps between seats gained and votes won, continued to improve, though it is unlikely to return to the outcomes associated with

3 This includes those seats in the NT (Lingiari) and QLD (seven seats) where the CLP and LNP candidates clearly indicated an intended affiliation with the Nationals in the Commonwealth Parliament.

the heady days of ‘rural weightage’ (see Economou 2007). Nonetheless, the Nationals has the most favourable seat/vote ratio of any of the parties (see Table 14.1).

Table 14.1. Proportions of votes and seats for the National Party in the House of Representatives, 2016

	Per cent of totals		Seat/vote ratio
	Votes	Seats	
Liberal Party	35.7	40	1.12
Labor Party	34.7	46.0	1.33
National Party	6.7	10.7	1.59
Greens	10.2	0.7	0.07

Source. Compiled by the authors from AEC (2016b, 2016c).

Then again, the Senate result shows the moderating impact of proportional representation. For that chamber, the Nationals are the ‘fourth’ party, with six Senators (7.9 per cent of the total), while the Greens have nine and PHON have four (see Green, Chapter 8, this volume).

The run up to the 2016 election and the outcomes from it suggest that the NSW party remains the centre of power for the federal party. Eight of 13 Country–National Party leaders have been from NSW, with seven of the last eight from that State (Truss was from QLD). NSW provided nine of 22 parliamentarians, QLD provided eight and VIC only four, with Senator Nigel Scullion being from the NT. Joyce and deputy leader Nash, both of whom were Cabinet ministers, were from NSW, although Joyce had been a Senator for QLD. By contrast, QLD ended up with one minister in Cabinet (Senator Matt Canavan) and one assistant minister (Keith Pitt) and VIC’s Darren Chester was also appointed to Cabinet. Contributing factors to the relative importance of NSW include the rise of Joyce within the federal party (and his shift to NSW), as well as the retirement of a number of senior QLD Nationals, leaving the party’s representation from that State as relatively junior and less experienced (although Matt Canavan, elected in 2013, was fast-tracked into Cabinet).

## Policy and electoral implications

The Nationals now have to deal with the actual and implied promises of the election. At face value, they are in a relatively strong policy position. It was the Liberals who lost seats and re-entered government a divided party. Turnbull quickly ceded additional Cabinet positions to the Nationals, suggesting that the ‘secret’ Coalition agreement would again be favourable to the Nationals. The Nationals have kept the water portfolio, which will enable them to blunt some of the impacts of water buybacks in the Murray–Darling Basin. They did not get trade, which was once a National Party portfolio, but the Nationals’ inclination to economic nationalism may be encouraged by some similar and probably stronger inclinations amongst the Nick Xenophon Team (NXT) and PHON in the Senate, not to mention Bob Katter and NXT’s Rebekha Sharkie in the finely balanced House of Representatives. More generally, those members may combine to make this one of the more rural-sympathetic parliaments for some time.

The Nationals’ objective to win additional money for dairy farmers or other groups that strike trouble appears to have been successful and a rural development bank would also enjoy some support, although there will be some reluctance on the part of part of some Liberals to step back into more direct support of agriculture after the long and tortuous road of deregulation. Similarly, the Nationals’ suspicion of big business, something evident in the early Country Party and still seen in discussion of practices by banks and major grocery chains, will also be given encouragement by some of the crossbenchers. There will continue to be interest in restricting foreign—especially Chinese—ownership of rural land, and probably other assets. All of this will allow the Nationals to be seen to be more influential in the Coalition than if the government did not have NXT and PHON in the Senate. Mining/farming conflicts will, however, be much more difficult with the Senate crossbenchers and Katter in the lower house.

Looking forward to the next and perhaps some subsequent elections, it is hard to see how the Nationals could further increase their parliamentary representation, even excluding the WA Nationals from the equation for the moment. In the first instance, this scenario depends on joint Senate ticket agreements being no less favourable, no further losses to new Independent challengers, no losses to the Liberals in three-cornered contests and no

big swings to Labor, which could see marginal seats such as Page and Capricornia lost. Even while retaining all current representation, there are perhaps only two to three possible lower house seats to gain. The Nationals could one day regain Kennedy when Bob Katter retires, although there is the possibility that current State MP Robbie Katter could take over that part of the 'family business'.

Second, the affiliation of elected members of the combined LNP in the federal parliament could become more favourable to the Nationals. For example, a future member for Groom (the Darling Downs) might opt to sit with the Nationals. It must have been something of a disappointment that the son of a National–Country Party/Nationals member for Groom (1984–88) and its predecessor electorate of Darling Downs (1972–84), John McVeigh, opted to sit with the Liberals following the 2016 election. However, the LNP is a party that is a relatively new amalgamation and, chastened by the 2015 QLD election result, this is a reminder to both parties that the balance between Nationals and Liberals is delicate.

Third, the Nationals will have opportunities to contest some Liberal seats in rural NSW and VIC with three-cornered contests. The result in Murray, with the election of Damian Drum, a high-profile footballer and coach and former State parliamentarian, was an important regain for them. They might be able to regain Hume, which has been held by both parties, but it is hard to see any other realistic targets. There were high hopes for taking Indi in the 2016 election, with Independent Cathy McGowan on a thin margin and a struggling Liberal candidate in Sophie Mirabella. Instead, Marty Corboy finished well behind Mirabella and McGowan increased her primary vote. Elsewhere, the Nationals performed very poorly in the Victorian seats that cover the major regional cities of Bendigo and Ballarat, with 3.6 per cent and 4.2 per cent of the primary votes, respectively. In the only two peri-urban seats they contested, McEwen in VIC and Whitlam in NSW, the Nationals polled 2.4 per cent and 6.2 per cent of the primary vote, respectively.

In northern NSW, despite the good results in Page, the party did not win back the electorate long held by the Anthony family (Richmond). Here, the Green vote increased to more than 20 per cent and, even though Labor's primary vote decreased, its two-party preferred margin increased by more than 2 per cent. A challenge for the Nationals is how to at least moderate the impact of the Green vote in some regions.

Finally, there is much for the WA Nationals to contemplate. On the back of a strategy of independence from the Liberals, this party has tried to come back from decline in the 1970s, capped by the ill-fated merger with the Democratic Labour Party in 1974. The party rebuilt to some extent and re-entered a coalition in 1993; however, under the leadership of Brendon Grylls, opted for independence from 2005, though twice joining government after State elections. The party advocated for the Royalties for Regions program, whereby mining royalties were allocated to regional projects, and has subsequently made much of that program, including in the 2016 federal election. The election result was, however, a disappointment with no Nationals Senators elected compared to one from PHON (Morris and Caporn 2016). The Nationals contested five House seats with O'Connor and Durack the main targets. In 2010, Tony Crook became the first WA Nationals member of the House of Representatives since 1974, winning O'Connor, but this now seems something of a false revival. Crook did not contest in 2013 and the seat returned to the Liberals. However, in neither O'Connor nor Durack did the Nationals win more than 18.5 per cent of the primary vote in 2016, casting doubt over their 'independent' campaign strategy.

## Conclusion

This was an election where the Coalition performed poorly while Labor outperformed expectations. Yet, while the Liberals' first preference vote share in non-metropolitan electorates decreased by 3.7 per cent, the Nationals, and the LNP in Queensland, experienced a negative swing of less than 1 per cent. This was a positive result for the Nationals despite several of the 18 non-metropolitan marginal seats staying with Labor, and the increased Green vote (1.42 per cent) in rural and regional Australia (AEC 2016a). The demise of the Palmer United Party clearly favoured the Nationals, but this alone is unlikely to account for the outcome. Rather, it is possible that the agrarian populism of Joyce, his starkly contrasting political style compared to the cosmopolitan Turnbull, resonated with rural and regional voters on the eastern seaboard of Australia at a time when stability in politics is a rare commodity. The Nationals now face the challenge of warding off a resurgent PHON from within the confines of the Coalition, delivering or at least facilitating irrigation schemes and developing serious regional policies.

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