



ARSINEH HOUSPIAN

Monique Ryan, who defeated Josh Frydenberg in Kooyong

Liberals can and must win back wealthy seats

The party cannot regain power without the traditional heartland support lost to the teals



PAUL FLETCHER

Following the 2016 election, the Liberal Party held all 10 of the electorates that, according to Roy Morgan research, have the highest average household wealth in Australia.

After the 2022 election, we hold just two: Bradfield on Sydney's North Shore, and Cook, in Sydney's south.

Of the other eight, we lost Warringah in 2019 and seven more in 2022: Wentworth, North Sydney, Mackellar, Goldstein, Higgins, Curtin and Kooyong.

Some say this a permanent realignment of political allegiances in Australia and the Liberal Party should not try to regain these traditional heartland seats; instead our exclusive focus should be on middle and outer ring suburban electorates and regional electorates.

As the member for Bradfield – one of the two seats in the 10 that are still with the Liberal Party – I disagree with this view (and I must say I have not heard it seriously advanced by fellow Liberals).

We have to win 18 seats to regain majority government. That means we need to target every seat where we have a chance of winning. Certainly that includes middle and outer ring suburban electorates and regional electorates – and swings to the Liberal Party in seats like McEwen and Paterson demonstrate the appeal of our message.

But our target seats must absolutely also include the eight seats I have mentioned, and other traditional Liberal seats we lost in this election such as Ryan and Boothby.

The majority of people in these seats have voted Liberal for generations. In all but one of the 10 traditional Liberal seats that I have mentioned, the Liberal Party got the highest number of first preference votes in this election, often by a considerable margin.

Regaining these seats will be difficult. As the experience in seats such as Mayo, Indi and Kennedy shows, when a Liberal or Nationals seat falls to an independent, it often stays independent for some time. But hard does not mean impossible. Both New England and Lyne were held by independents in the Rudd-Gillard-Rudd years – but were regained by the Coalition in 2013. North Sydney was held by an independent for two terms from 1990 but became a Liberal seat again in 1996.

What, then, must the Liberal Party do now to maximise our chances of winning back these heartland seats in 2025?

To start with, we need an honest and realistic self-assessment about the way we campaign and connect with the community. Liberals believe in the market and in competition. In this election we were out-competed and out-innovated in many of our heartland metropolitan seats.

Of course, we were up against extremely sophisticated campaigns, many directed by operatives with long campaign experience in the union movement and other green left groups like GetUp.

Thanks to funding from Simon Holmes a Court and other wealthy Australians, the independent campaigns spent at a level never before seen in local electorate politics in Australia.

But if you run a business and you face an innovative

competitor, you find a way to respond – or you go out of business while comforting yourself with “reasonable reasons” for why your competitor is doing better.

To take one example, to stay competitive Liberal candidates will need to do a much better job of using digital communications to target voters within an individual electorate. The independent campaigns did this very effectively.

Next, the Liberal Party must work hard to understand the message sent to us by people who previously voted Liberal but at this election voted for an independent – particularly women.

Our new deputy leader Sussan Ley has already nominated listening to the voice of female voters as a priority for her. There are now 10 Liberal and Nationals women in the shadow cabinet, and theirs will be strong and effective voices in this parliament.

But there is a lot of work for all of us to do, to listen to women and other voters who moved away from the Liberal Party.

The third part of the Liberal Party's response must be in our choice of candidates.

In this election, the Liberal Party fielded impressive and capable women as candidates in many electorates around the country.

Three examples were first-term MPs Katie Allen, Celia Hammond and Fiona Martin – each with impressive academic and professional qualifications, extensive experience in business, management and leadership, and a passion to serve their country. I hope each of them will in future again put themselves forward for election.

Some very capable new Liberal female MPs have been elected, such as Zoe McKenzie in Flinders and Jenny Ware in Hughes. But if we want to get back to government, we will need more outstanding female candidates coming forward to run. In turn, our party needs to work harder to attract, encourage and support women with a strong track record outside of politics.

This is not an ideological issue. Again, if you believe in competition, as Liberals do, this is about responding to the electoral marketplace.

A fourth priority, I believe, is making the case to voters for the stable government that can be delivered only when a major party has a majority in the parliament. We did not make this argument effectively enough in the 2022 election – with the result that in traditional Liberal seats many voters saw voting for an independent as having no downside.

And finally, we need to remember that our record of strong economic management has been key to these electorates being Liberal for many decades. If economic conditions deteriorate and taxes rise under Labor, these fundamental Liberal values will continue to resonate in these seats.

Every election defeat is hard, and we will only find our way back to government if we carefully study what happened and work out how we can regain the seats we have lost.

That is true for every seat around the country. But it is particularly true for the heartland inner metropolitan seats the Liberal Party has lost. If we tell ourselves anything else then it will be a very long time before we return to government.

Paul Fletcher is the Liberal member for Bradfield.