

— Opinion

Why the Liberal brand is fading in the suburbs

In 2025, the Liberal Party failed badly in part because it faced a disruptive competitor in many of its traditional metropolitan seats, and had not worked out how to respond.

Paul Fletcher

Former MP



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FEDERAL ELECTION

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79.7% counted

ALP majority

ALP

89

LNP

40

IND

8

GRN

0

OTH

2

76 seats needed for a majority

11 seats remaining

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For decades, Bradfield has been a heartland Liberal seat. Over the five elections I contested as the Liberal candidate for the electorate on Sydney’s north shore, from 2009 to 2019, our vote was rock solid.

But at my sixth election, in 2022, teal candidates won six heartland Liberal seats in our big cities. In Bradfield, we held on, but the swing against us exceeded 12 per

cent. The ground had shifted fundamentally, as the Liberal Party's post-election review [<https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/same-errors-caused-liberal-party-crisis-20250505-p5lwl1>] emphasised.



Gisele Kapterian correctly made the pitch that as a major party candidate, she was part of a team with a policy agenda and the capacity to deliver it. **Steven Siewert**

The 2022 election materially changed the composition of the Coalition Party Room. Compared with our traditional mix, we were now underweight in people holding metropolitan Liberal seats, and overweight MPs from Queensland and those holding regional and rural seats.

A lot of my colleagues, I sensed, were not seeing in their electorates the same powerful forces of change that were so obvious in Bradfield.

Many voters in Bradfield work in managerial or professional jobs; this includes one of the highest shares of managerial and professional women of any electorate [<https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/if-they-choose-two-men-they-re-morons-grassroots-liberal-leader-20250505-p5lwmr>]. And over my time as the local MP, the share of residents reporting being of Chinese background rose from 10 per cent to 25 per cent. The typical Bradfield voter, in my judgment, wants our economy managed well, lower taxes and lower interest rates. But he or she also takes it for granted that climate change is real, we need to transform our energy system, and wind and solar are a big part of that. Talk of war with China or Chinese spies is a major turn-off for voters of Chinese heritage.

“Good politics is fundamentally about shaping good policy which will make people’s lives better, and clearly communicating that to the electorate.”

This is the voter base we need to target in metropolitan seats if we are ever to return to government. The idea that we could ignore these seats, and could get back to government on the back of protest campaigns against offshore wind farms and new transmission lines, never struck me as plausible and has now been proven to be delusional.

Pretty clearly, we did not provide and communicate an attractive set of policies for this voter base. The result, disappointingly, has been that, at this election, we have mainly gone backwards in our traditional metropolitan heartland, Liberal seats.

We did some things right. Capable professional women in their 30s and 40s were selected as our candidates in seats like Kooyong (Amelia Hamer) and Warringah (Jaimee Rogers.) In Bradfield, I saw my long-planned retirement as another such opportunity, and so it proved with the very capable Gisele Kapterian chosen as our Liberal candidate.

As I write, counting continues in Bradfield. The teal candidate, backed by big donations from Climate 200, has a narrow lead over Kapterian.

During the campaign, the teal candidate never explained how one independent in a parliament of 150 can actually deliver the outcomes she promises. Kapterian by contrast correctly made the pitch that as a major party candidate, she was part of a team with a policy agenda and the capacity to deliver it.

But her job was made harder because our policy offering was thin and unpersuasive. We vacated the field and made it easier for teal candidates offering vague slogans because our offering was not rigorous and substantive enough.

As I went about the booths on Saturday, there were plenty of Liberal volunteers handing out how-to-vote cards – but there were more teal volunteers. Many of the latter greeted me affably and thanked me for my 15 years representing the electorate. There is no doubt in my mind that many were former Liberal voters.

“The centre-right political movement needs to find the policy skills and the political execution capacity to capitalise on

them.”

At Lindfield Public School where I spent a couple of hours, the mood was polite, but many voters would not take the Liberal how-to-vote card. Our first preference vote there was 32.7 per cent.

It was a sharp contrast to my memory of standing on the same booth in the 2011 NSW state election – when the local state member Barry O’Farrell led the Liberal National Coalition to a thumping victory. In his own seat, Barry received a two-party preferred vote of 81.3 per cent.

Barry and his team had a substantial policy offering and a good understanding of the people they were pitching to. Over its 12-year term, the New South Wales Liberal government, led by successively O’Farrell, Mike Baird, Gladys Berejiklian and Dom Perrottet, executed on those policies and delivered outstanding government – whether it was building the dazzling new Metro, delivering WestConnex, building new schools and hospitals across the state, or revolutionising the way citizens interact with government through Service NSW.

Good politics is fundamentally about shaping good policy which will make people’s lives better, and clearly and consistently communicating that to the electorate. In 2025, we failed badly at that, a failure made worse because we were facing a disruptive competitor in many of our traditional heartland seats and we had not worked out how to respond.

It is not pleasant to admit failure – and as a senior Liberal MP over this past term I have to own my share of the outcome. But we have to be honest with ourselves about what went wrong.

I believe that politics is cyclical and there will be a way back over time for the forces of centre-right politics. I hope that will be a rejuvenated Liberal Party, but there is enormous work required if that is to be the case.

The way back will likely be created by the inevitable failures of a Labor government spending too much money – whether it is the yawning fiscal disaster that is the National Disability Insurance Scheme, or Labor’s increasing practice of putting wage increases in selected industries such as childcare onto the taxpayers’ bill.

It will be driven by national security challenges and the likelihood that Labor falls short in its responses. And it will be driven by people in seats in Bradfield and other

traditional Liberal seats getting angry about ever more of their money being hoovered up by higher taxes to pay for Labor's big government vision.

There will be new political opportunities. The lesson of the 2025 election is that the centre-right political movement needs to find the policy skills and the political execution capacity to capitalise on them.

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