

Liberal unrest as Premier Gladys Berejiklian misses the mark

[Andrew Clennell](#), NSW Political Editor, 12:00AM September 10, 2018

About six months ago NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian asked her cabinet ministers to come to the table with some ideas for new policies. In true Yes Minister-style, some ministers brought in briefing notes from their departments, apparently unable to come up with their own ideas. But there was one person who came in without a single new idea, ministers say — the Premier.

In Turnbull the Libs enjoyed a PM who helped drag the party vote north. Instead of nurturing that advantage, they got rid of it.

In the wake of Saturday's Wagga Wagga [by-election loss](#) — and a 30 per cent primary-vote swing against her government — there are those in the government concerned now that what was viewed as the unlikely prospect of a loss to the Labor Party or a descent into minority government at the state election next March is now more than possible.

And that is because the Premier, leading a strong-performing government against a weak opposition, has been criticised as being unable to convey a clear vision for the state. Those close to the Premier say she has a plan — the people of NSW just have not seen it yet.

The Australian has learned that one slogan the Premier has been contemplating for the March election is, “We're working for you”, shades of Morris Iemma's “More to do but heading in the right direction” of 2007. Hardly inspiring and kind of obvious.

Political party research is understood to show people believe the state government is working hard, on projects such as infrastructure, but not necessarily working in their best interests.

With the record primary vote swing against the Liberal Party in Wagga Wagga, ABC election analyst Antony Green was moved to write on Saturday night that, because of the result, and another loss to the crossbench reducing Berejiklian's margin in the 93-seat Legislative Assembly to six: “Of the four possible results next year — majority Coalition, minority Coalition, minority Labor or majority Labor — majority Coalition is looking the least likely outcome.”

The only comfort for the Premier is that the government is [polling very well](#) in Sydney. The Australian has been told the government is well ahead in the marginal seat of East Hills despite holding the seat by a margin of only less than 1 per cent.

But in the bush the Wagga result comes after a 30 per cent swing against the Nationals in Orange saw the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party win the seat in 2016 and after big by-election swings in Murray and Cootamundra last year. The Nationals have several marginal seats. As of yesterday in Wagga, - independent Joe McGirr was on 25.5 per cent of the primary vote, with Liberal Julia Ham on 25.3 and Labor on 23.8. Labor preferences are expected to get Dr McGirr over the line and the Liberals have no chance because they were not being preferenced by other parties.

Berejiklian sought yesterday to put much of the blame for the Wagga result at the feet of the federal leadership spill and how this had turned voters off the Liberals.

But she did accept some responsibility. “The people of Wagga sent me and my government a very strong message yesterday and I accept that message,” Berejiklian said. “I want to stress at the outset the people of Wagga sent us the strongest message; they were angry and disappointed with the actions of the former member (Daryl Maguire, who [resigned over](#) corruption allegations) as was I. “They were angry and disappointed with politicians talking amongst themselves and not focusing on the community and they also want me and my government to make sure we don’t take them and their community for granted.

“I think what we need to change ... is the way politicians interact with each other and other levels of government. The public is sick of the sniping. “Nobody wants to feel we’re taken for granted. I have been in touch with the Prime Minister this morning and we’re both clear we need to work hard to rebuild trust in the community. “There is no point being in government if you don’t listen to the community.”

But there are now serious concerns within the NSW state government about the quality of the strategy of the Premier and her people. There has been talk about recruiting Mike Baird’s former director of strategy, Nigel Blunden, to turn the tide. It is said that Berejiklian speaks personally to only five or six of her 30 to 40 staff and the rest must contact her not face-to-face, or by text, or by email — but by memo.

Certainly on policy matters the Premier requires written briefings not verbal. Some in government have claimed she takes too much advice from former premier Barry O’Farrell but The Australian understands the Premier has only spoken to him a handful of times since taking office. One remnant of the O’Farrell regime is the fact that Berejiklian’s chief of staff, Sarah Cruickshank, gets Mr O’Farrell’s former chief of staff, Pete McConnell, to lecture senior staff every fortnight on how to run a government.

In the [Wagga Wagga by-election campaign](#), Ms Berejiklian listened to her campaign office and [visited the electorate](#) at least six times, even though she was certain to lose, effectively “owning” the defeat. The government made more than \$100 million worth of promises, so that after an MP fell over allegedly seeking a bribe, the government thought it was a good idea to attempt to electorally bribe its way to a by-election win, entrenching opposition to the Liberals in the seat.

Wagga’s The Daily Advertiser spared no blushes on this, with splash headlines such as “Buying loyalty” and pictures of the 17 ministers in the 23-member cabinet who had visited the seat during the campaign. In one of the more comical scenes on Saturday, about half of Berejiklian’s staff, who were handing out how-to-vote cards, were seen manning a booth in blue Liberal T-shirts with no locals around. But all of them were said to be on their phones, rather than approaching voters.

The difference between the quality of the Liberal on-ground game and Labor’s was stark. “There’s no doubt this result makes it more difficult for us in the future (for the state election), I accept that, but that only redoubles our efforts to work harder,” the Premier said yesterday. “We need to do better on the ground.”

The by-election, many in the government believe, was a kick in the backside the state government needed.

Berejiklian’s answer yesterday to the storm clouds ahead? That she needs to “work harder” and “double down” and “listen to the community”. But no one works harder than the Premier. One former staffer rather unkindly referred to her once as the “head girl of NSW” with Berejiklian having been the school captain at her Ryde public school. She is seen as being so conscientious she can miss the bigger picture.

A Newpoll earlier this year had the Coalition and Labor at 50-50, pointing to hung parliament after the election. If there is a reason the Premier is in danger at the next election, other than eight years in office, and despite a booming economy and tens of billions worth of infrastructure being rolled out, it is - because she has not shown so far she is good at conveying the right message — or conveying a vision.

That is her challenge in the months ahead. Another challenge is the likelihood of a federal election after the state election, meaning Berejiklian could face some blowback because of the federal shenanigans first — just as she did in Wagga.

