

The Vault: Behind the scenes of an ugly pre-selection



In happier times: former Warrnambool Mayor Michael Neoh with then Premier and South West Coast MP Denis Napthine. Image: W'bool City Council.

[box]A lot of what is said in State Parliament never gets reported beyond Hansard, the official record. One of the more intriguing speeches that passed unnoticed was by Labor MP Don Nardella, who gave his assessment of the in-fighting and chaos within the local branch of the Liberal Party leading up to the South West Coast by-election.

If you want a take on what really went on, this is it.[/box]

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[/dropcap]r **NARDELLA** (Melton) – Today I grieve for the good people in the electorates of Polwarth and South-West Coast for having to undertake a by-election due to the resignations of Mr Mulder and Mr Napthine. These two by-elections are quite bizarre. Let me start. We had, ‘Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, can you

get me a seat in Parliament please?’ from Tom Naphthine, asking his daddy to propel him into Parliament to replace him in South-West Coast. Tom Naphthine stood for preselection. Unfortunately he did not get it, because the whole preselection process was quite bizarre, including the intervention of Mr Michael Kroger.



Mr J. Bull – Oh!

Mr NARDELLA – Yes, Michael Kroger; it was extremely bizarre. He had a go at the preselection. I will explain what I am talking about. About 18 months ago, Michael Neoh joined the Liberal Party in South-West Coast. He was the anointed one to replace Denis Naphthine, and he was supported by Denis Naphthine. Everything was set up. Michael Neoh was a councillor, and he represented the people of Warrnambool. He was in all the photos with Mr Naphthine. He was Mr Naphthine's bestie – they were joined at the hip for 18 months. These two gentlemen had cheesy smiles, and they were synchronised every time they smiled. They gloated at each other. They were best of friends but then Exhibition Street stepped in – that is, Liberal Party headquarters in the middle of Melbourne.

Michael Kroger, the president, the saviour of the Liberal Party, decrees a couple of weeks before the close of nominations that there has to be a woman preselected for South-West Coast because the Liberal Party does not have enough women in the Parliament. That is absolutely true. Michael Neoh was snookered. He had spent 18 months in the

party. They are very loyal, these people in the Liberal Party. He had a massive 18 months in the Liberal Party because he was the anointed one. He had the cap and the baton. Denis was running behind him and putting the baton to him, and he grabbed the baton. Then Michael Kroger whacked it out of his hand. He could no longer have the baton, and he was snookered by the people in Melbourne. He was absolutely going to lose. He was done for. What did he do?

He did not even nominate for the Liberal Party. He did not even put in his form because he knew that he was done over by the city folk on Exhibition Street. So much for democracy – this is a long-term member of the Liberal Party. He was in there for 18 months! He is nearly a lifer – he had nearly been in there for life – but he has been snookered. What happened next? The Leader of The Nationals went, 'Knock, knock, knock. Michael, we want you. You've been so loyal to the Liberal Party and they've knocked you off. You've been in there for 18 months. We will have you now'. What did Michael Neoh do? He said, 'Thank you very much. I'll be your bestie now, Leader of The Nationals, and you'll be my bestie. That naughty Denis Napthine – we don't want him anymore. I want to be to be in the National Party'. So he has become The Nationals candidate for South-West Coast and we have this immense chasm – this division, this animosity – between the two parties.

The ex-Premier of Victoria, Denis Napthine – this bloke who was going to save the Liberal Party after the disaster of the two and a half years of the Baillieu premiership in this state – was then steamrolled by the Melbourne-centric head office. His hand-picked candidate was poached by the VicNats, or the National Party, or the Country Nationals or whatever they call themselves today; they are still trying to make up their minds about where they are going. That is when Tom Napthine stepped in. He said, 'Daddy, please give me a seat. I really want to be a member of Parliament. I am so loyal to the Liberal Party. I have just joined, so please, Daddy, please, Denis, make me a

member of Parliament', but the former Premier could not do that either because Michael Kroger said it had to be a woman.

This stalwart of the Liberal Party, Tom Naphthine, had actually paid his money to become a member of the Liberal Party the day that he put in his nomination form – and he probably paid his own money – but he was snookered as well. He could not get his daddy's seat anymore. It gets more bizarre. A woman candidate had to be preselected because Mr Kroger, the doyen of Toorak, had decreed that the candidate for South-West Coast, for Portland and Warrnambool, had to be a woman.

The Liberal Party had one in the field. She was very experienced. She had been a member of Parliament and a country mayor, so she had represented country Victoria not only in the local council but also in the Parliament. This is a bit bizarre. She was actually a long-time member of the Liberal Party. It was not just a case of her saying, 'I've paid because I want preselection', or 'I paid 18 months ago because I am the anointed one'. This woman was a long-time member of the Liberal Party, but unfortunately she was not wanted; Michael Kroger did not want her. Donna Petrovich, the perennial candidate, was dumped.

Ms Spence – The failed candidate.

Mr NARDELLA – The failed candidate, the perennial candidate, was dumped, so they had to find another woman who had to beat Donna Petrovich in preselection. They had no-one locally, so those opposite went out and talked about how the Liberal Party is the biggest volunteer organisation in Australia. They got this woman, Roma Britnell. Was she a long-time member of the Liberal Party? Before she put in a form for preselection she actually had to join the Liberal Party! This loyal member of the Liberal Party had to join the party before she could actually run for preselection. She joined to become a parliamentarian. She tried to get on a farmer board to increase her off-farm income but was not successful. Now there

was an opportunity.

I will tell you a secret, Speaker, about why she wants to become the member for South-West Coast. She wants the off-farm income. That is right; she went for a position on a board but did not get it, and this is her way of getting that off-farm income. She is only after the money. Further, she was not even wanted by the local members of the Liberal Party. There were the three councillors who had knocked off Michael Neoh from Warrnambool City Council, but the Warrnambool branch of the Liberal Party supported the country person out there. She might be the perennial candidate but she is a hard worker, Donna Petrovich –

Ms Edwards – Who?

Mr NARDELLA – Yes, ‘Who?’. We know who she is; she was a member of this Parliament. However, the good people of the Warrnambool branch did not want Roma Britnell at all; they wanted Donna, but she got knocked off by the city-centric Melbourne head office of the Liberal Party. Who are The Nationals running for these two seats? Mr O’Brien is running.

Ms Edwards – Not another O’Brien!

Mr NARDELLA – Yes, David O’Brien. He used to be in the upper house. This bloke ran for the South-West Coast electorate at the 2006 election. He went really well. The Nationals vote in South-West Coast in 2006 dropped by 7.3 per cent! That is how bad this bloke was. They did not even want him. Later he got into the upper house, but he was defeated by one of the following three groups: the Shooters and Fishers Party, Vote 1 Local Jobs or the Greens political party. He was not even good enough as a standing Nationals member to get re-elected.

Why is David now running for Polwarth? Because The Nationals have lost party status. As a bit of a refresher for members, you need 11 members in this house and the other house to have party status, but The Nationals party is on the nose. These

are the people who do not believe that country townships and cities should be joined up with water pipelines and channels, like the super-pipe to both Bendigo and Ballarat.

The Nationals leader opposed the super-pipe to Ballarat during the 13-year drought. He wanted everybody to leave Ballarat and Bendigo. That is the lunacy of The Nationals, and that lunacy meant that in Shepparton they actually lost a seat after the intervention of federal Nationals member Barnaby Joyce. He went to SPC and said, 'That's a Liberal Party problem for Sharman Stone from the Liberal Party to deal with. I'm from The Nationals party. I don't want anything to do with saving SPC. It's irrelevant to me'.

That is the reason the member for Shepparton is in this Parliament today. The Nationals are just hopeless. They do not represent country Victoria whatsoever. There has been a reversal of roles. The Liberals have preselected a farmer candidate, and The Nationals have preselected a city candidate. We see a war between the Liberal Party and The Nationals. When Robert Doyle became the Leader of the Opposition back in 2002 he said, 'Hang onto your hats!' Remember that? And we are all hanging onto our hats because of the division between the Liberal Party and The Nationals. They might all skip down the road holding hands, but the division is there and it is real. They have running partners, they have dummies, out there at South-West Coast. They really are concerned about losing that seat to an Independent. Swampy is running out there at the moment. (An honourable member interjected).

Mr NARDELLA – From Oddball. I reckon Swampy would be a fantastic member of Parliament. He would come in here without any fear or favour and represent those good people of South-West Coast. If they make it marginal and get rid of the Liberals, who have done nothing for years, then they might have a chance. That is why I grieve.

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