



**THE FUTURE:** Hajnal Ban (left), Nationals candidate for the seat of Forde, south of Brisbane **OLD GUARD:** Outgoing Deputy PM, Mark Vaile (above) and Warren Truss hold a doorstep at Noosa on the Sunshine Coast, Qld, in August

## Truss keen to lead Nationals in tough years

By **MELISSA JENKINS**  
in Canberra

**I**F THE state of the federal coalition is akin to salvaging the remnants of a train wreck, then its junior political partner has limped away with serious injuries.

Despite the Nationals being reduced to a historic low in the House of Representatives — 10 seats — the party has ignored outgoing leader Mark Vaile's plea for generational change.

Deputy and outgoing trade minister Warren Truss looks set to be elected unopposed as leader at a party room meeting in Canberra on Monday, with no other contenders declared.

At 59, the MP for the Queensland seat of Wide Bay is eight years Mr Vaile's senior.

He does represent generational change — just in the wrong direction.

As Mr Truss himself pointed out, most of the young blood the Nationals hoped to pump into the party failed to get elected last weekend.

Mr Vaile nominated glamour candidate Hajnal Ban as a possible wildcard winner, but the young recruit lost convincingly to Labor's Brett Raguse in the seat of Forde in Queensland's southeast.

It was not surprising the party lost its most marginal electorate, Page, on the NSW north coast.

But it was a rude shock when De-Anne Kelly was tossed out of her central Queensland seat of Dawson.

The Nationals failed to achieve the goal of picking up Richmond in north-eastern NSW, and look doubtful of scraping through in the newly-created central Queensland seat of Flynn.

Mr Truss nominated for the

leadership after outgoing agriculture minister Peter McGauran's withdrawal from the race, despite having the numbers.

The party's most public face, maverick senator Barnaby Joyce, has the ambition but not the numbers to claim the leadership now.

The first-term Queensland senator has endorsed Mr Truss — for now.

However, he said he would be obliged to challenge for the leadership down the track if the party performs poorly in public opinion polls.

The Senator, not up for re-election this year, has crossed the floor of parliament 17 times since he was elected in 2004.

He is disliked among some of the old guard in the party, such as the Nationals' Senate leader, Ron Boswell.

Senator Joyce provided a stream of damaging commentary from the sidelines of the campaign, saying there was not that much difference between Labor's and the coalition's stance on industrial relations, and tipped that the Howard government was headed for annihilation.

The Queensland Nationals is reportedly considering creating a new party if Senator Joyce is not promoted, but were unavailable to confirm the report yesterday.

Mr Truss portrays himself as a safe pair of hands to guide the depleted party through tough years in Opposition.

Mr Truss says he has a consultative, inclusive style of leadership.

He supports the continuation of the coalition but says opposition will give the Nationals more opportunity to speak out on differences of opinion with the Liberal Party.