

Nats hopefuls focus on Barnaby factor

Sophie Morris reports on a sea change on the Wombat Trail with Mark Vaile.

Touring the backblocks of rural Australia is a time-honoured tradition for a Nationals leader, with the political message usually changing as little as the landscape.

But this year Mark Vaile has discovered that many of the candidates he is counting on to boost the party's parliamentary stocks are looking elsewhere for inspiration, partly because of demographic changes in regional seats.

Preselected candidates in electorates such as Richmond in northern NSW and Leichhardt in north Queensland are more likely to see outspoken Nationals senator Barnaby Joyce as the model for a successful political career. After just three years in parliament, the Queenslanders is already known nationwide by his distinctive first name.

Vaile, who speaks of his new candidates like a proud father, sometimes feels the need to curb their Barnaby-inspired inclination to flag that they are ready to cross the floor on all manner of issues. "What I say to our new candidates is what one of Barnaby's key supporters — in St George — said to him," Vaile tells *The Australian Financial Review*.

"He said, 'Good on you Barnaby.



Lawyer Hajnal Ban — 'cheeky' Nationals candidate for Forde.

Photo: JASON WEEDING

Get down to Canberra, rock the boat but don't bloody sink it', that was good advice."

The Barnaby factor has triggered a renewed interest in the rural-based party, which is using this image of the Nationals as feisty community representatives to promote its candidates as they fight for seats against independents, Labor and — in eight seats — Liberal candidates.

But Vaile, who says that despite the coalition's polling woes he's aiming to increase the party's representation above the current 12

MPs, hardly wants a whole partyroom of renegades. "I want people that will speak up for the interests of their community within government," he says. "These are highly motivated, intelligent, free-thinking people who can win their arguments *inside* government."

Perhaps Vaile was yet to deliver his pep talk to Sue Page in Richmond, which the Nationals desperately want to win back after narrowly losing it to Labor in 2004.

"As of March this year, National Party people have crossed the floor 27

times [in this government] Mark, did you know that?" Page proudly told him on Monday, while explaining why she chose the Nationals over approaches from other parties. "A lot of those were Barnaby but certainly not all of them."

Later in the week, this feisty refrain is taken up by former used car dealer Ian Crossland, the Nationals' candidate in Leichhardt, who says he wants to come to Canberra to "kick ass" with Barnaby.

Back in Richmond Vaile explains that candidates like Page are part of the party's response to the changing demographics of coastal seats.

"You wouldn't call Sue your stereotypical country Nat candidate that we might see in western Queensland or western NSW," he says of the articulate former president of the Rural Doctors Association.

To give just an inkling of what he means, suffice to say that Page — who has long been a general practitioner in the region — supports strategies like safe heroin injecting rooms and needle exchanges as part of a multi-pronged approach to dealing with drug addiction.

Not the views normally associated with the conservative rural party.

The challenge for the Nationals in coastal seats like Richmond is that they have been transformed from farm-based communities to regional hubs with economies now centred around tourism and small business.

Once a Nationals stronghold, the

coastal towns of Richmond — which include Byron Bay — have become a magnet for retirees and families chasing what Vaile dubs a "sea change/tree change".

"Where they were traditionally agriculturally based seats, they are no longer and there's a whole range of different issues," Vaile says.

This transformation has forced the Nationals to reinvent themselves, fielding candidates from local business, government and community groups and moving away from the stereotype of a farmers' party.

The same is true of the Gold Coast hinterland seat of Forde, where 28-year-old lawyer Hajnal Ban is appealing to new voters for the Nationals as she fights in a three-cornered contest for a seat vacated by a retiring Liberal MP. Anyone who doubts the Nationals' transformation need only watch Ban's cheeky YouTube broadcast or visit her online fan site to realise the extent of it.

Yet it's not a complete makeover for the Nationals.

On the Wombat Trail, as the leader's election trip is known, there are still plenty of akubras, drought talk and farm moments.

The campaign is focusing on NSW and Queensland. In NSW, the party hopes to win back Richmond and retain the seat of Page, where MP Ian Causley is retiring. In Queensland, the new seat of Flynn, around the industrial city of Gladstone, is a prize the Nationals will fight hard for.