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With a new prime minister nominated, the Nationals have a rare chance to assert themselves

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Abstract

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August 24, 2018 4.48pm AEST

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So, Scott Morrison, MP for The Shire, has won the leadership of the Liberal Party. One must wonder what role external factors played in his victory, including the vague threat by some National Party members that they would sit on the crossbenches had Dutton been victorious.

With all the focus on the various ructions in the Liberal Party, it is too often forgotten that the current government is a coalition of the Liberal Party and the National Party. The Liberals cannot govern without the support of the Nationals. This has been the case for almost 100 years, with the first coalition government being that of the Nationalists led by Stanley Bruce and the Country Party led by Earle Page.

The Liberals have rarely had enough seats in the House of Representatives to rule in their own right when in government and so have always governed together with their Country/National Party colleagues. This has always given the National Party considerable leverage with regard to the Coalition. This has included the capacity to veto possible Liberal Prime Ministers, as happened in 1968, when then leader John McEwen said he would not countenance Bill McMahon as Prime Minister.

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It has also enabled the National Party to influence which ministerial portfolios will be allocated to them. In earlier times, the National Party leader was Treasurer in a Coalition government. McEwen

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changed this when he held the important portfolio of Trade and Industry from 1956 to 1971.

The National Party has declined in importance over the past 50 years, as the proportion of the population living in rural areas has declined, not least because of the mechanisation of Australian agriculture. Over the past 20 years, their representation in the House of Representatives has been in the range of ten to 16 seats. Over that same period, the Liberal Party has had a minimum of 50 seats and a maximum of 74.

Nevertheless, it's worth noting that after the 2016 election, the National Party has been in its strongest position in terms of the Liberals for some time. Whereas after the 2013 election, it held 15 seats to the Liberals' 74, after 2016 it held 16 seats to the Liberals' 60.

As the government holds office by the barest of majorities, this places the Nationals in a position of strength regarding the formation of a new Coalition government. While there has been no indication the leadership of the Nationals wishes to act as a King (or Queen) maker, there have been rumblings from other members of the party.

Prior to the leadership vote, it was reported that National MPs Darren Chester, Kevin Hogan and Damian Drum could go to the crossbench if Peter Dutton were elected leader. Both Drum and Chester are from Victoria, while Hogan holds the marginal seat of Page in northern New South Wales, which includes the hippy capital of Australia, Nimbin.

We will never know how serious these reports were. They may have been no more than an updated attempt by the Nationals, unofficially, to get the Liberal leader of their choice. It may also reflect the fact rural Victoria is more "liberal" than outback New South Wales and Queensland.

Certainly, their defection would have created a minority government, but one wonders how it would affect their preselection. Maybe they think they could win their seats as independents.

The key point is the current situation places the National Party in a position of strength with regard to their Liberal colleagues. Having undergone "trial by Barnaby" they can now move on and make the most of the situation.

Assuming the government runs for another eight months, they have an opportunity to pursue policies that will benefit their rural constituencies, thereby aiding their chances of re-election in 2019. With the progressive Turnbull, whose interests more or less aligned with those of urban Australia, out of the way, they could well have a window of opportunity to place more focus on rural Australia.

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One thing which will be of particular interest will be the portfolios which the Nationals will seek. Could they possibly want energy, given the importance of the cost of power?

It's certainly the case that the events of the past few days have weakened the authority of the Liberal Party in terms of its capacity to provide good government for the country. They're now seen as behaving like a group of fractious and difficult school children.

Under these circumstances, it seems to me, the National Party is presented with an opportunity to use its role within the Coalition to exercise its influence on behalf of rural Australia. It remains to be seen the extent to which it will make the most of this opportunity.

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