

Kyabram Free Press

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HD **Kyabram and district has two candidates contesting Saturday's Victorian...**

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Kyabram and district has two candidates contesting Saturday's Victorian Government election.

A third grew up in Girgarre and Wyuna and went to school in Kyabram.

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Wyuna farmer Nigel Hicks and retired Kyabram farmer Laurie Wintle are running for the top job in Murray Plains seat, while Steph Ryan, who went to school at Haslem Street PS, is the frontrunner in Euroa.

Australia losing control

Rise Up Australia's Murray Plains candidate Laurie Wintle wants to keep Australia Australian.

"I rarely meet anyone who doesn't agree with that," Mr Wintle said.

"The **Chinese** have bought up a lot of land lately — **billions** of dollars worth — but we can't **buy** a square inch in **China**."

The retired Kyabram farmer said while **dairy** products were processed and exported and some farmers were happy to sell to foreign investors, we are losing control.

"It should be owned by Australia," he said.

"We've already lost our manufacturing **business**."

"We spend a lot of money on social security and things like that."

On the whole, he thought many governments borrowed too much money.

"The US have more than \$18 trillion in debt and \$80 trillion in unfunded liabilities," he said.

"They borrow 42¢ in the dollar and they spend with no sign of stopping."

"The world is so intertwined now that when something happens on the other side of the world, we are impacted by it."

Mr Wintle said water was also a huge issue for the region and the lifeblood of the community.

"There's talk we are the food bowl of Asia and we're going to double our productivity, but in the last 20 years just about every commodity we have is produced less now."

As for the Echuca-Moama bridge, a new one was too expensive and the problem would be solved if people simply got on their bikes, Mr Wintle said.

"We need to do what the **Chinese** do and ride a push bike," he said.

"Then we'd get fit and it's not a big distance."

“Commuters in Melbourne drive an hour and a half.”

Mr Wintle said his thoughts on the new combined school for Echuca were “bigger is not necessarily better”.

He is also strongly against the Safe Schools Coalition that he felt promoted acceptance of homosexuality. When asked about his chances of winning the seat, Mr Wintle said there is a huge difference between the candidates, but the Nationals’ Peter Walsh would probably win.

Agriculture protection focus

Wyuna farmer Nigel Hicks has thrown his hat into the Murray Plains ring to protect the region’s vital agriculture.

The Independent candidate said he wanted to be a new voice for those who were tired of “hearing the normal party doctrine”.

“I’m hoping I don’t have my blinkers on, but when agriculture is prosperous that flows on through local communities,” Mr Hicks said.

He said politicians’ focus on Melbourne spending and policies was at the detriment of rural and regional areas.

But Mr Hick said with Australia’s population expected to hit 50 million by 2050, agriculture would become more vital than ever.

“It’s the middlemen and retailers that are profiting at the expense of the rural community,” he said.

“I’m passionate about not selling our agriculture to foreign investors.

“There’s a whole group of ageing farmers who are desperate to get out and it’s getting hard to pass that on to the next generation.

“We need a first farm buyer type scheme.”

Mr Hicks said running as an independent was an idea he had toyed with for a while.

“It’s a reasonably safe seat, but the message (that there’s more options) needs to get out there,” he said.

“So much of it revolves around the party machine.

“But we are seeing the rise of more and more independents in a number of seats.

“It’s still a voice in parliament that’s got to be dealt with.”

Beyond agriculture, Mr Hicks was keen to get better deals on power for the elderly and attract specialised healthcare to the region.

“My message to people is that number one, there is an alternative, and number two, we don’t have to keep taking the normal party doctrine,” he said.

“There’s always promises being made with no time frame on them.

“We are fortunate to live in this country and have freedom of speech.

“We have to get back what we had and what Australia stands for.

“We need to do something about it.”

From humble beginnings

Pregnancy changed Stephanie Ryan’s life.

Something as innocent as filling a maternity leave position in Paul Weller’s office was all it took to open her eyes to the world of politics.

And aged 28, the former Haslem Street Primary School and St Joseph’s College student and Riverine Herald journalist is a frontrunner for a seat in Victorian parliament as the Nationals candidate for the newly-formed seat of Euroa.

An electorate carved out of parts of the abolished seats of Rodney (Mr Weller's seat), Benalla, Seymour, Shepparton and Bendigo East.

Taking over from retiring member for Benalla Bill Sykes, her biggest opponent is Liberal Tony Schneider.

Born and raised in Murchison, Steph lived in Girgarre for a short time before her family moved to Wyuna.

She completed school in Echuca, before studying journalism in Melbourne.

Returning to Echuca to work at the Riv for a year, she covered Mr Weller being elected for Rodney, the 2007 NSW election and did a lot of stories around agricultural issues, water and drought.

"Working for Paul was the first time I had been involved in politics in any other way than an observing it as a journalist," she said.

"I really enjoyed working for him.

"I felt he was taking on the government around agricultural issues which were really impacting the community at that time.

"As a journalist I had felt a sense of frustration that I couldn't help a bit more.

"I would talk to people across the community, but at the end of the day you're there to report it and not change it."

A short time after that Nationals leader Peter Ryan, then in opposition, offered her a job and she was catapulted into the midst of a government in the making.

Working "off the smell of an oily rag", Steph thrived in the environment and having the chance to work across a range of portfolios.

After the Coalition was elected, she started working as a media adviser for Premier Ted Baillieu and treasurer Kim Wells.

"The time I spent in politics as an adviser gave me a really good understanding of many different areas of government," she said.

"I've had the privilege of seeing it not just from an electorate office, but also at a senior level of government."

Since nominating for the seat of Euroa in February, she said she has enjoyed being able to meet and talk to people again.

"In government you tend to get buried by the paper and things move so rapidly, you don't always get the chance to talk to people about what they're thinking and their ideas," Steph said.

"I find that ordinary people have the most extraordinary stories and it's just been a really enjoyable process finding out what people want to see in regional Victoria."

Listing her parents and friends as a great support, Steph has driven more than 50 000 km since she started her campaign and said it felt the election was finally close.

"I think I'll be happy on election night no matter the outcome, knowing there's no more I could have done," she said.

While acknowledging the sacrifices involved — "but it's a huge privilege as well" — Steph said she also found the level of attention in her interesting.

"The fact that I'm younger than the normal candidates and also female has attracted more attention than normal," she said.

"I would hope that one day I will be the norm and that we don't see it as an unusual thing for younger people to be involved in politics.

"At the end of the day, parliament should represent the diversity of what's in regional Victoria — and regional Victoria is not just made up of middle-aged men."

Steph is just as passionate about the fundamentals of the system.

She sees voting as one of the greatest democratic rights people have.

“We can have a different view of the world and that’s why we need to make our voices heard,” she said.

“And why I support compulsory voting, so we don’t just experience that democratic right, but that we also take it seriously.”

The Nationals might have been her first taste of politics, but for a young political force on the rise they might still be seen as a strange decision.

Because government or opposition, they are always going to be the minority in the parliament.

But she has a different take on their role in the process of government — which stems from her own country childhood and formative years.

“Because I grew up in country regions the Nationals are, in my mind, absolutely the party for rural and regional Victoria,” she said.

“They have stood our region in very good stead.

“I respect the values The Nationals put on our way of life in regional Victoria.”

This girl from the bush, who has cut her political teeth in Melbourne, is back where she belongs and if the numbers fall her way on Saturday that is where she plans to stay.

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