

SE Focus
HD **No shock for Sheed in Shepp**
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With her whopping 32.5 per cent swing in Shepparton, Suzanna Sheed tapped into a rich vein of discontent, writes Konrad Marshall.

The warm but fuzzy picture of what happened in Shepparton District polling stations last week made for a nice little election snapshot - one of those folksy flashbulb anomalies that makes politics likeable again.

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In these pages and others, the independent Suzanna Sheed, 60, was easily and freely described as the "giant killer" of the state election - the symbol of a larger "quiet revolution" against the Nationals in regional Victoria.

The party had held the heartland seat for 47 years, until Greg Barr this week conceded a shock defeat to a challenger who had only announced her candidacy a mere five weeks ago. How does that happen?

The popular tale of the upset result sees a plucky family lawyer decide she is fed up with her community being ignored, at which point she throws together an impromptu grassroots shoestring campaign, and wins.

The narrative is appealing. And familiar. Only 12 months after the stunning ouster of Sophie Mirabella from the federal seat of Indi, the tale of Suzanna Sheed more than shades the Cathy McGowan story.

On election night as the votes rolled in and it became clear that the race was on, those covering the event struggled to understand what was going on - no one even had a photo of the virtually unknown contender.

However, spend a little time in this food bowl town - a regional centre that was once mentioned in the same breath as Bendigo, Ballarat and Geelong - and a different picture emerges.

Look a little closer at the darling result of the 2014 Victorian election and you begin to understand that the most surprising thing about the win by Suzanna Sheed is that anyone considers it surprising at all.

Certainly though, a visit to the offices of "Team Sheed" - a block away from the muddy Goulburn River, where big Christmas baubles hang from tall gum trees - does nothing to disabuse you of the underdog script.

Campaign headquarters is an empty shoe shop, which sits between a ladies' boutique and the Beautiful Bounty salon. The space is bare, save for a few plastic picnic tables and folding chairs on a polished concrete floor.

"It's sort of a bit Collingwood, isn't it?" says Sheed, looking around the airy space and smiling. "Warehousey."

But this is where the brains trust would gather - a cadre of five women who hatched a plan that would help their electorate shake the title of "safest seat in the state" with a whopping 32.5 per cent swing.

It is where Sheed, advertising guru Liz Ainsworth, communications manager Carrie Donaldson, volunteer wrangler Michelle Luskin and community engagement professional Michelle Patterson came up with what then-Nationals leader Peter Ryan described as a "well orchestrated ambush".

This was the base from which Sheed began a conversation with the community that focused on "listening rather than talking", and went from nought to 200 volunteers in a fortnight, tapping into a rich vein of discontent.

The message was clear. Shepparton - an agricultural, horticultural and **dairy** industry powerhouse - has for too long been waiting at the foot of the table for funding crumbs to fall their way.

"We've been neglected and under-invested, compared to the others," Sheed says. "If everyone was doing it hard you would suck it up a bit, but when you see there's a real difference between a marginal seat and a safe seat, it dawns on you."

The idea of the campaign was in some ways borrowed from nearby past attempts to "Make Murray Marginal". But ultimately the Sheed slogan was more straightforward: "Stand Up ... It's our turn."

"Just look at my face when I say that," Sheed says, and indeed her **chin** does raise and her eyes do harden. "I really passionately feel that. And so did the community. The penny truly dropped."

Carrie Donaldson nods from the other side of the table.

"Your delivery of that was so powerful," she says. "You just said it twice, and both times - look - the hairs on my arms stood up. When we were putting it out there, I felt an emotional connection."

They made those connections everywhere, in destinations that roll off the tongue, from Katunga to Kialla, Tatura and Toolumba. In one whirlwind month they hit pubs in Picola and Barmah and Dookie.

They spoke to people in the streets and **sale** yards, with businessmen in the Nathalia bakery, and farmer's wives at afternoon tea in Tallygaroopna, leaving campaign signs everywhere they went.

Sheed laughs off a suggestion they selected teal as a campaign colour because it was the Pantone "colour of the year". Similarly, she rejects the idea that they borrowed orange from the McGowan campaign.

"It's a different orange. Maybe my red hair worked with it," she says, laughing. "I'm not sure why we chose those colours, but we did want to differentiate ourselves. We thought they stood out."

People noticed. Their Facebook "likes" jumped to more than 1000 in a few weeks, which sounds meagre, but followers began sharing photos and messages, offering strong social media penetration in a locality of 42,000.

Importantly, they established a preferences arrangement with Labour. Without a decent deal, Sheed might have gone the way of Chris Hazelman, the last independent to give the seat a real shake.

Hazelman, a former major and current manager of the Ethnic Council of Shepparton, could have won in 1999. But he needed a slight drift from the Labour how to vote cards, and didn't get one.

"I think this campaign has been a lot slicker, a lot smoother," he says. "Suzanna is not some naive, inexperienced operator. It's not a surprise. She was a very good candidate."

Their campaigns were waged on similar issues - rail, road, aged care, health, social services.

Sheed in fact supported his campaign at the time, and Ainsworth coordinated his advertising.

As Hazelman explains it, Shepparton is a unique regional centre. About 10 per cent of the population are recent humanitarian entrants, undergirded by a long migrant history.

Greeks, Italians and Albanians first came in the 1920s and 1930s, followed by Turks in the 1960s, a Punjabi and Sikh contingent in the 1980s, and Pacific Islanders in the 1990s. More recently there are refugees from Iraq, Afghanistan, Congo and Sudan, along with skilled migrants from Sri Lanka and **China**, working at increasingly sophisticated farms.

The region is not some rural redneck outpost, and Sheed worked to capture the imagination of the mixed population by catering to the shared needs of farmers and urban settlers, in one of the most disadvantaged communities in the country.

"There's no recipe to take away," she says, "but it is a warning to other electorates: Don't take people for granted."

She campaigned on everything from the need for a bypass road for multi-million dollar businesses, to the social services so desperately required for people with traumatic backgrounds.

Suddenly Peter Ryan was visiting town, bringing new funding promises.

"It's ironic," says Hazelman, "because in the end those announcements were just further evidence that without competition for this seat, nothing was ever going to happen here."

Belief in Sheed began to grow but in truth it was already there. She is director of a family law practice with eight solicitors, and is routinely described as calm, capable, genuine - and formidable.

She is a trustee of Goulburn Valley Hospital Foundation, an RACV director, and former chairwoman of the local Fairley Leadership Board.

She also has a background on the land, having been raised on a wheat, sheep and rice irrigation farm in Jerilderie, in southern New South Wales. She boarded at Kilbreda College in Mentone and studied law at the University of Melbourne before settling in Shepparton 35 years ago.

Then there is her husband and "secret weapon" - a local doctor who featured on her campaign messages with the words "Authorised by Peter Eastaugh". Some papers have joked that Eastaugh "delivered" his wife 35,000 voters, but he is a paediatrician not an obstetrician. His reach in the community is unmatched.

Together their credibility was sold on radio and television, in local newspaper wraps and on massive billboards - stationary and mobile.

The discrepancy between what both candidates spent on marketing makes it obvious how soundly and roundly Sheed was backed. The Nationals couldn't come near her fund raising estimate of more than \$100,000.

Some of that came from little donations - a grandfather walking in off the street and dropping \$50 into the funding pool, or volunteers buying T-shirts - but others suggest crowdsourcing played a minor role.

"That money certainly wasn't generated from mums and dads," one local says. "There would have been some serious backers."

In many ways Sheed was a lightning rod in the middle of a perfect storm.

Exit polls suggest that the deeply unpopular Abbott government budget played a role. Then there was federal Agriculture Minister Barnaby Joyce unleashing what Ryan described as a "less than helpful" and "inappropriate and untimely" comment that struggling SPC Ardmona was not an issue for the Nationals. And finally there was the "Indi effect", offering renewed belief that upsets are possible.

Barr was in some ways a victim of circumstance. Pre-selected in February, he began attending events with retiring member Jeanette Powell. Reports repeatedly and incorrectly characterised him as the incumbent, and even as "the sitting member".

Ross McPherson, the fifth generation owner and editor-in-chief of the Shepparton News, says the "succession" plan was fumbled, and ultimately Barr only won over the "rusty on Nats" voters.

"Greg is a good guy," McPherson says. "He's an ex-policeman but pretty quiet. He's humble. He's a nice person - but politics is not always about being a nice person."

Down at Peaches Cafe, which sits inside the SPC Ardmona factory store, Barr, 49, discusses what went wrong.

Barr had been Powell's adviser for 10 years, and spent 20 years before that as a Victoria Police detective in Cobram, Shepparton and Hawthorn.

While he acknowledges the difficulties his campaign had to overcome, he refuses to blame spending, or Abbott, or Joyce, or McGowan, for his loss.

"The buck stops with me," he says. "But there's a perception that Shepparton is this safe seat and always has been. The reality is it's not, and it hasn't been. It's always been very tight."

The result reminds him less of a perfect storm and more of his days as a detective, gathering circumstantial evidence against crooks.

"A single fact by itself is not enough for you to mount a case," he says, "but when you put them all together they paint a bigger picture, and that bigger picture is I didn't get enough votes."

Barr, like Sheed, will be happy to see the bruising and bloodletting end. The consolations and congratulations flowed easily between the two, and their mutual admiration feels genuine.

The region can only hope that gains will continue to be made, in order to close what many see as a "gaping gap" between perception and reality about where Shepparton is and where it is going.

The community is no doubt at a crossroads, having been hit hard by an expensive dollar and the millennium drought. The psychology of the town, damaged by chronic unemployment, is still dented.

But green shoots are emerging and an industrial rebound is being experienced - one that is not subsidised but market-driven, and which will only be strengthened by the new free trade agreement.

The world wants Shepparton's 2.3 billion litres of milk each year. It still wants the low end "stone and pome" fruits for canning, but also the produce from farmers transitioning to fresh food crops.

Sheed says Shepparton has got the climate, the water and the people - it just needs the infrastructure, education and support to harness and develop those advantages. It needs an equitable share of rural riches, which she intends to get.

"The dams are full, and commodity prices are strong. Everyone is telling us the graph is only going one way," Sheed says. "I just feel honoured and proud that Shepparton has stood up."

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