

Cut Through, May 6, 2026: **Farrer by-election: A One Nation vs independent showdown**
All timestamps are approximate

Crystal Andrews (00:00)

Hello and welcome Cut Through, Crikey's spin-free analysis of Australian news, politics and power. I'm your host Crystal Andrews, and we are bring you this week's episode earlier than normal because we're going to be discussing the Farrer by-election taking place this weekend, Saturday May 9th.

To unpack what's going on in this rural New South Wales seat. Today I'm joined by Crikey politics reporter, Anton Nilsson. Anton, welcome back to Cut Through.

Anton Nilsson (00:09)

Thank you very much.

Crystal Andrews (00:11)

And we also have Oliver Jacques, editor of news publication Region Riverina, who lives in Griffith, which is one of the main cities in Farah. Oliver, welcome to Cut Through. It's such a pleasure to have you with us today.

Oliver Jacques (00:22)

Thanks, it's really great to be here.

Crystal Andrews (00:23)

Now, as I'm sure everybody watching and listening already well knows, this by-election was triggered by former opposition leader Susan Lee's departure from politics. And despite this being a seat that has only ever been held by a national or a liberal MP, neither party currently is looking like much of a chance to win this time around. Instead, it's a neck and neck race between One Nation's David Farley and community independent Michelle Milthorpe.

There is a lot going on. It is being very closely watched. So, Oliver, I think I'd like to come to you first with question that's been really rolling around my mind about what seems to be the biggest issue in this election and that being water policy. It's been mentioned by every single candidate. It comes up constantly in the coverage. And I must admit that, you know, as an outspoken is watching on, is.

definitely not a topic that I understand very well and I'm sure for a lot of cut through lists, most people being in metropolitan areas, they would feel the same. So can you give us a bit of a snapshot of the water issue and how it's playing out in this election?

Oliver Jacques (01:31)

Yeah, sure. guess water is a really big issue here because a lot of towns in this electorate were basically purpose-built irrigation towns. So the government's dammed the rivers and then they plonked towns in afterwards. And so a lot of the towns here, especially in the western side of the

electorate, not so much in Albury, were created really with a purpose ~ for farmers to pump water from the rivers and to channel them to grow crops to feed the nation.

So I guess there came a point though in the 1980s and 1990s when the federal government decided they'd actually given away too many or sold too many water licenses for irrigators to extract water from the rivers. And there was a lot of concern, I guess, about degradation of the rivers, environmental damage. So governments gradually began to buy back water licenses to actually take water out of agricultural production and let water flow down the rivers.

Now that's created a lot of resentment in towns over the western side of this electorate because they depend so much on irrigation and people have made the argument that, you know, without irrigation we don't have much else. So when you take away irrigation, then eventually, you know, the families leave, the stores close, the schools shut down. And that's going to be the slow decline. And given that the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, which was, guess, the federal government framework for restoring

river health or buying back water to allow the rivers to flow. That was a bipartisan thing. That was a bipartisan, I guess, plan that was agreed to by both Labor and the coalition. That's why you're seeing the insurgence of an independent and one nation really capitalise on that resentment and why they're kind of leading this race.

Crystal Andrews (03:18)

Hmm. So this has been quite a long simmering issue then. And it seems almost like this by-election has been like a well-timed outlet for everyone to say we have had enough of the solutions to this point.

Oliver Jacques (03:30)

Very much so. And there's a lot of other factors in play there. I know that's kind of simplifying things. A lot of crops, basically, there's been a change. We used to grow a lot of rice and dairy and stone fruits in this part, but that's actually moved on to cotton and nuts, which are very water intensive. that's, you know, less jobs created, a lot more water taken. And also, farmers are not the only ones that can buy water anymore. Water has become a tradable commodity. So people on Wall Street and Sydney

Stockbrokers can trade water and that's also created resentment too. So there's a lot of aspects to water policy that has fueled, I guess, division and resentment.

Crystal Andrews (04:07)

And how is that playing out along the ~ party lines? Well, I guess it's in all parties, you know, there's some independence in the mix as well. But, ~ you know, I think I can understand how the community would be feeling about, you know, about all of that. But it's then quite another thing about the different solutions that, you know, a liberal national Greens, One Nation, or, know, also Michelle Milthop as an independent, the ideas that they would put forward because

I guess you have to make distinction from each other, right? Like you have to have slightly different plans. How are you sort of seeing that play out across the political spectrum of those who are kind of jostling to win this campaign?

Oliver Jacques (04:46)

I think there's a real race to the right really on water. You don't hear many candidates talking about, for example, the environment or there's very much, know, our water has been taken away. And the four leading candidates, Michelle Milford, One Nation, Liberals and Nationals, they've all basically pledged to fight against water buybacks, the buyback, buying back licenses from irrigators. Only the Greens really are talking about supporting buybacks. But there's not a lot of differences. I know the One Nation and

Crystal Andrews (04:49)

Mm.

Oliver Jacques (05:14)

and Michelle Milthoops want a royal commission into water. They believe there's been a lot of corruption. Other levels of nationals are against that. So there are some differences, but generally it's a case of give us more water ~ from the four main candidates.

Crystal Andrews (05:30)

That's fascinating because as you say, if all four candidates are sort of quite aligned in their position of, ~ you know, making sure that those licenses stay with, ~ you know, with the irrigators and the people who have them. Yeah, it then comes more about ~ this idea of who is part of the establishment versus who's not part of the establishment. that so? Have I got the right end of the stick there in interpreting that?

Oliver Jacques (05:55)

Exactly. And the Liberals and Nationals are now talking about, we've got to change the Murray-Darling Basin Plan. And One Nation saying, well, you were in power for nine years. Federally, what did you do? You did nothing. ~ So that's why, I guess, the insurgent, the two non-minor party candidates are doing so well.

Crystal Andrews (06:15)

It is a hard argument to make when you've been part of establishing that plan in the first place. It also is probably worth noting at this juncture for anybody who doesn't know, part of David Farley, the One Nation candidates appeal, is that he is a very prominent person in sort of the agricultural business. And so I guess that lends him some credibility in this space as well.

Oliver Jacques (06:22)

Definitely.

It does, though also, mean, a lot of his work is, I guess, with the cotton industry, which is quite controversial. There's a view by some here in the Southern Basin that cotton growers in the

Northern Basin who are based around sort of the northern rivers take too much water. And especially, I don't know if you've heard of floodplain harvesting where the practice of farmers actually diverting rainwater away from the rivers and into their private dams. That's very controversial. And a lot of Southern Basin farmers have

have basically felt that that needs to be regulated and cracked down on more. But interestingly, that issue hasn't really come up in this by-election. I think people are just sort of making the argument that we need more water and then kind of pitting their sort of greens versus a farmer's of dichotomy there.

Crystal Andrews (07:22)

I did ~ interview the Greens candidate Richard Hendry ~ some weeks ago about his campaign. And yeah, the Greens, I mean, we say that the nationals and liberals look like a long way back. The Greens odds are about \$101 to win. So they're not really in this fight, but I think in terms of being in the campaign and putting their ideas forward, they're absolutely out there.

Oliver Jacques (07:35)

Yeah.

Crystal Andrews (07:45)

~ Anton, I'm going to come to you now because you went to Griffith a little while ago for Crikey and spent some time interviewing those two main contenders, Milthorpe and Farley. and one of the topics you spoke to them about was the public interest, the very widespread public interest in some of the big money donors that they've had to their campaigns or to One Nation in the case of Farley. we're talking about Gina Reinhart who's made some very

attention grabbing contributions to One Nation lately. There's also been money coming from those in her orbit, which we've covered on Crikey recently. I'll make sure the link to that article is included in the episode description. When it comes to Michelle Miltorp, a lot of interest in funding from Climate 200, which has come to her campaign. That's obviously founded some years ago by Simon Holmes, a court.

Also Rupert Murdoch's son-in-law, Andrew McLeod, recently made a pretty sizable donation to her campaign also. what did Milthorpe and Farley have to say about the interest in those donations and what did they, how are they feeling about it all?

Anton Nilsson (08:49)

Yeah, it's interesting because they both obviously wear orange. They're both kind of seen as outsiders. It's kind of tempting almost to imagine them as maybe too similar to each other ~ based on those superficial things. But they also do kind of both have this notion that there's no point in talking about these big.

because they haven't really influenced their campaigns, feel both are seeking to portray themselves as funded by masses of small local donors. And I suppose they're right about that.

We'll see in October when the electoral commission releases the figures exactly how that money flowed. But ~ Farley and his party

both say that Gina Reinhardt did not donate anything to his campaign in fairer. So that's worth noting. There's no evidence that that happened, but obviously he's still being dogged by questions about her support for his party. And he told me that he does not believe that those kinds of gifts that we've seen coming from Reinhardt to Pauline Hansen and the party have

any effect on the party's policies whatsoever. In fact, he thinks it's good for democracy to have this relationship between ~ rich donors and political parties and candidates because it keeps democracy healthy in his mind. It allows parties to function and run campaigns. And ~ the line that jumped out to me, you know, obviously we

put it on our headline because it's an obvious ~ line that just sticks out very much is ~ you can only sell so many stubby holders, which he said with the, what he means by that obviously is there's no obvious revenue stream for a lot of parties, especially if you're not labor coalition. So ~ you gotta get the money somewhere.

Crystal Andrews (10:46)

Thank

I feel like he knew that would,

I feel like he knew that that comment would be a hit.

Anton Nilsson (11:06)

Yeah,

I actually found him quite unguarded when he spoke to me. feel like he said a lot of things that were potential headline grabbers that he and this always always the kind of nice thing for journalists when you talk to new candidates that they aren't as media trained yet. So they say a lot of interesting things that you won't get in the stir. Yeah, exactly. And Miltorp.

Crystal Andrews (11:11)

Okay.

little bit more candid.

Anton Nilsson (11:36)

~ I found her kind of defensive about this. She said that my questions were ridiculous when I brought up Climate 200. She had said at the Canada Forum that I attended before interviewing her, which all of her actually moderated, that 2 % of her campaign funding came from Climate 200. And ~ there's also the regional voices fund that ~ she got money from, which has gotten less.

Crystal Andrews (12:03)

.

Anton Nilsson (12:06)

attention, but she was open about that. She says that she's very transparent about this, more transparent than other candidates. ~ But yeah, quite defensive. She said that she was the only one who was asked about ~ this kind of funding, which is not true because as anyone listening to this can tell, we're talking about those two top candidates. ~ It's a very common question to be asked for political candidates.

So, but I think for her, and I'll be interested to hear what all of her thinks about this, I think having a stamp on her that she's kind of too closely connected with climate 200 is not good for her campaign, she feels, because it gives an impression that she's some kind of a city blow in rather than a true regional candidate, I suppose, even though that's not true. She is from the electorate and she is a real, you know.

regional politician, but I suspect that's the reason why she doesn't want too much focus on that.

Crystal Andrews (13:12)

Yeah, Oliver, did you have any any thoughts on that?

Oliver Jacques (13:13)

Yeah,

yeah, I mean, that's totally the case, basically. One Nation have capitalized a lot. There's a lot of memes of her with Simon Holmes at court. The teal label is all over her and they've really exploited it. I mean, in a way, I think it's a little bit unfair. mean, she's kind of described as a climate 200 backed independent all the time. But you don't hear the National Party candidate called, you know, the Santos backed National Party candidate or CFMEU backed Labour candidate. We don't. It's funny how we define

independent candidates by one of their donors, ~ which I don't know, seems a bit unfair. But on the same token, she's kind of conceded a few own goals herself. I think the donation by Ruben Murdoch's son-in-law, I don't think there was any need to put out a press release about that. And, you know, a ~ pub event with David Pocock who supported buybacks. Again, she was kind of drawing attention to what's kind of a weak point for her. So, yeah, that's been a very interesting...

Crystal Andrews (13:56)

Mm.

Oliver Jacques (14:11)

campaign in that regard.

Crystal Andrews (14:13)

I watched the most recent panel, candidates panel, which was moderated by Barry Cassidy. And yes, she was certainly asked about some of those connections. She was pressed about net zero, ~ which there were some very interesting exchanges in that panel actually across the board. But someone I noted who got a rough run at that event was the liberal candidate Rysa Bukowski. Apologies if I pronounced that name incorrectly. ~ But she seemed to

have a really tough time at that panel. Anton, while you were in Griffith, you did have some time with the coalition representatives. ~ You actually get a great quote from Matt Canavan, and he told you that he thinks that the coalition will win the next federal election, which I thought was, again, great get, very, very entertaining. ~ But what was your assessment of how the national and liberal parties, their candidates,

are being received at the moment in Farah from what you've seen, like me, a little bit of an outsider. The odds have both of them a long way back. I think the liberals are paying like \$19 to win the seat, nationals \$51. Not that betting odds are the be all and end all of what the outcome will be. But it certainly seems like there's something going on in terms of the reception for coalition, just the coalition's presence.

Anton Nilsson (15:17)

Mm-hmm.

Yeah, absolutely. think it's interesting that when the election was called, when Susan Lee said she would retire all the focus fell on the liberals and what a test this will be for Angus Taylor. know, it's actually one of the longest held liberal seats, I believe, like 2001 to 2026 is a...

very long time in politics And yet when you're in Griffith, there's not a lot of nationals and liberals. They've kind of almost fallen into the background,

did not get a chance to speak to Ray Szybkowski, but Mack Hanneman was there. And he, when he said that he thinks the Nats and the coalition can win the next election, that was in response to a question I had prompted by

both of the coalition candidates making the argument on stage that vote for us and you'll get a chance to have representatives that can form government in the future. Obviously, Labour is not running. the pitch that we heard from both the Nats and the Libs was if you vote for us and we get in, then you can be represented by government, which is not a great argument given that you've had that.

Crystal Andrews (16:45)

Mm-hmm.

Anton Nilsson (17:02)

for such a long time. And you've even had a minister and opposition leader represent your also given that the coalition did so badly in the last election, the chance actually greater that they can form government than anyone else on that stage?

Crystal Andrews (17:03)

Mm.

Anton Nilsson (17:26)

~ That's when Mackenna said, I do think we can win. I guess he didn't really engage with the core of the question there, but yeah.

Crystal Andrews (17:35)

the thrust of the question. Yeah,

I mean, Oliver, someone who's a bit more of an insider, is our outside of view of that ~ aligned with what you're saying or ~ is there, I mean, geography must also play a pretty significant role in how different candidates are received in different part of the electorates too.

Oliver Jacques (17:57)

Yeah, very much so. mean, but your point about the Liberal candidate, their campaign's been quite extraordinary, I think, in that it took them three weeks after Michelle Milthorpe announced for them to even announce someone and they run a very lacklustre campaign. mean, Susan Lee, who's held the seat for 25 years, not one appearance anywhere in this campaign. And as you said in that Barry Cassidy debate, ~ Razor was asked about why they put One Nation ahead of Michelle Milthorpe, but she didn't have an answer. She said, ~

Crystal Andrews (18:24)

Mm-hmm.

Oliver Jacques (18:27)

She almost implied it was accidental, was ease of reference, it was just coincidental and the audience laughed and it just didn't seem convincing at all. So yeah, they run the worst campaign imaginable, think, the Liberals.

Crystal Andrews (18:40)

Yeah, it was a very unusual response to that question, which is surely a question that, you know, you would be anticipating. It has been, so, so, so widely discussed throughout the campaign and in like national media as well, you know, not just discussed in the electorate and in local media. There was something else that you had mentioned in the prep work for this episode.

You said that this particular by-election has been really divisive within families in a way that you haven't noticed before. And there seems to be like two warring sides really, you know, putting it all out there. Yeah, what's going on? Why is it playing out this way?

Oliver Jacques (19:18)

I don't know, I think it's quite a shock. I mean, it's a very multicultural electorate. People might think of Farah as being arts rural. It's no surprise that One Nation's doing well, but it's a very multicultural. In Griffith where I live, big Italian population, big Indian population. But you're seeing a lot of people who are supporting One Nation for the first time, some surprising people. And it's just, there's a lot of arguments, family dinners on social media.

A lot of core flutes are being vandalised, a lot of signs have popped up all over Griffith, say no to fascism, say no to racism, those sort of signs. So it's been a very, very fiery campaign where people, it's kind of really divided the town. And I think that'll be quite a shock for a lot of people if One Nation do get out of the law.

Crystal Andrews (20:06)

So that's obviously quite unusual for the previous elections that we've had where Susan Lay's been running and obviously has been, you know, very popular and won quite comfortably, up until, I mean, she even still won pretty comfortably, I think in 2025, although she was well challenged by Millthorpe. But it seemed like the tension was not quite as high.

Oliver Jacques (20:26)

She did, and One Nation, you've to remember, they only formed their branch, I think, this year here. They had no presence here. They never won, this century they haven't won more than 7 % of the voted in elections. So they've actually come from nowhere. would be devastating for Michelle Miltorp, who really has basically campaigned for the last two years nonstop. And it's a massive electorate. It's bigger than the country of Scotland and Ireland. You've got to do a lot of driving and a lot of work. And she would have thought that when Susan Lee resigned,

having driven her so close and the Liberals really running such a token campaign this time, the seat was hers, but One Nation have just emerged from nowhere and now they're the favourites.

Crystal Andrews (21:06)

Hmm. Yeah, actually it does make me think that also perhaps the liberals anticipated that she was going to be the main person to beat as well. And that may have guided selection of their candidate, choosing like another sort of like woman from the community, more sort of like modern vision of the liberal party. And it's turned out that that's not exactly the lines that the battle has been fought on.

Oliver Jacques (21:29)

Yeah, no, it's it's amazing how that sort of progressive ~ that that kind of symbolism or it's it's really played out. There's a big gender divide, I think, in the support with Farley's leading men, 38, 22 or something. And it's vice versa for women. And actually, David Farley even went to an anti-abortion ~ prominent anti-abortion rally.

just like a week ago or so, which seems extraordinary. So it seems like a very risky thing to do, such a polarizing sensitive topic just before an election. But it's very much, it's like the candidates are trying to outright wing each other, basically.

Crystal Andrews (22:07)

Yeah, that is quite surprising. I recently worked on a piece for CryKey with a contributor about anti-abortion movement there was some recent polling done And

voters of all parties or people who intend to vote for any of the parties currently available, outright majority of them all support access to abortion. And that includes One Nation supporters, which I think might surprise some people. But yeah, it certainly is.

become more of a culture war issue than it actually, you know, has real critics in the community, which I think is quite interesting, if not a little bit, sorry, taking us on a little bit of a tangent. But on that note as well, Oliver, like I wonder, so many people are looking at Farah for this like test of one nation. Will they be able to, you know, win this seat? And what does that say about their prospects across the country more broadly? Now, I don't know that I think it is so,

that we can so easily draw comparisons from this seat to everywhere else in the country. And I'm kind of curious on your view again, as someone who's in the heart of it, like what are the learnings that we will be able to take from Farah about the state of Australian politics, kind of regardless of what the results might be, what are the indicators that people should be looking at even if they don't live in this electorate?

Oliver Jacques (23:29)

I just to appreciate what a threat One Nation are really given that it's really shocked us here that how they've emerged. is not really a seat, know, university town as its main population. So it's not really a seat that you'd expect One Nation to win. It just shows how threatening I guess they are. But also to, we don't know because I mean, immigration is generally the issue that One Nation has kind of built its brand on.

And it's not such a big issue here, which is interesting too. and David Farley, as you would have seen from that Barry Cassidy forum, he actually said that he supported the current immigration ~ rate. then I think he peddled back the next day on social media. But yeah, so so I guess you've got to watch out for other issues that one nation can really take hold of apart from immigration. And they've got hold of the water issue and the health issue too here.

Crystal Andrews (24:06)

Mm.

Oliver Jacques (24:23)

So yeah, I guess it shows that they're broadening their appeal. I've been surprised by the amount of young people, migrants who are supporting One Nation here. So yeah, it does show that they are possibly a growing force.

Crystal Andrews (24:37)

Anton, is there anything that you've learned from covering this race that you think other people should, yeah, equally pay attention to and have their minds on?

Anton Nilsson (24:47)

it's, ~ very humbling when you go to a place I'd never been to Griffith before. I'm sure I've driven through the electorate on my way to somewhere else, but, ~ how local issues are and, you know, it's hard to, if you don't live there or pay close attention in general, to even understand at first glance what the important

parts are. ~ We've already talked about water, but that really stuck out to me that water is such a big issue there. And it's not really a topic that engages Australians who live in cities as much or maybe even in other regional areas as that was a big takeaway for me for sure that every, every by-election is unique. And I'm assuming in the next

federal election, if you go to a seat like fair, you'll hear conversations you didn't really expect going in. And I think it's good to listen to the people who know more and who live locally and who keep track of these things. It's humbling for a national reporter as well.

Crystal Andrews (25:50)

Yeah, I think that the importance of having local media, local news media everywhere in the country, like when it comes to something like this and you know, we're really fortunate to have Oliver here and that, a publication like Region Riverina exists is so important because otherwise it's, you know, the likes of us scrambling around trying to figure out what's going on without necessarily having that, that deep local insight. when it comes to, when it comes to things like this, you really realize how important.

that is to have. So that is my little plug for local media in Australia. I want to end by asking both of you the same question. I'm sure you've been anticipating it. What's the prediction for the outcome after Saturday? Anton, I might come to you first. What do you think is going to happen?

Anton Nilsson (26:38)

I think it's going to be between Milturk and One Nation. ~ before reading Oliver's story that was published today as we record, I probably thought it was snack and egg, but then I noticed that you said there's likely One Nation, so now I think that too.

Crystal Andrews (26:44)

Hahaha

We've been led by the Oliver, yes, it seems like you think that One Nation might just have the edge here, but why do you think that?

Oliver Jacques (27:07)

Just the vibe on the ground. the people you talk to, that just seems to be, it seems to me that people, don't think they necessarily like One Nation or they're in love with the party, but they've kind of positioned themselves as the best alternative. think people live, they've run an effective scare campaign against their main opponent, the independent and people are afraid of the implications, I guess, on water, even though it may not be backed up by a lot of evidence, but that's the way it's worked out. So yeah, I do think One Nation is going to take the seat.

Crystal Andrews (27:37)

Would you be shocked if Millthorpe won or is that still quite in play for you?

Oliver Jacques (27:42)

I'd be very shocked if you have this stage here, I've to say.

Crystal Andrews (27:43)

Okay.

Okay, well, we will find out in just a matter of days. ~ And I'm sure we'll have more coverage on the other side, regardless of what that result may be, or indeed how long it takes to get it. It's also the case that they might be counting for a while. But for now, we'll leave it there. Anton, Oliver, thank you so much for joining me on today's episode.

Oliver Jacques (28:06)

Thank very much, it was a pleasure.

Anton Nilsson (28:07)

Thank you so much.