

Campaign ‘forgot voters’



ACTU secretary Sally McManus takes her 'Change the Rules' campaign on the road during the lead-up to the May federal election. Picture: Patrick Gee

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The ACTU’s \$10 million campaign aimed at getting Bill Shorten elected was too complex and struggled to connect with voters, a confidential review has concluded.

The Change The Rules campaign was not well understood beyond union officials and activists, became focused on policy prescriptions rather than problems facing voters, and underestimated Scott Morrison’s capacity to turn the election into a referendum on Labor, it found.

The 45-page review by former Queensland ALP secretary Evan Moorhead found many of the multi-million-dollar campaign’s ambitious policy objectives were complex, long-term and “swamped” during the election campaign by the Coalition’s “simple and immediate” negative message.

The review, obtained by The Australian, said the union campaign was also swamped by Clive Palmer’s campaign and a Labor campaign that did not make Change The Rules issues a “key choice at the election”.

“Labor avoided big workers’ rights announcements in favour of piecemeal announcements, particularly following the criticism attracted” by its promised pay rises to childcare workers.

“The Change the Rules campaign was not well understood beyond officials and activists,” the review said. “While union members and target voters agreed with principles of Change The Rules, for many it was a lower order issue than the issues agenda played out by the major parties.”

ACTU secretary Sally McManus announced the external review after acknowledging the union campaign was “overwhelmed” by voter concern about Labor’s tax agenda. The ACTU spent \$10 million in the lead-up to the election, including \$6.5m on advertising during the campaign.

The review said the ACTU campaign, along with commentators and Labor, underestimated the capacity of Mr Morrison “as a marketing executive to turn this election into a referendum on the opposition despite six years of dysfunctional LNP government”.

Some unions raised concerns that campaign messages that could be interpreted as grouping all employers as oppressive posed a risk of alienating union members who might believe their employer was not their key problem or non-union members who saw their employer as a provider of employment they needed.

Mr Moorhead said the widely held view that Labor would win the May election meant Change The Rules became incredibly dependent on policy announcements from Labor.

He said most unions said Change The Rules did not get adopted by organisers into their daily organising as they found it hard to incorporate its broad agenda and there was a “degree of complacency” that Labor would win.

“The combination of an assumption of a Labor win and a dependency on Labor policies poses a risk of putting faith in political solutions in circumstances where voters are not easily convinced,” the review found.

“For the same reasons, the campaign struggled to engage voters in the message that the LNP was a risk to workers’ rights if they were re-elected.”

It said the systemic change advocated by the Change The Rules and Australia Needs a Pay Rise messages required a much longer time to build a narrative and some unions raised concerns that, in hindsight, the agenda was too ambitious.

“Even for simpler messages like Australian Needs A Pay Rise, it was hard to explain the direct and immediate link between election outcome, policy reform and changed wage levels,” the review said.

The review’s recommendations, backed by the ACTU executive this week, include moving to distinguish the detailed union policy agenda from a simple and clear election narrative, and to consider spending 10 per cent of the campaign budget on research. More than 1400 people had input into the review.

An ACTU spokesman said Change the Rules was “an ambitious and necessary campaign” and unions had “made incredible progress in the last two years”.