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OPINION

She's thrived through fire, plague and scandal, but Berejiklian's big challenge awaits her

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If last year was not remarkable enough, Gladys Berejiklian defied political logic and survived a sex scandal that would have ended the career of perhaps any other politician.

Far from career-ending, the shock of her relationship with an MP accused of corruption did not damage her stocks. Rather, weeks after it was revealed, her approval rating was sky-high at 64 per cent. And the Premier is starting 2021 from a similar position of strength as she did in 2020 after she navigated the Black Summer bushfires.

Now for the next mountain ... Premier Gladys Berejiklian on Wednesday.*CREDIT: KATE GERAGHTY*

Berejiklian's stewardship through the pandemic mirrored her approach to the bushfires: calm, considered and competent. She is at her best in a fast-moving crisis.

However, while the upheaval of last year has subsided, the economic rebuild is only beginning. If the government was defined in 2020 by its handling of the pandemic, 2021 will be about its ability to resurrect the state and manage a far broader suite of challenges.

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Berejiklian and her cabinet will be tested.

NSW's unemployment is at 6.4 per cent. That's lower than the predictions in the November budget, which had it peaking at a 23-year high of 7.5 per cent by Christmas, but plenty of pain will still be felt when JobKeeper ends next month.

The government's success in tracing COVID-19 at increasing speed has meant it has been able to extinguish spot fires and keep the economy open, but it can't coast on its record of keeping NSW largely COVID-free. This year is the midway point of the Coalition's term and March will mark a decade in power. Next year it will shift into campaign mode ahead of the 2023 election, so if there is any appetite for bold reform, this year is the government's chance.

The biggest reform it has on its books is axing stamp duty.

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Treasurer Dominic Perrottet is desperate to make it happen because it would be a legacy-making achievement. But the premier-in-waiting has to convince the risk-averse Berejiklian to back it. It is now, or never.

Berejiklian is expected to cement her election team with a cabinet reshuffle after budget estimates next month when she will have to sort out the problem of one-time sports minister John Sidoti, who has been on the backbench longer than he was a minister. Sidoti was sidelined in September 2019 after the corruption watchdog launched a preliminary investigation into his property interests. Almost

18 months later, the watchdog has not indicated whether a full inquiry is needed. That unfairly leaves Sidoti in political purgatory.

But the reshuffle will be minor because the expected departures have not eventuated. Health Minister Brad Hazzard has found his calling during the pandemic and even senior Labor frontbenchers are loath to criticise him. Ambitious Liberals are hoping Hazzard will call stumps on his 30-year political career this year, but he will not abandon the state while the pandemic persists.

Similarly, Transport Minister Andrew Constance learnt his lesson last year in his disastrous short-lived tilt at federal politics and will not quit to head to Canberra.

Whether rambunctious Deputy Premier John Barilaro chooses to make good on his previous threats to quit before the next election also remains to be seen.

Opinion polls late last year showed Berejiklian's popularity higher than ever and she has an air of invincibility to her after managing to convince voters that even a goody-two-shoes can, as she put it, stuff up her private life.

The corruption commission's investigation into her once long-term partner and now-disgraced former MP Daryl Maguire has been extended. While Berejiklian was not the subject of the inquiry, she will want the saga behind her. Instead, it remains a live issue.

There is also simmering anger within the National Party at Berejiklian after the disastrous koala planning policy that threatened, albeit briefly, to tear apart the Coalition. National MPs feel they were made out to be country bumpkins playing out of their league in a policy debate. Senior Liberals fear the wrath of Barilaro on the back of the koala saga and are convinced he will seek revenge at any opportunity.

Berejiklian may have survived despite her political near-death experience, but after 10 years in power, her Coalition team risks being plagued by complacency, arrogance and fatigue.

Last year it was a crisis government. This year it can't afford to be a government in crisis.

Alexandra Smith is *The Sydney Morning Herald's* State Political Editor.