

## Grattan on Friday: Wentworth preselectors' rebuff to Morrison caps week of mayhem

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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In the early hours of Friday morning, the Liberal preselectors of Wentworth delivered their new prime minister a humiliating public slapdown.

In selecting Dave Sharma, 42, former Australian ambassador to Israel and now a partner in an accountancy firm, as the candidate for the October 20 byelection, the preselectors have on all accounts chosen the best candidate.

But Scott Morrison had made it known he wanted a woman, a preference that's been embarrassingly rejected. Katherine O'Regan, who was supposed to come out the winner, ran fifth.

Moreover, on Thursday it was learned that John Howard and Malcolm Turnbull were both encouraging Sharma to stay in the contest. So the two former prime ministers managed to do over the current prime minister.

The Wentworth Liberals, whose local member and PM was cut down, have had their revenge. The question now is whether the electors will also take theirs. Sharma has the potential to be an excellent MP. But he lives way outside the electorate, so he'll start with a disadvantage against the high profile Kerryn Phelps, who is set to run as an independent.

This week has recalled the worst of Labor's days. Morrison's attempt to move things on from the coup didn't cut it, just like Julia Gillard found her wheels spinning when she tried to dig her government out of various bogs.

In a highly provocative move, Turnbull has been busy from New York lobbying to have cabinet minister Peter Dutton's parliamentary eligibility referred the High Court, to determine whether an interest in a child care business through a trust could see him in breach of the constitution's troublesome section 44.

Turnbull explained in a tweet:

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Morrison brushed this aside, saying the public didn't want the "lawyer's picnic" to continue. But wishing it away won't resolve a legitimate question that needs to be answered.

Never mind that Turnbull can be accused of malice; that he wasn't worried about Dutton's situation months ago, or that his government voted against referral.

Post coup, we are in a new era. A spurned Turnbull is off the leash. So is former Liberal deputy Julie Bishop who, when asked about her stance, was coy.

"If there's a vote on that matter then I'll make my mind up at that time, but of course we want clarity around the standing of all the members of parliament," she said. Backbencher Bishop has been reborn as outspokenly independent.

An unhappy "ex" is dangerously liberated to cause trouble, whether they're inside or outside parliament. Tony Abbott has been the model.

Former Nationals leader Barnaby Joyce was also freelancing, accusing Turnbull of "an active campaign to try and remove us as the government".

Turnbull quitting parliament has already delivered a major blow to his successor by triggering the byelection that, at worst, could put Morrison into minority government.

The legal opinion that Turnbull commissioned from the solicitor-general during the leadership crisis has left sufficient uncertainty about Dutton's eligibility to enable Turnbull to pursue the man who moved against him.

As we saw in the citizenship cases, this High Court takes a narrow view of section 44. Dutton might be on solid ground - as he insists and the Solicitor-General's opinion supports. But doubt remains - as that opinion also concedes.

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Labor is set to have a fresh try next week to refer Dutton to the court. The Herald Sun reports that two Liberals are considering voting with the opposition, a threat they're making to push the government to take the matter into its own hands. The internal unease will be hard for Morrison to manage.

Bloodied by his unsuccessful power grab, Dutton is also still locked in an altercation with former Border Force chief Roman Quaedvlieg about ministerial interventions on visas.

Holes have been shot in Quaedvlieg's claims. But Dutton went over the top when he used parliamentary privilege to accuse Quaedvlieg - sacked for helping his girlfriend get a job - of "grooming" a girl 30 years his junior. Even his colleagues did a double take at the term.

Dutton's Canberra troubles can't be helping him in his battle to hold his very marginal Queensland seat of Dickson, where GetUp has him in its sights.

All in all, Dutton is a marked man. If he survives to serve in the next parliament, it will be remarkable. That he remains in cabinet in this one is notable.

Normally someone who'd caused so much damage to the party and himself would now be on the backbench. But Dutton had hardly warmed a seat there, after the first challenge, then he was back in Home Affairs following the second one.

Here is a paradox: he is damaged goods, but too powerful to cast aside. Or rather, his right-wing support base is too strong for him to be relegated.

If Morrison wasn't able to keep the lid on the controversies around Dutton, he was a little more successful in containing the insurgency from some of the women over bullying and low female representation.

He headed off backbencher Lucy Gichuhi's threat to name the bullies. "The Prime Minister has

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taken up the issue," she tweeted after their meeting.

Morrison's pitch to the women was that he'd work with them and the whips internally. It is believed some complaints about behaviour have been made to the whips. The Minister for Women, Kelly O'Dwyer, has proposed the Liberal party organisation should have an independent and confidential process to operate when concerns are raised.

The recent events have sparked a few calls in the party for quotas, but there is minimal chance of the Liberals following Labor down that path.

But the Wentworth outcome could produce another round in the war over gender representation.

All week, the Liberals struggled to answer the key question: why was Turnbull deposed? It took Nationals leader Michael McCormack to give the brutal response on Thursday. McCormack identified three factors - ambition, Newspolls, and opportunity. "People take those opportunities and we've got a new prime minister," he said.

And the view from the voters? As one Liberal MP says, they've got the baseball bats out.

*Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.*

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