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Now that Kerryn Phelps has confirmed she's running as an independent in Wentworth, the battle is set up as a fascinating test between the campaigning skills of a tyro prime minister and the attraction of a community-based candidate.

The backdrop is a disillusioned, sour electorate – in the seat itself and in the wider Australian voterland, with people fed up with politicians, especially those from the big parties.

Phelps enters the contest with a lot of advantages. She has a medical practice in Wentworth (she lived there for most of the past 20 years until the 2016 redistribution pushed her a stone's throw outside the boundary). She has strong brand recognition as a Sydney city councillor, a former president of the Australian Medical Association, and an activist in the marriage equality campaign.

Morrison has a well-qualified candidate in Dave Sharma, a former ambassador to Israel, but not the female candidate he'd have preferred, nor someone with local ties. There will be plenty of money behind the Liberal campaign. But Morrison faces voters who, even more than the nation, are asking the "why?" question – why was Turnbull, their local member and their PM, tossed out?

For Phelps the byelection is obviously important but for Morrison, it is critical. If Wentworth is lost, there goes the Coalition's majority. There could be some paralysis and the fear in the ranks will increase enormously.

Morrison can talk down expectations all he likes – and he has learned from Turnbull's failure to do so in Longman. But whatever dampener is applied, if this always-Liberal seat with a whopping 17.7% margin were to fall, it would be a devastating blow.

The contest will have a dress rehearsal aspect. Morrison's style of campaigning and how well he goes over on the ground will be carefully watched for indications of his potential strengths or weaknesses come the main game next year.

In her first press conference Phelps stressed: “I’m not here as a destabilising influence. I’m here to bring integrity and stability to the political processes in Canberra.

"What I think is very important is that I say right from the outset – my intention is not to block supply.” (Though when asked by The Conversation about her attitude on the matter of confidence, she said that “depends on the government’s behaviour”.)

She told the news conference: “My intention is to give an independent voice to a lot of the concerns that the Australian people have, particularly about the policies that might come from the hard right of the Liberal party and the Coalition. What we need to hear is the voice of the people”.

Phelps is a version of the community candidates we have seen winning and retaining house seats in the last few years: Cathy McGowan (independent) in Indi, Rebekha Sharkie (Centre Alliance, formerly called the Nick Xenophon Team) in Mayo, and Andrew Wilkie (independent) in Denison.

While there are differences among those MPs politically, their electorates have continued to embrace them because they are seen as effective voices for their communities, people to be trusted in an age of distrust.

Phelps on Sunday articulated grievances Wentworth voters will have and their likely policy priorities. They were angry about what happened to Turnbull, and sick of the revolving door of leadership, she said.

She called for more action on climate change, a fast tracking of renewables and a more humane treatment of asylum seekers on Manus Island and Nauru.

“We need to see the people’s voice represented and not politicians who are simply spouting a party line or a party slogan”.

While the Liberals are worried about Phelps, ABC electoral analyst Antony Green casts some doubt on her prospects. “She has to get aquarter of the vote to even be in the race, and end up above Labor,who has picked a strong candidate,” he says.

As the Wentworth campaign gets underway a Fairfax Ipsos poll published in Fairfax papers on Monday has Labor leading the Coalition nationally on the two-party vote by 53% (down 2 points since August, when the government was under Turnbull) to the Coalition’s 47% (up 2 points).

Morrison is preferred as PM by 47% (down a point since August, when it was Turnbull), compared with 37% who prefer Bill Shorten (up one point).

It’s the familiar story: the public is supporting Labor but when it comes to the leaders, they prefer anyone but Shorten – whether it was Turnbull or is Morrison.

Morrison, operating in the most difficult of circumstances with a divided party, is trying to get on the front foot in relation to issues of community concern and where possible jump ahead of them.

On Sunday he announced a royal commission into aged care.

Let’s put aside that this came a day ahead of an ABC’s Four Corners expose, and despite his minister Ken Wyatt telling Four Corners he would rather spend the money on front line services than a royal commission.

The royal commission is overdue and fully justified. Some of the stories coming out of aged care facilities are horrific.

The terms of reference have yet to be worked out, but Morrison said the inquiry would run until the second half of next year.

Shorten told the ABC Labor would support the royal commission but it had to cover “everything”, including staffing, training, and funding.

The public will want the inquiry to be wide, and the politicking to be minimal.

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