

Liberals trounced in huge Wentworth swing, bringing a hung parliament

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

The Morrison government has been thrown into a parliamentary minority after a crushing defeat in the traditional Liberal seat of Wentworth, which has been captured by high profile independent Kerryn Phelps.

The anti-government swing in Malcolm Turnbull's former seat of more than 20% is a record for a federal byelection in modern history.

As of late Saturday night, Phelps had achieved a 52-48% two-candidate lead over the Liberals Dave Sharma. Sharma had about 42% of the primary vote; Phelps has polled about 30%.

Labor, which ran dead in the campaign to give the maximum chance of Phelps defeating the Liberals, was on 11%, down nearly 7 percentage points.

Turnbull had a 17.7% margin at the 2016 election, with 62% of the primary vote.

The byelection fiasco will re-open fractures in the government and threatens a damaging burst of infighting between Liberal conservatives and moderates.

It is not clear how it will affect the instability wracking the Nationals, where there is a push on from Barnaby Joyce to try to regain the leadership.

The government is not in danger of falling on the floor of the House because it has enough crossbench support on the matter of confidence. But to pass legislation, it will need the support of one of the now six crossbenchers.

The thumping in Wentworth, although there were special circumstances and it is not a typical seat, will be devastating for government morale and is another major fillip for Labor.

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The tearing down of Turnbull in a coup initiated by the conservatives and their candidate Peter Dutton was clearly the key factor in the huge backlash. But also climate change – where the conservatives have pushed for a weakening of policy – was a major issue in the campaign, and the treatment of refugees was also prominent.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison's frantic efforts to shore up the vote, including by a major change of the government's Middle East policy in the campaign's final week, failed to have an impact.

Phelps told a jubilant election party: "We have made history tonight. This is a great moment for Australian democracy."

She sent a message to "any young people, any women, any aspiring Independents out there – if you are thinking of running for parliament or running for public office: yes, it can be tough, yes, the road can be hard, but it is so worthwhile that we have the right people stepping up to represent Australia."

She told the ABC: "People have been concerned about the direction of government for a very long time and we've seen a lack of decency, a lack of integrity and we have to look at what the House of Representatives is about. It is about representing the people and the people have spoken loud and clear."

Morrison left the Invictus Games to appear at the Liberal gathering. "I know this is a tough day, but leadership requires you to turn up on the tough days and the good days, and that's what you will always get from me as the leader of the Liberal party."

Morrison admitted: "The Liberal party has paid a big price tonight for the events of several months ago".

"What's happened here in Wentworth is not unexpected. Liberals are angry," he said.

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“Tonight is a night when we listen, learn and accept the blows.

In remarks also aimed at rallying his humiliated party, Morrison declared “the bell hasn’t rung” on the bigger fight for the next election.

He defaulted to his stump speech, saying “we believe in a fair go for those who have a go. ...we believe it is every Australian’s duty to make a contribution and not take a contribution....My message to Bill Shorten is you will never lead a country that you want to divide.”

Morrison has to quickly recalibrate his pre-election message about the threat of instability if the seat were lost. This was a point he stressed at the end of the campaign, warning: “If an independent is elected at the Wentworth by-election, that will throw us into a hung Parliament and a lot of uncertainty, at a time when the country doesn’t need it.”

Morrison stressed the generally-acknowledged point that Sharma was a quality candidate. “The result today is on us, the Liberals, not on Dave Sharma. When you attract the crystal quality of the man like Dave Sharma, you know your party is heading in the right direction.”

In a gracious speech paying tribute to Phelps and other candidates, Sharma admitted the campaign had been “a little bruising”, and said “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to earn the trust of the voters of Wentworth tonight”.

While some Liberals want Sharma to contest Wentworth at the election, it will be hard to dislodge Phelps, and there will also be pressure to keep him for a more winnable seat.

Former minister Craig Laundy, a strong Turnbull supporter, appearing on Sky, lashed out at right wing commentators, urging colleagues who listened to them to realise they “do not shift votes”.

NSW Liberal MP Trent Zimmerman, who was on the ABC panel, said the result was “not a

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distinctly Wentworth message” and the Liberals had to heed the lesson. Zimmerman said Liberal research showed that the two biggest things working against the Liberals were the removal of Turnbull as prime minister and concern about climate change.

“I think what we’re seeing tonight is a reflection of the anger in the broader community, but particularly in his own seat ... on what happened on that mad week two months ago,” Zimmerman said.

NSW Labor MP Linda Burney said Morrison should consider calling an election.

Turnbull’s son Alex, who urged a vote against the Liberals, tweeted: “Incredible result and proud of the people of Wentworth. A hearty congratulations to @drkerrynphelps who fought a great campaign. A great day for Australian democracy”.

The vote has raised speculation that Tony Abbott could face a threat at the election from an independent in his seat Warringah.

There had been speculation the result could be close, but it was obvious from nearly the start of counting - ABC analyst Antony Green called the result at 7:18pm.

There were 16 candidates in the field.

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

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