

View from The Hill: Wentworth mightn't be typical but it's the shrill canary in the mine

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Fittingly, given the perennial instability of federal politics, the Wentworth byelection looked clearcut on Saturday night only to become very murky on Sunday morning.

But as things stand, although a lot of postals are still outstanding, independent Kerryn Phelps is expected to take the seat and the Coalition is poised to go into minority government, and potentially to descend into yet more infighting on the way to seemingly inevitable defeat next year.

Read more: [*Phelps consolidates her lead in Wentworth after nail biting day*](#)

In Wentworth Phelps' support appears to have strengthened late. She improved her messaging, while the government's shambles last week reinforced in voters' mind why it needed a walloping.

Regardless of the narrowing in the count, the top line message is that these voters shouted their outrage at the political assassination of Malcolm Turnbull. They also strongly signalled they care about climate change and are not satisfied at the government's policy response; as well, they want something done about the offshore refugees who have been treated inhumanely for so long.

Read more: [*Government raises glimmer of hope for New Zealand deal on refugees*](#)

Defenders of the leadership switch will say Wentworth isn't Australia, voters elsewhere won't

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feel so strongly, and Scott Morrison cuts through better than Turnbull.

But a large number of Australians are disgusted with the expedient coup culture that has overtaken our politics. As Liberal candidate Dave Phelps told Sky on Sunday, “Australians are sick of this [instability]”. The Coalition can't avoid paying a price for that at the election – the question is only how high a one.

To think that the Nationals could be even remotely contemplating a coup by Barnaby Joyce against Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack shows that some politicians find it hard to learn the most basic lessons.

McCormack is lacklustre but cutting him down would be simply to court danger. Not least, some rural women are so against Joyce that the party might face active opposition from them. Yet, Nationals sources still don't rule out a move before Christmas.

As for Morrison, as much as bringing him new problems, Wentworth has put up in lights the ones that were already there.

Even if those in other electorates are not as agitated about climate change as Wentworthians, that issue is more important to the broad Australian community than it is to the government.

Morrison may have held the line against the right wing Liberals arguing for quitting the Paris agreement but he errs by brushing away people's concerns about climate change with his singleminded focus on power prices. Many voters won't see that approach as adequate.

Morrison remains wedged between his Liberal right wing ideologues and mainstream voters. The right claims to speak for the “mainstream” on climate (and other things) but it doesn't.

Morrison needs a way out – to show that he understands a more sophisticated policy is required - but none is in sight.

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Liberal deputy leader Josh Frydenberg was holding firmly to present policies on Sunday, even though he has previously admitted his bitter disappointment at the death of the National Energy Guarantee, which in its totality integrated energy and climate policy.

The story is a little more positive on the refugees. Finally, the government shows a willingness to settle some in New Zealand, but it demands that Labor pass the legislation to close the “back door” to stop these people (and boat people settled elsewhere) ever setting foot in Australia. Labor says such a ban is too wide but the pressure is on for a deal. One “push” factor is that progress on a New Zealand solution, albeit partial, would take some weight off Bill Shorten at Labor’s December national conference.

A hung parliament, assuming it happens, will make everything harder for the government, including building a platform for the election. To pass any controversial legislation, it would have to get the support of at least one of six crossbenchers. The crossbenchers will exploit their enhanced importance.

Read more: [Explainer: what is a hung parliament and how would it affect the passage of legislation?](#)

Generally, risks will be higher. The possibility of a successful no confidence motion is remote. But Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton might be a little more nervous about the chances of his eligibility to sit in parliament being referred to the High Court.

The government’s worsened situation may impose more discipline on its backbenchers - or it may encourage backbench grandstanding in the pursuit of survival.

Coming up on the policy front is the issue of the response to the religious freedom report. Here Morrison is on a hiding to nothing. His right wing wants more religions protections to be legislated. But in the run up to Wentworth he had to promise legislation to remove the existing right of religious schools to discriminate against gay students – and he is resisting calls to do the

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same for teachers. The religious freedom debate is going in quite another direction to that foreseen by the right and Morrison himself.

Morrison would do better to simply bury the (still unreleased) report. But the right won't allow that.

Then there is the Middle East policy U-turn Morrison put on the table in the campaign's last week – to consider shifting the Australian embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. A decision is due by year's end. Is Morrison going to stick to this controversial path – or make an ungainly retreat? Either way, there'll be a fresh argument.

After the Wentworth debacle Turnbull's critics predictably are intensifying their attack on him – firstly for jumping ship ahead of the election and secondly for his failure to intervene to help Sharma. Both Morrison and Sharma appealed personally to Turnbull to come to the aid of the party.

Turnbull can say he made it clear he would quit parliament if rolled, and that ex-PMs shouldn't hang about. The former prime minister can argue that weighing into the campaign would have been viewed cynically and thus counterproductive.

If, however, Sharma misses out by a relatively modest margin, the question will hang in the air: might Turnbull have swung a few votes? His decisions will be seen even by some of his supporters on the negative side of his legacy ledger.

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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