

Australian government suffers major defeat in Wentworth by-election

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The federal Liberal-National Coalition government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison suffered a major defeat in the October 20 by-election for the seat of Wentworth in Sydney's wealthy eastern suburbs. Barring a last minute reversal, its candidate Dave Sharma, lost to Kerryn Phelps, an independent.

The defeat means that the Coalition will lose its one seat majority in the House of Representatives. This imperils the deeply-divided government and means that it will be dependent on support from cross-bench MPs to pass legislation in the lower house. The government must already seek the support of unpredictable right-wing populists and independents to enact its policies in the Senate.

The by-election was triggered by the resignation of the seat's sitting member of parliament—former prime minister Malcolm Turnbull. Turnbull left parliament after he was ousted as prime minister in a party-room coup on August 24.

With several thousand postal votes still to be counted, Phelps appears to have an unassailable preference vote tally of more than 51 percent, compared with Sharma, at just below 49 percent.

The swing away from Sharma—of roughly 19 percent compared with the Liberal result in the 2016 federal election—is the largest ever against a government candidate in a by-election. The Liberals and its conservative predecessors have held the federal seat of Wentworth since it was established in 1901.

The historic loss is the latest expression of an unprecedented crisis of the entire parliamentary establishment, spurred by deep popular hostility towards the major parties. Successive Labor Party and Liberal-National Coalition governments have imposed sweeping cuts to healthcare, education and welfare, attacked fundamental democratic rights and stepped up Australian involvement in US-led wars and military preparations for conflict with China.

In every election over the past decade voters have sought to punish the incumbents and register their opposition to the major parties, including by voting for independents and

representatives of the minor parties. Phelps is the latest in a series of independent candidates who have won federal electorates that were previously considered “safe-seats” for one of the major parties.

Making clear that the vote in Wentworth was a repudiation not only of the Coalition but of the parliamentary establishment as a whole, the candidates for Labor and the Greens also suffered declines in their primary vote of over 6 percent.

During the campaign, Phelps made tepid appeals to oppositional sentiment, denouncing the “dysfunction” of the major parties and declaring that they were “out of touch” with ordinary people. Phelps stated that she would attempt to bring to Australia refugee children incarcerated in Australian-operated detention centres on the Pacific Island of Nauru, and denounced the government's climate change policies as inadequate to confront the global environmental crisis.

The swings to Phelps were largest in the inner-city and beachside areas of Wentworth, which are traditionally the less affluent sections of the upper middle-class electorate. All 12 of the 35 voting booths won by Sharma were in the wealthiest harbor-side sections of the seat. Sharma also appears to have won a majority of postal and pre-poll votes.

Exit polling indicates that many of those who voted for Phelps were hostile to the ouster of Turnbull.

The result has further underscored that the coup against Turnbull, and the installation of Scott Morrison as prime minister, was not primarily motivated by electoral considerations. Rather, it was an attempt by the most right-wing section of the Liberals, including former prime minister Tony Abbott and Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, to install a government even more committed to the US alliance and to attacking the social and democratic rights of ordinary people.

The Abbott-Dutton wing of the party, with Morrison's full support, is seeking to cultivate an extreme right-wing movement based on anti-immigrant xenophobia, a racist campaign over a supposed “African gangs” crime wave in Melbourne, and anti-Chinese rhetoric.

This is aimed at diverting widespread anger over a deepening social crisis in reactionary directions, and cultivating a social base that can be mobilised against the emerging social and political struggles of the working class.

The removal of Turnbull was also prompted by concerns within Washington, and among members of the Coalition with close ties to the American political and intelligence establishment, that his government was not sufficiently committed to the US confrontation with China.

Turnbull had repeatedly signalled his complete support for the US alliance, and had passed anti-democratic “foreign interference” laws aimed against China, which have been hailed in Washington as a model to be emulated internationally.

Turnbull had, however, resisted direct Australian participation in US-led “freedom of navigation” provocations in Chinese-claimed waters in the South China Sea, and had expressed concern over the bellicose “America First” policies of Donald Trump. Before becoming prime minister, Turnbull was associated with a section of the Australian ruling elite that had voiced fears that Washington’s confrontation with Beijing would endanger the lucrative trade relationship with China.

In the weeks leading up to the election, the Morrison government demonstrated that it was seeking to shift official politics even further to the right.

On October 15, government senators voted in favour of a motion by the xenophobic Pauline Hanson One Nation Party, deploring the rise of “anti-white racism” and declaring that “it’s OK to be white.” The latter slogan has been championed by open white supremacists, including the American Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi groups.

While the government later claimed that its ministers had voted in favour as a result of an “administrative error,” their position was a clear signal to this extreme right-wing constituency.

Days earlier, Morrison had flagged moving Australia’s embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in line with the provocative actions of the Trump administration. He also declared that the government would review its attitude to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, in a sign of support for Trump’s scuttling of the agreement earlier this year.

Media commentators and the Labor opposition asserted that Morrison’s statements were aimed only at garnering votes from the large Jewish community within the Wentworth electorate. In fact, they were designed to demonstrate that the Morrison government is unequivocally committed to every US-led war and military provocation, including its backing for Israel’s persecution of the Palestinians and its moves towards a regime-change against Iran.

Significantly, Morrison used his concession speech on the night of Saturday’s election loss to make clear that his government will maintain its far-right agenda. The prime minister denounced welfare recipients and touted the “dignity of work.”

The Wentworth result will undoubtedly deepen the civil war raging within the government. Senior figures in the Coalition, including prominent National Party MP Barnaby Joyce, have publicly denounced Turnbull for failing to endorse Sharma. Throughout the campaign, the former prime minister’s son, Alex Turnbull, was campaigning for a Liberal defeat in the electorate.

Turnbull supporters within the Liberal Party and the media have responded by declaring that the by-election result demonstrates that the installation of Morrison was a mistake.

Representatives of the Labor Party opposition have issued calls for a federal election, which must take place before May, 2019, to be held immediately.

Labor is positioning itself as a party of “parliamentary stability,” capable of governing in the “national interest,” i.e., the interests of the corporate and financial elite. Senior Labor figures have said that they will not seek to bring down the minority government on the floor of parliament, and have declared that Labor can offer an alternative to the “chaos and division” of the Coalition.

Whatever the immediate developments, the Wentworth outcome will deepen the crisis of the entire parliamentary establishment. It portends a federal election campaign dominated by anti-immigrant racism, xenophobia and unbridled support for US militarism by Labor and the Coalition.



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