

Why this is the most important week of the year for the Liberal Party

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At the luxurious InterContinental Hotel on Tuesday night, Sydney's powerful and wealthy gathered for a soiree. Ros Packer was there, as was neurosurgeon Charlie Teo and businessman and Sydney Cricket Ground Trust chairman Tony Shepherd.

Conservative campaign expert Sir Lynton Crosby was deep in talks with the Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, the host of the exclusive cocktail party, who was joined by much of his frontbench, including Marise Payne, Josh Frydenberg, Peter Dutton and Mitch Fifield.



Liberal candidate for Wentworth Dave Sharma with Prime Minister Scott Morrison.
CREDIT: AAP

NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian, who co-hosted, also had several of her ministers by her side.

Later, a small group of big spenders moved on to Justin Hemmes' new pop-up restaurant, Little Bistro at Hotel CBD, where the bar czar hosted a \$7500-a-head Liberal Party dinner. The drawcard was former Australian ambassador to Israel - and candidate for Wentworth - Dave Sharma.

Sharma is the Liberal's great hope if he can win next weekend's critical byelection. In just a few weeks, the political newcomer has shown the financially

crippled party that big donors still exist - for the right candidate. On Tuesday night alone, between two fundraisers, Sharma raised close to \$200,000.

The 42-year-old son of an Indian migrant could reach [a goal of raising \\$1 million for the Liberals](#).

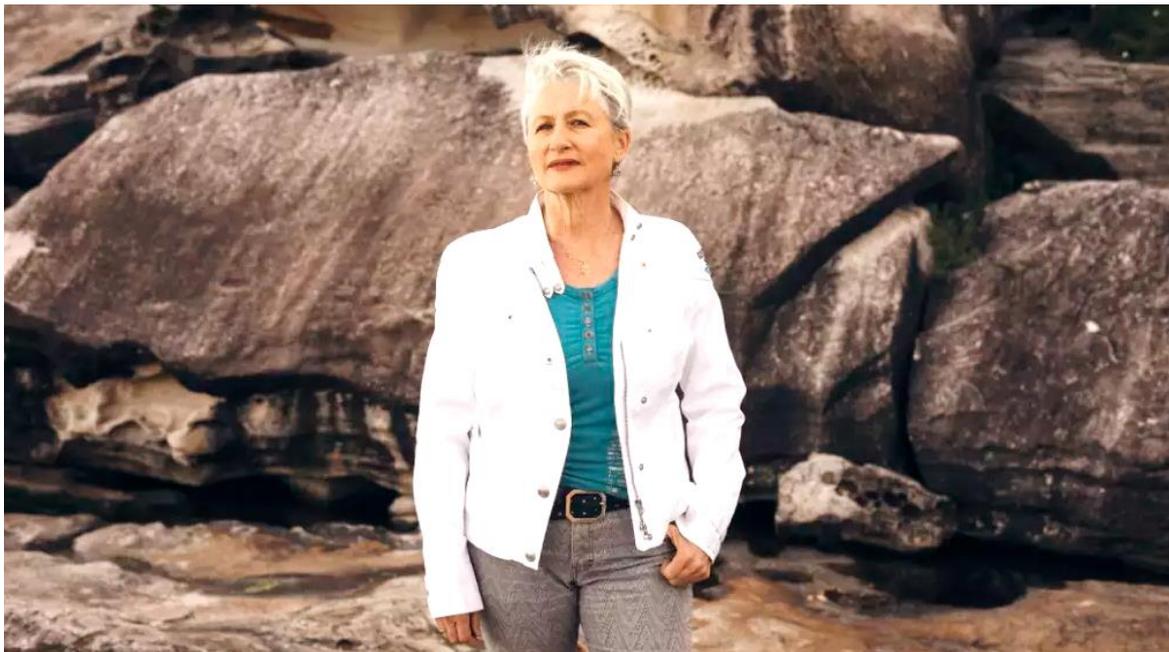
But despite his fundraising efforts, which have ensured the party could run one of the most well-funded campaigns in Liberal history, the party could still lose its prized seat. Relinquishing Wentworth, one of Australia's original lower house seats and one that has never been held by Labor, would mean the Coalition government would lose its one-seat majority in the House of Representatives.

The Turnbull factor

The Liberals hold the seat that symbolises Sydney's sun-kissed, wealthy image by 17.7 per cent. It seems almost inconceivable the party could lose it. Yet, party insiders are worried. Losing the seat would be the equivalent of John Howard losing Bennelong in 2007.

When the Liberal Party toppled Malcolm Turnbull as prime minister in late August, [Wentworth lost its hugely popular local member](#). "Beloved" was how many in the electorate described him.

In the 2016 election, Turnbull's two-party preferred winning margin was almost a whopping 18 per cent and the Liberals fear his brutal political assassination at the hands of his own people could be enough to drive away some of the party faithful.



Kerry Phelp is running for the seat of Wentworth as an independent. CREDIT: JAMES BRICKWOOD

Those who desert the Liberal Party in protest are likely to turn to well-known doctor Kerry Phelp, a City of Sydney councillor who has had a public profile for more than two decades.

Phelps, who married her partner Jackie in a ceremony in New York in 1998, was a vocal campaigner in the marriage equality debate last year. In Wentworth, 80 per cent of voters backed same-sex marriage in the government's plebiscite.

Unlike Sharma, Phelps - who is Jewish - does not have the big end of town or the established eastern suburbs Jewish community throwing money at her. She is largely funding her campaign from her own pocket, with support from a small but enthusiastic army of volunteers.

Polling released on Thursday night by the Voter Choice Project, an academic research project looking at why Australians vote the way they do, has Sharma's primary vote at 38.8 per cent. Phelps is on 23.5 per cent and Murray 17.2 per cent. Strategists believe Sharma will win if his vote reaches 40 per cent.

'I would've voted Liberal regardless'

Candidates, volunteers and corflutes crowded the footpath outside the Rose Bay pre-polling booth on Thursday, as a steady stream of people wandered in to cast their vote early. As many as 30 per cent of Wentworth people could vote before next Saturday's byelection.

The 16 candidates on the ballot paper include Labor's Tim Murray, Greens' Dominic Wy Kanak, as well as candidates from the Voluntary Euthanasia party, Derryn Hinch's Justice Party and the Science Party.

Of the three pre-polling stations scattered across the electorate, the Rose Bay booth is the closest for the life-long Liberal voters in the nearby moneyed suburbs of Point Piper, Bellevue Hill, Vaucluse and Dover Heights. For better or worse, most would never turn their backs on the party.

Susan Blind, a Russian emigrant who has lived in Wentworth for 30 years, is one such voter. She backed Sharma despite deploring the Liberal Party's knifing of Turnbull. "This is a shame for Australia. It's a joke," she says outside the Rose Bay pre-poll booth, before adding: "I'm a Liberal, always have been, always will be."

Across the electorate at the Bondi Junction pre-poll booth, Pam Bennett - a Bondi resident for 40 years - also voted for Sharma. She hails from Labor stock, but now counts herself among the hordes permanently "swayed over" to the Liberal Party by Howard in the 1990s. "I don't mind him," she says of Sharma, "but I would've voted Liberal regardless".

But not everyone is as loyal. A longtime Liberal supporter, who wanted only to be known as William and has lived in Wentworth for 54 years, cites Turnbull's axing as the reason for his decision to abandon the party. "It did change how I voted. I think it's going to change how a lot of people vote," he says.

Friends Emmy-Lou and Daisy, who live in Tamarama, both voted for Phelps. They are less perturbed by the knifing of Turnbull than what they regard as the growing influence of the conservative right over Liberal Party policy. "I've just voted a way I've never voted before," Emmy-Lou reveals as she leaves the Bondi Junction polling booth, describing her vote as an "anti-Abbott statement".

Daisy, a gay woman, says she is firmly “right wing” for economic reasons, but finds former prime minister Tony Abbott “too extreme”. “He wants to control the Liberal Party with a faction of people who don’t represent the broader electorate.”

The biggest threat

There is no doubt that the Liberals see Phelps as their biggest threat and are using similar tactics from previous campaigns to target the independent.

Pamphlets with the words “With a 1 seat majority, a vote for Phelps is a vote for ... Labor?” plastered over an unflattering photo of Phelps with an angry-looking Labor leader Bill Shorten have been posted to as many as 85,000 Wentworth households.

Federal independent MP Cathy McGowan says she encountered the same “ferocious attacks” from the Liberal Party when she was contesting the Victorian seat of Indi, held by Liberal MP Sophie Mirabella. They used very similar advertising campaigns.

“They portrayed me as a Green or Labor stooge and it was a full-scale attack because I honestly think the major parties would rather lose to each other than an independent,” McGowan says.

McGowan recently met Phelps, and another independent Wentworth candidate Licia Heath ([who has the backing of the Sydney Lord Mayor Clover Moore](#)) to impart her wisdom. “I want to support independent woman candidates and I wanted Kerryn to know that the battle can be tough, I wanted to warn her of the ferocity of the attacks, but also to let her know that it is absolutely worth doing,” McGowan says.

'Protest' votes

Wentworth, a classic blue-ribbon Liberal seat with some of the highest property prices in the country and wages to match, is also progressive and diverse. It has a high gay population and Jewish voters make up 12 per cent of the population.

Unsurprisingly, the last thing the Liberals wanted was the religious freedom debate to be ignited before the byelection. But on Wednesday, the long-awaited Ruddock review, in the hands of the government since May but kept under wraps, [was revealed by Fairfax Media](#).

Sharma [was quick to distance himself](#) from recommendations to further amend some existing laws that give religious schools the right to turn away gay students and teachers. “Personally, I would be opposed to any new measures that impose forms of discrimination on the basis of gender or sexual orientation, or anything else for that matter,” Sharma said, while Phelps was quick to warn the review was proof the Liberal government wanted to water down anti-discrimination laws.

Phelps, 60, has seized on climate change, identified as the biggest policy issue for voters in Wentworth, as one of her key platforms. She has released a six-point plan to tackle global warming and has pledged that if elected she will reject government support for new coal-fired power plants and aim for 50 per cent renewable energy by 2030.

The former Liberal leader John Hewson, who was the member for Wentworth from 1987 to 1995, has also taken up the climate change fight, and says [the byelection is a chance to register a "protest vote"](#) to push "major players to accept the imperative of an effective climate action plan". Hewson joined the environmentalist and businessman Geoff Cousins, and a coral expert, Professor Terry Hughes, at a byelection climate-change forum in Bondi on Wednesday night. Sharma was not there.

Earlier in the day, Sharma was asked about his response to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, which warned that the world has 12 years to keep global warming to a maximum of 1.5 degrees or face dire outcomes. "I do think we are doing enough and I do think we have had a good record on climate change. Emissions are at their lowest levels in 28 years," Sharma said. "We are on track to meet the Paris commitments and I believe we will address the Paris commitments and we will be addressing affordability and sustainable and coherent energy policy."

Phelps was quick to label Sharma's comments "a joke". "It is just ridiculous that the Liberal candidate for Wentworth can say that the Liberal government is doing enough on climate change - the Liberal government does not have a policy on climate change," Phelps said.



Alex Turnbull has taken to Facebook to urge young liberals to cast their vote elsewhere to send a message to the party, which he says has been 'taken over... by extremists on the hard right'.

And Malcolm Turnbull's son, Alex Turnbull, [posted a video online late on Thursday urging voters in Wentworth to vote against his father's party on October 20](#), in part due to concerns about the party's lack of action on climate change. He said the Liberal Party had been taken over by "extremists", and that the hard right of the party wanted to "pursue a crazy agenda". "If you want to pull the Liberal Party back from the brink it's the one clear signal you can send," he said.

Another headache for the Liberals arose last week too. In a disastrous blunder for the NSW government, the issue of whether a multimillion-dollar horse race should be promoted on the Opera House dominated headlines for days. The light projection went ahead, along with a protest and widespread anger.

Indeed, as some of Sydney's elite were sipping champagne at the Liberal's \$550-a-head drinks function on Tuesday night, just several hundred metres down the road protesters [were chanting "it's our house" on the forecourt of the Opera House](#).

It had been a bruising few days for Berejiklian and her NSW Liberal colleagues. One senior Liberal working on the campaign said of the debacle: "The Opera House problems could not have come at a worse time for us. Wentworth Liberals adore the Opera House and they would not have wanted to see some horse race beamed onto iconic architecture just because [2GB shock jock] Alan Jones demanded it.

"Then we had the religious freedom review just emerge. They were both very unhelpful. Dave is a stand out candidate, prime ministerial material, but the electorate isn't happy. I just fear that the wounds are too deep. I am not sure Wentworth has healed."

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