

Wentworth candidates clash on climate change as debate heats up

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Liberal candidate for Wentworth Dave Sharma says he "completely accepted the science on climate change" and was appalled by the way his party treated former prime minister Malcolm Turnbull.



During a debate on the upcoming Wentworth byelection hosted by the SMH, the main candidates sparred over the issue of climate change and preferences.

With less than a week to go until the Wentworth byelection, the main candidates have sparred over the issue of climate change as the Liberal Party fights to hold onto the seat.

Facing off against his major rivals in a debate, The Battle for Wentworth, hosted by *The Sydney Morning Herald* in Bondi on Monday, Mr Sharma said he believed Australia could meet its Paris commitments.

He added that policy also needed to address energy affordability and reliability in order to secure the "broad public support we need to move to a lower emissions pathway."

Asked about his views on coal-fired power - an issue which has riven the federal Liberal Party - Mr Sharma said coal would "remain part of the energy mix for the future".

"But I do firmly believe that as technology gets better – particularly technology for renewable storage - and as schemes like the Snowy Mountains Hydro 2.0 come online, we will be increasingly able to transition away from that and towards more renewables in our energy mix," Mr Sharma said.

However, he was taken to task on the issue by independent candidate Dr Kerry Phelp, who is regarded as the main challenger capable of breaking the Liberal's hold on the seat.



The five main candidates in Saturday's byelection at Monday's debate. From left Dave Sharma (Liberals) Kerry Phelp (independent), Tim Murray (Labor), Dominic Wy Kanak (Greens), Licia Heath (independent). CREDIT: NICK MOIR

Dr Phelp suggested Mr Sharma would be hamstrung by the warring views on climate change within the Liberal Party, which has fuelled policy intransigence and was one of the factors in the dumping of Mr Turnbull as prime minister.

"Regardless of what your views are, your party is dominated by climate change sceptics," Dr Phelp said at the forum.

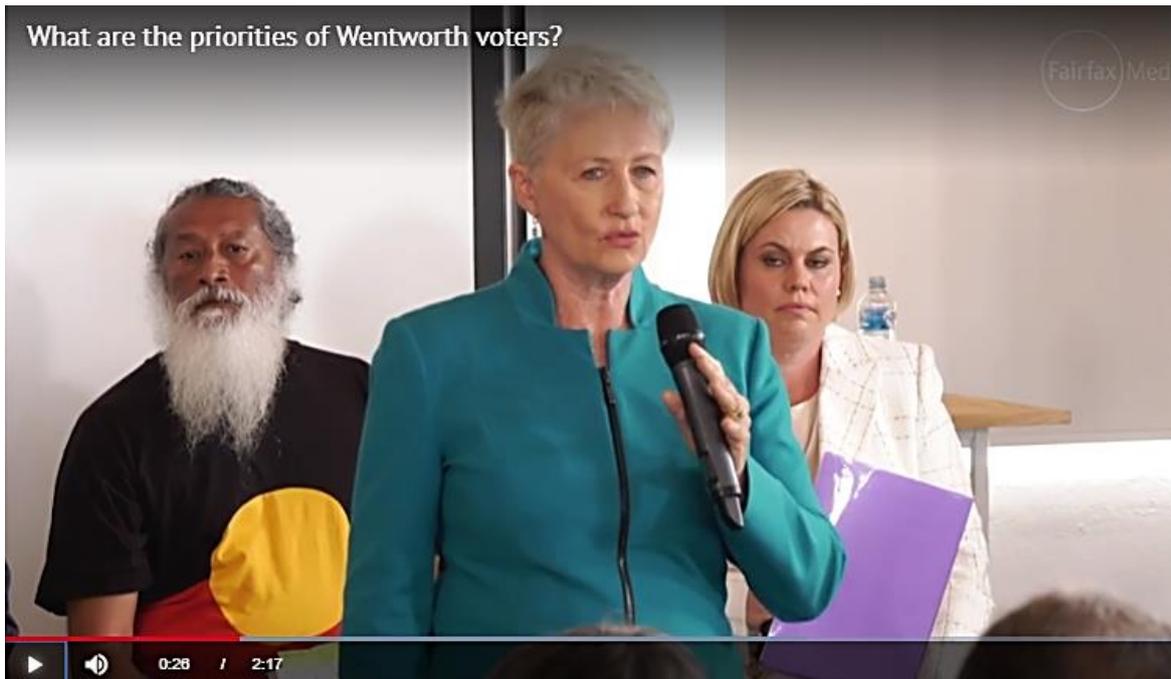
"Unless you are prepared to cross the floor, you are going to have to vote with a government that doesn't believe that climate change is real and doesn't have a policy on climate change."

Mr Sharma also pleaded with voters to give the Liberals another chance even though it booted Mr Turnbull, whom he described as a "mentor and a friend", from the top job in August.

"I, too, was appalled at the treatment that was meted out to him," Mr Sharma said.

Dr Phelp argued that a "strong local independent" could "create a stabilising influence to keep the government to account and not just be a rubber stamp".

But in a firm exchange with rival independent Licia Heath, Dr Phelps was forced to defend her decision to preference the Liberal Party ahead of Labor.



At a Sydney Morning Herald-hosted leaders' debate, we spoke to local voters about what their main issues are ahead of Saturday's byelection.

"I find it a bit disingenuous when I hear attacks against other candidates about climate change when the same candidate is preferencing the people in direct opposition to those policies," Ms Heath said.

Ms Heath said Dr Phelps could have elected to run an open ticket, and not direct her supporters on how to allocate preferences.

At the outset of her campaign, Dr Phelps indicated she would preference the Liberals last, but later backflipped on her decision and is now asking her supporters to direct their preferences to Mr Sharma ahead of Labor candidate Tim Murray.

Dr Phelps has been forced to defend this decision throughout the campaign.

"People are able to put their preferences wherever they like, and I am more than happy with that," she told the audience.

"The important thing here is that we talk about the policies that are of importance to Australia's future."

Mr Murray said high energy prices were a direct product of the "government's intransigence on climate policy."

"There is a fiction out there that alternative energy will drive prices up. That is simply not true," he said.

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