

Who can tell what core beliefs the Liberals still fight for, asks

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THE massive swing against the Liberals in the Wentworth by-election proves the Morrison Government is dead. It will lose the next election, and badly. But the media Left's pet theory is wrong: the Liberals didn't suffer this humiliating 18 per cent swing just because they sacked Malcolm Turnbull as prime minister.

Check the massive difference in support for Liberal candidate Dave Sharma in the postal ballots sent before Saturday and in the ballots cast at polling booths on the day.

They point the finger straight at new Prime Minister Scott Morrison and his inept campaigning in the past week or two. The support for Sharma at the booths on Saturday was just 48 per cent, which is why Morrison just hours later announced the Liberals had lost to independent Kerryn Phelps. But then the Australian Electoral Commission started to count the postal votes mailed in earlier, and the difference was chalk and cheese: they backed Sharma by an overwhelming 64.4 per cent.

Phelps' lead was slashed to ribbons, and the vote is now so close that there may be a recount. Until this shock twist, many in the media and the Liberal Left were claiming that voters in Wentworth, Turnbull's former seat, had revolted against Turnbull's sacking and defended his global-warming crusading. "Unless you act on climate change, not even your safest seat is safe," cackled GetUp!.

And true, many voters in Wentworth would indeed prefer Turnbull to any other Liberal leader, because this is an atypical Liberal seat — rich, but with many gays and Jews, and containing a Labor state electorate. But that massive difference in Liberal support in votes counted on the day (48 per cent) and mailed in earlier (64.4 per cent) suggest the Liberals' campaigning in the final days was catastrophic.

This should be critical in figuring what the Liberals must learn from this debacle, whether they lose Wentworth or win it by a whisker. Did the huge swing show the Liberals were being punished for sacking Turnbull and — as his angry son, Alex, put it — being "taken over frankly by extremists on the hard Right"? Or was the problem that Turnbull was replaced not by an "extremist of

the hard Right” but by Scott Morrison, an intellectually incurious former marketing man who shows little idea what his party really stands for?

How obvious that was in the last couple of weeks of campaigning for Wentworth, when Morrison kept reacting wildly to events and betraying his too-transparent desperation to save the seat. For instance, last month Morrison suddenly proposed yet another national day for Aborigines, yet two weeks ago he defended the right of religious schools to ban gay students (until brought to his senses two days later).

It was the same ideological confusion last Tuesday. Morrison tried to bribe Jewish voters in Wentworth with a promise to “consider” moving our embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, but just hours later his senators voted that it was “OK to be white” (only to then claim they’d made an “administrative error” and reverse their vote).

And, of course, on one day he’d promise to do everything he could to cut electricity prices, yet on the next would promise to honour the Paris agreement on global warming and cut emissions as well.

To many voters, this must have looked like utter cluelessness, made worse late last week by reports of Barnaby Joyce thinking of replacing Michael McCormack as the Nationals leader and deputy prime minister.

Morrison in these last weeks showed all the stability and sense of direction of a Catherine wheel, and his pandering to every side left him respected by none. This is not a problem of Morrison’s alone. The whole Liberal Party is now like that. Who can tell what core beliefs it would still fight for?

At least half its MPs are of the cultural Left they should oppose, or are whateverists who’d happily run a Labor agenda (global warming, identity politics) if it just means they can keep power. But the other half include conservatives of conviction who’d rather lose than betray their ideals — but whose ideals, in some cases, seem mean and reactionary, not optimistic and liberating.

This split can’t be resolved by another change of leader or a few policy changes. One side must smarten up and win this battle and the other — well, they must put up or walk out. Or be carried out. The struggle for the carcass of this Liberal Party has a bloody way to go.