

WEEK 1

# The battle for Wentworth

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**T**he Bronte to Bondi walk is one of the great delights of Sydney life. On any given day, thousands of Sydneysiders either jog or stroll along its winding route, taking in the sea air, admiring the ocean view – pilgrims on the road to health and relaxation.

But today a middle-aged man wearing a dark suit with an open-neck red shirt has disturbed the peaceful routine. He is leading a ragged entourage of journalists, photographers and camera crews north towards Bondi. Like his fellow travellers on this road, though, he is also a pilgrim – of sorts. Like Saul on the road to Damascus, the man in the red shirt has come to a decision. Just as the non-believer Saul became the Christian Paul, the man on the track to Bondi has something to declare.

As he rounds the headland at Marks Park in Tamarama, he can see his final destination – the Bondi Icebergs, a large white building nestled by the ocean. Even if he wanted to, he can't turn back now. Waiting for him poolside at the Icebergs is an even bigger pack of journalists and television cameras. Some of the channels have brought in their broadcast vans so that his words and deeds can be fed out to television viewers across the nation as quickly as possible.

He hurries on, pausing only for the really essential photo opportunities. And then, with little fanfare, he arrives. There are a

few quick formalities. A press release is handed out. Then the media scrum opens to embrace him: he has come to talk and they are here to listen.

Finally, after months of prevarication, the man in the red shirt utters the words that will see him elevated from a mere footnote in the history books to the far greater fame of trivia quiz question. Hyped up on nervous energy, he barks his message into the wind as a fine spray of salt water falls gently upon the gathering.

“I am running as the member for Wentworth again,” Peter King tells the assembled throng. “I’ll be standing for re-election.”

It is Friday 3 September 2004, at a quarter past ten on a fine spring morning. Just five days earlier, John Howard had announced that his government would seek a fourth term at an election to be held on 9 October. And the reason for the media's interest is obvious: a long-time Liberal Party loyalist has taken the enormous step of ratting on his old party in the first week of an election campaign.

King, a former president of the NSW state branch, had easily won the federal seat of Wentworth in Sydney's wealthy eastern suburbs for the Liberals in 2001. By all accounts he was a well-liked and energetic local member. But in February 2004 he succumbed to the irresistible force that is Malcolm Turnbull when he was disendorsed as the Liberal candidate for Wentworth after being beaten in a bruising preselection battle. King stayed on as the sitting member, nursed his bitterness, bided his time, and made his plans.

The Bondi Icebergs is located at the southern end of Bondi Beach and possesses a commanding view of Australia's best-known stretch of sand. The famous winter swimming club that gives the building its name, which used to be run by and for local working-class men, is still here, but nothing in Sydney with so beautiful a view of the water stays exclusively working-class for very long.

The Icebergs and their famous pool remain as an important part of the local culture, but the building itself was rebuilt several years ago and now accommodates a very expensive restaurant and bar on its top floors.

It was at the Icebergs that King and Turnbull exchanged a few intemperate words in late July 2004. Under parliamentary privilege, King later revealed that Turnbull had told him to “fuck off and get out of my way” after the local newspaper, the *Wentworth Courier*, had speculated that King might have enough support in the local community to run again. King, no doubt, had this encounter in mind when he chose the Icebergs as the setting for his announcement.

On the face of it, Turnbull and King have a great deal in common. They were both educated at Sydney University; both are lawyers; and both studied at Oxford University as Rhodes scholars. They both also married into political dynasties. King is married to Fiona Sinclair King, the daughter of former National Party leader Ian Sinclair; Turnbull is married to Lucy Hughes Turnbull, the daughter of former Liberal Attorney-General Tom Hughes, and herself a former Lord Mayor of Sydney. They are even near neighbours in Point Piper, one of Wentworth’s richest suburbs. But they had something else in common, of course: these two ambitious men both wanted to be the Member for Wentworth; and in the end, it was the well-connected, multi-millionaire republican who was able to oust the mundane monarchist.

So when King finally arrived at the Icebergs for his press conference that Friday morning, the media quite rightly expected the bell to ring for round two of a no-holds-barred grudge match. And they weren’t disappointed. As the journalists strained to hear in the blustery conditions, King outlined his battle plan for taking back Wentworth.

No, he would not be splitting the conservative vote, he said. That was a furphy put about by his political enemies – in fact, he

would not be allocating preferences at all. He told us that he had spoken to the prime minister at 8.15 that morning and that, yes, it had been a cordial conversation. “He understands my position, I understand his.” He went on to imply that vast amounts of money were being spent to stop him, but he would not be deterred. And the issues he would run on? Well, that was simple: Old People; Trees; Kids in Detention; Hating Malcolm; and Keeping Yourself Nice. In fact, something for every voter in Wentworth who might consider giving him their support.

“Do you know aged care is in crisis in this country, and in crisis here in the eastern suburbs?” King asked the windswept media. “There are people who are actually suiciding, who are not being fed properly. There are people eating cold sausage rolls three times a day.” If anyone in the pack gasped with shame I couldn’t hear them above the sound of crashing waves.

King also said he was in favour of human rights, and against bullying – especially in politics, and particularly in preselections. Bullying is “abhorred by everybody and true liberal values are contrary to that approach.” He was also against locking up underage refugees. “I think it is a disgrace,” he said, “that we have children in detention in this country who have done nothing wrong.” King was also keen to assure the assembled media that he was quite the greenie.

“I’ve got a message for Mark Latham and John Howard. It’s time for Australia to get serious about environmental policies,” King told us, with a straight face. “I’m in favour of the banning of the logging in old-growth forests. And that should be the precursor for a national policy that’s going to get serious about climate change.”

“Where are the old-growth forests in Wentworth?” shouted one admirably pugnacious radio reporter. But King ignored the question entirely, proving he wasn’t without some political smarts. The sitting member raced on; he had a lot to get off his chest.

“Politics is about people, it’s not about power, it’s not about money, it’s about people,” King preached, “And as soon as we forget that, whether we’re a political party or an individual, we go wide of the mark.” Of course, Turnbull and the Liberal Party had gone very wide of the mark, in King’s mind, when they didn’t see fit to keep him on as Member for Wentworth.

“The choice at the end of the day for the people of Wentworth will be the same [as in 2001]: Peter King or Labor,” he explained, “and I believe they will vote King, because King is no quitter.”

It’s always a bit unsettling to see someone start referring to himself in the third person. Pretentious rap singers, overpaid boxers and rugby league coaches sometimes do it, but it’s not a good look for Australian politicians just six weeks out from polling day.

“They will have a choice between Peter King, who is 100 per cent Wentworth, untrammelled by party, untrammelled by ministerial ambitions. And other candidates who see this seat as a stepping stone to go somewhere else. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.”

In this rambling but strangely compelling press conference, King cast himself as a David versus a Goliath; the little guy versus the Liberal Party. He obviously hoped to build a loose coalition between Liberal Party supporters who hated Malcolm Turnbull, small “l” liberal voters displeased with the Howard government, the urban green vote, and the remnants of his personal support base in the electorate, particularly older Wentworth voters and monarchists.

And this is why the media were fascinated. In the first week of a six-week campaign that promised tedium and was yet to disappoint, the media latched on to the Battle for Wentworth as a much-needed bit of colour. It had all the traits of a Jacobean drama, minus the blood: it was about power, privilege, revenge and testosterone. It was irresistible, and if the upset – no matter how unlikely – occurred it might even be significant.

As far as I could tell, King was keen to emulate the success of Peter Andren, the independent member for Calare, a seat in rural New South Wales. Andren is the federal parliament’s senior independent. He has won Calare three times and went into this election with a 25 per cent margin. During the campaign King would even adopt Andren’s slogan: “Your Choice, Your Voice.” But did he really expect to achieve what Andren had? In a big city seat like Wentworth, against the full weight of the Liberal Party on its home turf?

So what, exactly, had I and the other journalists just witnessed? The reading out of a lengthy political suicide note? The outpourings of a man with a genuine grievance? Or an act of personal revenge cunningly disguised as an election campaign? King’s gambit seemed so quixotic and badly thought out that I really couldn’t tell – but it was fun to watch.

The federal seat of Wentworth is geographically small, densely populated, well educated and prosperous. And a bit flamboyant. It has a large Jewish population and a large gay community, and several very popular shopping and entertainment areas – Oxford Street, Double Bay, Bondi.

It stretches from trendy Paddington and well-heeled Woolahra in its west, through the wealthy harbour-side suburbs of Darling Point, Rose Bay and Vaucluse along its northern margin, towards Dover Heights and the Pacific Ocean. It incorporates the comfortable, but less-moneyed, beachside suburbs of Tamarama, Clovelly and Bronte. And at its southern end, Wentworth takes in parts of the more Labor-affiliated suburb of Randwick. But its spiritual centre is Bondi Beach, the place where Wentworthians of all types come together to swim, promenade and perve on each other.

And unlike Sydney’s other traditionally safe Liberal Party seats – which are all on the respectably middle-class North Shore of the

city – Wentworth is regarded as a bit flashy, a bit of a fashion victim, and a bit full of itself. And this reputation is not undeserved.

In some parts of the electorate a simple cup of coffee might require a small bank loan to purchase. Members of the Roosters – its local rugby league team – sometimes moonlight as male models. Along Bondi’s Campbell Parade, film-makers, actors and television personalities overpopulate the cafes, hiding behind dark glasses hoping to be noticed. At restaurants like Catalinas on New South Head Road you’ll find the ladies-who-lunch, freshly coiffured and their skin stretched tight, discussing charity auctions and divorce settlements. Go for an early morning swim at one of Wentworth’s several fine beaches and you might bump into either billionaire-in-waiting Jamie Packer or his ex-wife, swimsuit designer Jodhi.

Yet mixed in there somewhere among the millionaires and models are quite a few real people. Despite the serious money there is also some evidence of a social conscience. The Greens have always done well here; in some booths around Bondi Beach they can get as much as 40 per cent of the vote. And for a safe Liberal seat, Labor doesn’t do too badly either, regularly polling about 30 per cent of the primary vote across the electorate. And then, of course, there are the so-called “doctors’ wives.”

This patronising expression is not a precise sociological term – it refers to people of either gender, for example – but it does describe an interesting phenomenon in Australian politics. Many small “I” liberals – some of them even Liberal Party members – have become thoroughly fed up with John Howard and his government over a diverse range of issues: the treatment of refugees, the war in Iraq, truth in government. If you know an economically well-off, well-educated, older Australian – the wife of a doctor radicalised by refugee children being kept in detention, perhaps; or a gay businessman with a passion for bushwalking; or even a practising Catholic who sponsors an orphan in East Timor; in other words, someone with the time, inclination and

wealth to think about the broader issues of Australian life, not just those connected to the famous hip-pocket nerve – then, chances are, you will have met a member of this interesting species of voter.

They are the sort of people who voted for the republic, but whose children go to Cranbrook or SCEGGS Darlinghurst. They might have walked across the Harbour Bridge to show their support for reconciliation, but then picked up the BMW from their office parking spot in the CBD to get home afterwards. They might support the free market, but don’t support the war in Iraq. They might be members of both the Sydney Cricket Ground and a refugee support group. They quite like trees, particularly old-growth forests, and one day they might even go to Tasmania for a long weekend to see them.

And though they might be easy to caricature and deride, they are genuinely disappointed by the Howard government and seemed likely to cast a protest vote against the Coalition.

They are the sort of voters being picked up by the Greens in the Senate. They will probably support the former Adelaide magistrate Brian Deegan, whose son Josh was killed in the Bali bombing, and who is running as an independent against the foreign minister Alexander Downer in Mayo. They are the supporters of Andrew Wilkie, the intelligence analyst turned whistleblower, now a Greens candidate, in his eccentric attempt to unseat Prime Minister John Howard in Bennelong. They are the types of people behind Not Happy, John!, a group run by the former Liberal Party stalwart John Valder, which wanted to see the government returned but John Howard tossed out.

And most importantly for Wentworth, they are the type of voter who King obviously planned to attract to his banner, thereby splitting the Liberal vote and giving Labor a sniff of victory – however unlikely.

Certainly, Prime Minister Howard saw the danger. Even before Peter King announced his candidacy, the PM took time out from

his busy working life to write to all Wentworth voters over the age of 55. “I have a very real concern that the seat of Wentworth could be won by the Labor Party at the next election,” the prime minister wrote, “Wentworth is not the safe Liberal seat that many people imagine... This election will be very close. We can never take anything for granted.” Reading between the lines, it’s pretty much what I imagine he told Peter King himself: “For Christ’s sake, don’t do it!”

Less than an hour after King’s announcement the media pack had hunted down his main opponent for an impromptu press conference in the Bondi Junction shopping mall. Casually dressed – tie-less, with his shirtsleeves rolled up – Malcolm Turnbull was doing his best Man of the People impersonation. He strolled up to the waiting media accompanied by his two photogenic children, Alex and Daisy. Then, as curious shoppers swirled around, Turnbull squared up to the assembled microphones. And he didn’t waste any time in warning the Liberal flock of Wentworth about the dangers of straying too far from the Great Shepherd, John Howard.

“The way voters in Wentworth can contribute to ensuring John Howard is returned as prime minister is to vote for the Liberal candidate,” he said. “A vote for any other candidate puts Wentworth and Australia at risk of being governed – or misgoverned – by Mark Latham.” It was, it seems, the patriotic duty of all good Liberal Wentworthians to see off this traitor in their midst.

In the face of whirring cameras, Turnbull said he’d seen King’s move coming for months. He said that Wentworth was now a marginal seat. He pointed out that he’d lived in the seat all his life, that he felt a deep affinity with the place. And, no, he wouldn’t comment on whether King was a “Liberal rat” or not. But, yes, he would like to say that he loved trees just as much as Peter King.

“I am a very committed environmentalist. I am a director of Clean Up Australia – the biggest grassroots environmentalist organisation in the world,” he informed the media. And then he used a nice line that he’d probably been polishing up for the last few months. “Independents may be fond of the wilderness,” Turnbull said, “but I’m afraid to say politically they end up being voices in the wilderness.”

There were a few more questions and then he was off; back to his nearby campaign office to tell someone trustworthy and loyal, like his wife, what he really thought of Peter King.

But the pack was not quite sated by Turnbull’s sound bites. They were off to find their next meal – the Labor candidate, David Patch. Patch is a short, middle-aged and balding bloke with an engaging manner. Like King and Turnbull, he is also a barrister and was also educated at Sydney University. The pack got to Patch just as he was setting up his card table and campaign leaflets outside the Eastgate Gardens shopping centre. (In fact, a canny TV reporter had probably alerted him to get over to Bondi Junction as quick as he could.)

Patch explained that Wentworth was now a volatile seat. He said his chances of winning had gone up slightly. He said that he liked Peter King, that their children had gone to school together. And, no, he wasn’t surprised that King had decided to run. “I would have eaten my hat if he had not announced he was going to be a candidate,” Patch declared with an impish grin. “He’s been acting like a candidate for months.” And Patch was also keen to parade his own green credentials, declaring, “I have been a member of the Australian Conservation Foundation for many years.” For a seat where two trees growing side by side might be considered high-density, environmentalism certainly held some sway. Patch also made sure he got a good, long dig in at his main rival as well.

“Turnbull,” he said, “is a very unpopular candidate who is running a campaign which – despite his denials – is based on his image. If you look at his leaflets, then the first thing you see is a

whole lot of stuff about... Malcolm. You move on in his leaflets and what do you find...? More stuff about Malcolm – that’s right – and then closely followed by a series of photographs of... can you guess?... Malcolm.”

David Patch looked to be in his element. After all, he claims to have beaten Turnbull once before in a political battle – in 1975, for the presidency of the Student Representative Council at Sydney University.

By the end of the day it had become clear just how annoying the seat of Wentworth would now become for the Liberal Party. As the former Labor pollster Rod Cameron clearly enjoyed explaining on that night’s edition of ABC Television’s *Lateline*, Turnbull’s victory was still highly likely, but far from being the walk in the park he might have expected.

“Had a turbulent time, hasn’t he? I still think he’d be favourite to win,” Cameron opined. But what about King’s chances?

“For King to win, he’d have to run second. In other words, he’d have to out-poll either Malcolm Turnbull or the Labor candidate. Very difficult to see him doing either of those. To out-poll Labor... [the ALP] would have to run dead and why should they? They’ve got a chance of winning, outside, but a chance of winning... The last election showed that the Libs got about 50 per cent, Labor about 30 per cent and minor parties got about 20 per cent, so it’s a tall order for Peter King to win – with an outside chance that Labor might get it.”

And when *Lateline* compere Maxine McKew asked about the reality of Labor’s chances, Cameron confirmed the worst fears of both Turnbull and Prime Minister Howard. “Labor would [have to] run second,” he said, “and would be brought home on the preferences of minor parties and the leakage of the Liberal vote that went to King. Now, King might give 30 per cent to 40 per cent of his preferences to Labor, and that might get them over the line.” Labor possibly home on less than half of King’s preferences? It didn’t bear thinking about, particularly if you were a Malcolm

Turnbull, and never content to lose anything, or a prime minister fighting tooth-and-nail in a tough national contest. Despite having a relatively safe margin of over 7 per cent in favour of the Liberals, Wentworth was now too close to call. It’s not often that a blue-ribbon seat goes from shoo-in to showdown in the course of a single press conference, but that’s what had happened.

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A few weeks after King announced his candidacy, the *Sydney Morning Herald* commissioned a poll on the seat from ACNielsen. What it found must have had Malcolm Turnbull’s morning corn-flakes turning to ash in his mouth.

The poll showed King running third with 25 per cent of the primary vote, Patch with 27 per cent, and Turnbull on 34 per cent. After distributing preferences from the Greens, the poll found the two-party-preferred vote split between Patch on 36 per cent and Turnbull on 35 per cent. And then it got very interesting. After allocating King’s preferences, the poll found that Wentworth was resting on the proverbial knife edge, split 50–50 between Labor and Liberal.

A few days later Turnbull found himself eating another bowlful of burnt offerings for breakfast. The Greens in Wentworth had decided to allocate their preferences to Labor. In 2001 the Greens won 10 per cent of the vote in Wentworth, and about 90 per cent of their preferences went to Labor.

David Patch probably couldn’t believe his luck – a loyal flag-bearer for the Labor Party one moment; parliamentary hopeful the next. Malcolm Turnbull, a relatively recent convert to Catholicism, probably cried out in pain, “Why, oh Lord? Why must it be so hard? I just want to be prime minister. Is that too much to ask?” Discerning what Peter King felt is a bit more difficult. Did he blanch at the thought that his gamble to stay in power was possibly going pear-shaped? Or did he simply rejoice in the knowledge that he had ruined Malcolm Turnbull’s day?

Whatever he thought, King was certainly determined. Straight after he announced his candidacy, he began to campaign in earnest. That same night he could be seen busily putting up his own election posters along Oxford Street near Centennial Park. Wearing a Wallabies jersey, hammer in hand, he was hard at it until well after midnight.

But politics is a Sisyphean task. The next morning a political opponent had defaced one of his signs to read: “Re-elect Peter King – and his ego.”

*As the results came in on election night it soon became obvious that Malcolm Turnbull would win Wentworth for the Liberal Party. Turnbull received nearly 42 per cent of the primary vote, Labor’s David Patch almost 27 per cent, the Greens candidate 11 per cent and Peter King just under 18 per cent. In the end, three-quarters of King’s preferences flowed to Turnbull, giving him over 55 per cent of the two-party-preferred vote – and victory – but only after surviving a 2.3 per cent swing to the ALP.*