

Four-time Olympian Zali Steggall launches bid to topple Tony Abbott in Warringah (Published heading is “An Olympian’s Task: to kick out Abbott”)

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World champion athlete-turned-barrister Zali Steggall has called time on Tony Abbott's "destructive and divisive" 25-year career in federal politics, launching a major bid to seize the former prime minister's blue-ribbon Sydney seat of Warringah.

Announcing her decision to contest this year's election as an independent, the four-time Winter Olympian said Mr Abbott was an "aggressive" national figure who had lost touch with the affluent electorate and deserved to be thrown out of Parliament for his role in the demise of Malcolm Turnbull, and views on the environment.

“I am in this to win it,” Ms Steggall told The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age. “I want to beat Tony Abbott, who has been a handbrake on Australian progress on many fronts but particularly effective action on climate change. Barrister and former Winter Olympian Zali Steggall will run against Tony Abbott in Warringah. Credit: Dominic Lorrimer. “I know what I am getting into but I am not a wallflower - I am tough. I learnt from sport that you have to put the work in, and can’t just turn up on the day hoping for the result. I will do the work for this, just as I did the work for sport and law.”

Born and raised in Manly, Ms Steggall won bronze in slalom at the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics and became world champion in 1999. A member of the Australian Sports Anti Doping Agency (ASADA), the 45-year-old now works as a barrister, serves as a governor at the exclusive Queenwood school in Mosman and is also raising a family in the heart of the electorate.

A battle is under way to end Tony Abbott's 25-year political career

Mr Abbott's enemies believe the 2019 election represents the best chance to defeat the polarising former Liberal Party leader, which would also block any push to re-install him as opposition leader should Prime Minister Scott Morrison lose the federal poll expected in May.

Ms Steggall will run with the backing and funding of the dozens of grassroots groups, which have spent months laying the groundwork for a campaign, and is

expected to be inundated with thousands of small donations from across the country. A self-described fiscal conservative who has never voted Labor, Ms Steggall is also expected to be offered major contributions from wealthy Liberal Party figures who want to see the back of Mr Abbott after 25 years as the local MP.

Mr Abbott's share of the primary vote plunged more than 9 percentage points at the 2016 poll. Ms Steggall would need to drag his primary vote from 51.65 per cent to about 45 per cent to have a hope of unseating the political veteran - a swing less than half the size of the thrashing the Liberal Party suffered in the Wentworth byelection.

The barrister wants federal Parliament to do more on climate change and has been consulting former Australian of the Year, Professor Tim Flannery on policy options. She said an emissions trading scheme model had been "overtaken" by private sector investment in renewables but unlike Mr Abbott is not opposed to a mechanism that ties the economy to emissions reductions. "It needs to be a multi-faceted strategy. It's not a quick fix, it won't be a quick solution. It has taken years to get into this mess and will take time to get ourselves out of it."

In a pitch to the electorate's wealthy and older voters, Ms Steggall vowed to oppose Opposition Leader Bill Shorten's tax agenda, including Labor's negative gearing and capital gains tax reforms, and proposed changes to the dividend imputation system the government has dubbed a "retiree tax". "We are talking about a generation that has worked hard all their lives, they have paid their taxes, they have paid their dues, they have put in place their strategies for their retirement and now the goal posts are being moved," she said.

The former prime minister, who has fought and won nine elections in Warringah, faces a Melbourne Cup field of candidates at the election and has previously described independent aspirants as "Labor in disguise". "That actually shows how out of touch he is," Ms Steggall said. "A broad part of my support base is the extremely dissatisfied, long-term, moderate Liberal voters who are looking for sensible financial policies but progressive social attitudes.

"Tony Abbott does not represent me, or the views of most of the people I know in this electorate, and I want to replace him."

Zali Steggall is expected to mount a well-funded campaign against the former prime minister. Credit: Dominic Lorrimer

The campaign will begin Sunday morning at a formal launch at North Harbour Reserve. Anthony Reid, who worked on Kerry Phelps' successful Wentworth byelection campaign, will run Ms Steggall's campaign and Louise Hislop - the former president of Voices for Warringah, one of the main grassroots groups formed to oust Mr Abbott - has been installed as operations manager and co-campaign manager.

"She's the one," Dr Phelps said last week. "I've spent time with Zali and she's an excellent candidate. She grew up locally, has good name recognition, is articulate, progressive and fearless. "I grew up on the northern beaches and I think Warringah has changed, particularly on social issues and there is a space to be filled by a small 'l' liberal candidate from the sensible centre." Two independents have already nominated to contest Warringah - Alice Thompson, a former staffer to Mr Turnbull, and television producer and Indigenous activist Susan Moylan-Coombs.

Tony Abbott at the launch of his ninth campaign for the seat of Warringah in 2016. Labor candidate Dean Harris has been campaigning for months but the party has little hope of ever winning Warringah, which stretches from Mosman in the south to Curl Curl in the north and is the nation's richest electorate based on median weekly household income.

Strategists fear an influx of independent candidates could split the anti-Liberal vote and actually help secure Mr Abbott's 10th term as the local member. Mr Abbott told The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age in September that he wants to stay in Parliament for at least six more years and is open-minded about an "unlikely" return to the leadership if the Liberal Party drafts him.

"Is Warringah likely to be lost by the Liberal Party? I don't think so. But can it be taken for granted? Absolutely not," Mr Abbott said. Ms Steggall said beating Mr Abbott would mark a nationally significant moment in political history but would not be her crowning achievement. "Winning the seat is not enough. I want to do something with the position. I would like to be part of coming up with solutions for climate change, so I can look my children in the eye."