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## It's down to fete as contenders take the chocolate wheel



Maxine McKew, John Howard's rival for the seat of Bennelong, spun a 44 on the chocolate wheel at the St Charles Catholic primary school fete in Gladesville yesterday.

Photo: *Ben Rushton*

Gerard Noonan  
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SMOKE from the kebab stall billowed across Tumbalong Park as a small contingent of federal police, a couple of minders and an older, balding man without a sun hat crashed the Armenian cultural festival at Darling Harbour.

There were surprises all round as the 600- to 700-strong crowd realised they had a celebrity of sorts - the Prime Minister - in their midst.

One grumbled that this was the first time he could remember the Armenian community being visited by the member for Bennelong, who had just been whisked from a humble fete at St Charles Catholic primary school, Gladesville, in a three-limousine entourage.

There he had spun a 44 on the chocolate wheel, a potentially troublesome polling omen for the somewhat grim-faced PM. But his Labor rival for the seat, Maxine McKew spun up the same number an hour later when it was her time to visit the kiddies and their voting parents. The two did not cross paths. Mr Howard refuses even to mention the former ABC journalist and presenter by name.

Armenians are a significant force in Bennelong. The national president of the Armenian National Council, Varant Meguerditchian, said 4000 Bennelong voters with an Armenian background wanted the candidates to recognise the Armenian genocide - a forced deportation and massacre of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey in the early 20th century. Ms McKew has obliged but neither Mr Howard or the Labor leader, Kevin Rudd, has bought into the issue.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics is a little more modest in its listing of 2285 people of Armenian

ancestry in Bennelong. Whichever is the figure, in a tight election, the Armenian vote will count big time.

Mr Howard wasn't exactly mobbed by his bemused Armenian hosts as he gladhanded his way across the park. Most were polite, some were effusive, handing over babies for photos, with Mr Howard looking every inch the grandfather that he has just become.

Mercifully after 15 minutes a minder fetched one of Mr Howard's trademark Akubra hats to perch on his gleaming pate.

In creased pinstripe suit pants and wearing a silverfish-coloured tie, Mr Howard walked stiffly, and the grin looked a little forced. At an impromptu media conference after the 35-minute walk-through, it was gone altogether.

The Prime Minister answered four questions uttering a grim "No" when asked whether he was still considering resigning his beleaguered leadership of the party and the country. One of the media pack suggested there had been rumours he was going to announce his resignation tomorrow. "That's news to me," he retorted before his media minder closed it down.

Hagop Srjararian, 74, declaring himself a big fan of the Prime Minister, dug his Liberal Party membership card out of his wallet. "I always support him, I'm against Labor," Mr Srjararian said. "I was in Russia for 30 years and that's Labor's home. I like the Liberals, the Queen and imperialism."

At one point, Mr Howard ambled past a signpost pointing to famous locations in Armenia, including Mount Ararat - where the biblical tale says Noah landed his ark after a 40-day flood. With the Government lagging a resurgent Labor in the polls, a miracle looked like his best hope.

A good thing, too, that only adults, or at least most of them, can vote. After vigorously shaking hands with 11-year-olds Anita Boyadjian and Robert Geokjian, the two children struggled a little with Mr Howard's political complexion. "He's Labor, right?"

On Saturday Mr Howard was meeting and greeting citizens at Carlingford shopping centre. There he came face to face with members of the controversial Exclusive Brethren sect, who followed him around the centre.

Pity the religion, some of whose members have been accused of funding the Government's re-election campaign, doesn't allow its faithful to vote.

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