

OPINION &gt; Opinion

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John Warhurst

EVERYONE in politics wants friends with spare money at their disposal. They can do you so much good when an election comes around. But you don't want to get them offside.

The combination of money and friends is now a common campaign theme in two Sydney seats, Bennelong and Wentworth. Bennelong is held by Prime Minister John Howard and Wentworth is represented by Environment Minister Malcolm Turnbull.

They are two of those 20 marginal seats that Labor needs to win if Labor leader Kevin Rudd is to triumph. Labor needs a swing of 4.2 per cent to defeat Howard in Bennelong, while Wentworth requires only 2.5 per cent. If the Government manages to hold both of them, Labor will be straining to win enough seats overall.



That's where extra money comes into play. There are few players in politics with cash to splash about at election times. With the exception of the trade union movement, most of those players have made their money in business. As a consequence, the Coalition has come to depend on support rather than opposition from the cashed-up brigade.

But occasionally Labor strikes it lucky. In 1972 and 1983, both Gough Whitlam and Bob Hawke respectively benefited from the support of progressive businessmen dissatisfied with the incumbent Coalition government.

The Exclusive Brethren are friends of Howard and regard him very favourably. The world leader of this small, traditional Christian sect, Bruce Hales, lives in Eastwood and is one of Howard's constituents.

At the last election in 2004, the Exclusive Brethren spent lavishly to support the Government. The Australian Electoral Commission reports that the members of the sect, who eschew voting but have no problem with political lobbying apparently, spent \$370,000. That tally puts it above what just about every other non-party group was able to muster.

The group may get involved again, and Howard needs its support in his own electorate. Money seems not to be an issue for it. It has plenty to spare because its 14,000 Australian members include many successful businessmen.

Howard makes no excuses for continuing to meet with Hales and his Exclusive Brethren colleagues, most recently in his Parliament House office early this month. He defends them merely as a legitimate Christian denomination like any other. His senior colleagues, Treasurer Peter Costello and Health Minister Tony Abbott, also enthusiastically defend the right, even the responsibility, of ministers to meet with such groups as a matter of course. Yet other less amenable Christian leaders have faced difficulties in getting such meetings.

Howard blusters about the status of the Exclusive Brethren and tries to fob off Labor's criticism of the group with a vacuous response. This is despite, or perhaps because of, the well-documented record of its enthusiastic, and often shadowy, support for conservative politics in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. It is not afraid to play dirty politics.

In Wentworth, there is another twist on this theme of friends with money. Turnbull, who is a millionaire himself, has plenty of money for campaigning, and demonstrated this during both his preselection contest with the incumbent Peter King and in the election proper. Yet, so too, apparently does another friend of Howard's, Geoffrey Cousins, a former prime ministerial adviser and presently a Government appointee to the Telstra board. Furthermore, Cousins is threatening to use some of his money against Turnbull because of his objection to the proposed Gunns pulp mill in north-eastern Tasmania.

Cousins placed a full-page anti-Turnbull advertisement in the local free newspaper, and gathered together celebrity friends such as playwright David Williamson and actor Bryan Brown to join him.

Cousins says this is above party politics and, to demonstrate this point, is now also campaigning against the shadow minister for the environment, Peter Garrett, in Kingsford Smith. But this is hardly evidence of even-handedness as Kingsford Smith is a safe Labor seat, held by 8.7 per cent, that Garrett will not lose.

Turnbull's reaction to this development was testy and ill-judged. He accused Cousins of using his money to bully him. Furthermore he questioned his suitability to sit on the Telstra board. That line of invective just won't convince the public when the sitting member is a millionaire many times over and has a reputation for fiery exchanges. Both men have often been described as abrasive.

The pro-pulp mill Labor member for the seat of Lyons, Dick Adams, has also been critical of Cousins. Howard took a remarkably conciliatory stance, given one of his own ministers was being attacked so close to an election. He refused to take sides between, in his words, an excellent minister and an excellent bloke.

The combination of friends with money and close election contests has distorted the judgment of both Howard and Turnbull. They have been thrown off balance in different ways.

Howard's usually good political judgment has deserted him if he has managed to convince himself that the Exclusive Brethren is just another Christian denomination. His judgment is also surprisingly flawed if he chooses not to stand up for one of his own ministers when they are under this sort of pressure.

Turnbull's judgment in this matter will disappoint many of those supporters who, impressed with his personal and professional growth since he entered Parliament in 2004, think he is the best long-term candidate for the Liberal leadership.

Labor needs to win both these seats. One businessman will assist its cause in Wentworth, but in Bennelong another might be just what Howard needs to survive.

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