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The battle between Tony Abbott and Zali Steggall just got closer

Campaign offices are now just doors apart as the Liberals try to fend off the independent incomer

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The electorate of Warringah might be 68 square kilometres but independent candidate Zali Steggall and the Liberal MP Tony Abbott are finding themselves uncomfortably close neighbours as the campaign heats up in the beachside electorate.

Former prime minister Abbott opened his new campaign office on Monday night, just a few doors away from the former Olympian Steggall's office in Brookvale.

Steggall has also rented space in Military road, Cremorne, only to find that her next door neighbour is also the Liberal party.

The windows of 392 military Road, Cremorne, which a spokesman confirmed had been rented by the party as storage space, is plastered in anti-Steggall posters.

The red, white and black posters opposite a major intersection carry small authorisations by the Liberal party and warn that a vote for Steggall is a vote for Shorten. They warn of higher taxes, lower house prices and rising costs due to Labor's policies.



The Liberal Party's storage space on military road with Zali Steggall's office on the right prior to the anticipated Australian federal election. Photograph: Anne Davis/The Guardian

But so far the candidates have avoided coming face to face, except on a debate hosted by Sky.

Abbott was unable to attend a community forum held on Monday night in Manly which was moderated by the Reverend Tim Costello, brother of Abbott's former colleague Peter Costello, who was treasurer under John Howard.

Instead, a range of independents, including Steggall, and Labor and Green candidates, offered their views on foreign aid, refugees and climate change.

Steggall said that if elected she would push the ALP to go further than a 45% cut to emissions by 2030, arguing that while the Labor target was much better than the Coalition's Paris commitment of 26 to 28%, it was still not enough to prevent dangerous levels of warming. She said Australia needed to look aspirationally at a target of 60% by that date.

Labor's Dean Harris said his party was working toward a realistic target and that Labor would aim to depoliticise responses to climate change.

But most of the candidates were in furious agreement that Australia's aid budget was too low and required lifting over time to at least 0.5% of gross national income. The Greens want it lifted to 0.7% which is in line with the United Nations target.

On refugees, Steggall appeared to back a regional processing solution to the problem and argued that Australia should "remain flexible on how many humanitarian refugees it should take".

At his office opening Abbott told the Manly Daily he expected the Steggall campaign and its supporters to spend about \$2m in its bid to unseat him.

During his speech he frequently referred to Steggall as the "fake independent", despite her consistent denial to date that she has any allegiance to the Labor Party or GetUp.

He also held a "Tele Town Hall" using technology that the Liberals are deploying to hold virtual town hall meetings in which voters can ask the candidates questions.

Constituents reported being contacted ahead of time to ask whether they would like to participate and ask Abbott a question.

"It was an eventful night full of spirited conversation on Warringah's future and solutions to our community's most pressing needs," Abbott said on his facebook page.

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