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NATION

## Charles Waterstreet plotting comeback after his 'fall from disgrace'

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Five years since the firestorm of sexual harassment allegations that killed Charles Waterstreet's high-flying legal career and left his reputation in tatters, the one-time king of the courtroom is living in a backpacker hostel plotting his comeback.

The colourful former barrister and inspiration for the ABC TV series *Rake*, has choice words to describe the experience: "I was hung, drawn and quartered, all on murmurs".

The controversy that erupted when a string of former paralegals went public with their stories of his alleged highly sexualised conduct in his chambers has come close to knocking him out cold.

Unable to work as a barrister after the NSW Bar Association stripped him of his law licence, Waterstreet is also unable to publish his writing anywhere except *Penthouse* – "the only place I'm not cancelled" – after the tide of public opinion turned against him.

The 72-year-old is now living on a pension after declaring bankruptcy in 2019.

Waterstreet says a diagnosis of bipolar disorder earlier this year explains his colourful and overly sexualised demeanour that has long made him among the legal fraternity's most well-known and eccentric characters.

Now Waterstreet is battling the bar association in the NSW Civil and Administrative Tribunal in a bid to retain his licence, resurrect his legal career and salvage his

reputation after what he calls his “fall from disgrace”.

Cancelled

When he arrives at cafe Up South Bondi to speak to The Australian, he's flanked by a documentary film crew.

Dressed in a grubby coat, his long hair slicked back and his eyes obscured by dark glasses, he tucks into fruit salad, a chocolate biscuit and black coffee.

“People say I'm Australia's Harvey Weinstein,” he says.

“And sexual harassment they thought was sexual assault, and all this publicity.

“I was living hand-to-mouth. I couldn't sue for defamation. They investigated me for five years and the statute said it needs to be investigated expeditiously.”

Waterstreet's speech is rambling, jumping frequently from one topic to another, and his eyes are alight with manic energy as he tries to explain what it's like to be cancelled.

“If you get cancelled not just in court and your licence punctured it's tough, but if you're cancelled trying to get published it's even tougher,” he says.

“I have a lot of unpublished works and a couple of unfinished novels, and people walked around me in the street for a long while and when they hear my name they crinkle up.

“It's worse for my family because Waterstreet is an unusual name. My sister gets out her credit card at the store and they say, ‘Are you related to the predator?’

“I'm hoping to at least clear my name, everything on Google ... dirt sticks but bat shit is forever.”

Overly flirtatious

The allegations of his former legal assistants were examined over five days of gruelling NCAT hearings in late July, including claims that he showed the women pornography, produced a sex toy during a job interview and asked them to buy lingerie for him as part of their duties.

But Waterstreet says his bipolar diagnoses can account for his openly flirtatious and, by his own admission, inappropriate behaviour.

Though he always knew he suffered from depression and addiction – and has been sober for more than three decades except for a “flirtation” with nangs (nitrous oxide bulbs) – his bipolar diagnosis and ongoing treatment through medication and electroconvulsive therapy now meant he was ready to return to practice.

“I love women. But I can’t talk about my own particular case, I am the first to admit I was overly loquacious, overly talkative and overly sexualising things,” he says.

“I was excited. You come out of court and you’re high like an actor coming off the stage. No wonder they’re all alcoholics; you get off the stage and you’re hyper, so I was very enthusiastic about my life.

“As so much of my life was drunk ... I thought to myself I can’t do alcohol or drugs so I’ll do sex and chocolate. I still do chocolate but I overdosed on sex.”

‘Vehicle for MeToo’

Waterstreet is every bit the counterculture barrister he has portrayed himself to be: a vocal supporter of the arts, an advocate for mental health awareness in the legal profession and an antidote to the stuffiness of the bar. But how he relates to women remains frozen in the 1970s.

When he was pulled up on his conduct – exposed by online publication New Matilda in 2017 that alleged he complained loudly of being snubbed for an invite to a “sex party” and had his assistants organise his dates and pick up Viagra prescriptions – his response was simply that “I didn’t read the room very well”.

“MeToo came, and quite rightly, but sometimes they punish the wrong people,” he says.

“I was used as a vehicle for MeToo by the online rag when the fact is no allegation of any touching ... The institution of the bar is renowned for every barrister marrying his secretary and it's all hushed up.

“I was used for MeToo in Australia and I don't mind criticism, I really don't if it was dealt with expeditiously.”

### Timing and place

Waterstreet is turning over a new leaf in his cluttered, almost filthy, ground-floor room in a Bondi hostel, which is packed wall-to-wall with overflowing boxes of books, newspaper clippings and photo albums.

His barrister's wig – which was bequeathed to him by the late barrister, Labor Party figure and High Court judge Lionel Murphy – sits perched in a desk, framed by a statue of a Greek goddess, skull-shaped vodka bottles and an explosion of general clutter. Copies of his book *Precious Bodily Fluids* line the shelves.

Waterstreet's face lights up when he relives memories of a youthful summer spent in Europe, parties and gallery openings as he flicks through faded photo albums and scrolls through photo albums on his computer.

He pauses as he scrolls past a collection of intimate nudes – presumably of former girlfriends – and at one point he flashes a snap of himself naked from the waist down.

He is now awaiting the second leg of the NCAT proceedings into his suitability to practice as a barrister, which will resume later this year, and has almost finished writing a book about his experience titled *Rake Man*.

What is not lost on Waterstreet is the irony that Richard Roxburgh's portrayal of Rake's self-destructive protagonist Cleaver Greene, who snorted cocaine, slept with prostitutes by night and trounced his opponents in court the next morning, had been embraced as a loveable rascal rather than a degenerate.

He now knows more than anyone the importance of time and place.

“That’s what I grew up with – with stories of drunks doing outrageous things. But now it’s all PC, you can’t talk about it,” he said.

“What we got up to in Rake, luckily we just got in before 2017.”

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