

Address to the National Press Club

13 July 2022

Yama.

I want to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people, and their elders past, present and emerging.

I also acknowledge the Burreberongal of the Darug Nation, from whom I am a proud descendant.

We have much to learn from our first nations peoples, particularly when it comes to questions of sustainability and environmental stewardship.

Real reconciliation lies in leaning into this knowledge and working with our first nations peoples to find solutions to the big challenges we face.

The fact that we have seen year-on-year declines in public trust in government should concern us all.

Just 25 percent of Australians believe the government can be trusted. One in four.

What if there was a way to change that?

In 2019, I worked as a staffer for Tim Storer, the independent senator from South Australia.

During the eighteen months I worked in the Senate, there was only one time I saw it operate in the way I believe those who created Australia's democracy meant it to.

It was during the only conscience vote that happened while I was there; one of only 43 that have taken place since 1950.

Up to that point, the business of the Senate was conducted like many of us have sadly come to expect.

Party positions dictated by a small group of individuals, with everyone else falling into line.

The debates served only as an opportunity to deliver pre-rehearsed statements designed to exact maximum political damage.

I remember asking myself: “What is the point of this? Why have this massive chamber? Why not just send one representative from each party into a small room to vote on the matter?”

Question Time was even worse – a fact that the gallery here doesn't need to be reminded of.

But all that changed during that one conscience vote.

Suddenly, each Senator could make up their own mind, voting in the interest of their community and their own conscience.

I couldn't believe the difference. The place came alive.

Senators from across the political spectrum huddling in corridors to honestly exchange views on the pros and cons of the legislation.

Everyone in deep thought and contemplation, desperate to consult with key community stakeholders.

Low and behold, during the debate, other Senators were actually going into the chamber to hear what their peers had to say.

In that moment, we got a glimpse of how our Parliament would operate if we had a large cross bench of independents, answerable to their communities alone.

It would make for better, more respectful, and respected, politics.

Cathy McGowan, the ‘Godmother’ of the community independents movement, often likes to end her talks with the Margaret Mead quote:

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

On the 21st of May, small groups of thoughtful, committed citizens around this country changed Australia.

A government that spent much of its time fighting against climate action, greater integrity, transparency, and gender equity was thrown out.

On that day, 18 women were added to the parliament, making it the most gender diverse in Australia's history.

Seven new climate ambitious community independents were elected, joining the four already there, making it the biggest federal cross-bench we've ever seen.

Around the country, at least 20,000 people volunteered for community independents in the lead up to the election.

Many of them were engaging in politics for the first time, making it one of the most significant democratic revivals in recent memory.

Real people, real conversations, real democracy.

Today, I'm going to tell the story of that extraordinary result, and the contribution Climate 200 made to it.

But before I do, I want to be crystal clear that Climate 200 was just one cog in the very large wheel that helped the community independents movement achieve what it did.

Climate 200 did not start the movement, nor did we start the campaigns.

We simply worked to level the playing field for existing grass-roots, community efforts, and the genuine community leaders they selected.

History told us how hard it is for community independents to succeed against the party machines.

Unsurprisingly, the victors write the rules. And, the major parties have rigged the game in their favour.

Tax-payer funded communications budgets, access to the names and addresses of every voter, multi-million dollar government-funded advertising campaigns.

And that's just as a start.

Communities around the country who wanted a different type of political representation, and leadership on the big issues facing our country and planet, needed help.

We set out to provide it.

So, how did we get here?

Let me start by contrasting the mood of this election with 2019.

You know the one, Shorten vs Morrison. Shorten ahead in the polls, on track for a certain victory.

What was that election night like for you?

If you're a political junkie, you might have been at home with ABC on one TV, Sky on the other, furiously tabbing through the AEC and Poll Bludger websites on your laptop, all while refreshing your twitter feed and silencing the room any time Antony Green spoke.

My experience that year was quite different.

Work had taken me to Botswana where I was helping indigenous communities apply the experience of our First Nations in reintroducing traditional fire management practices to reduce emissions.

So there I was, in the middle of the baking Kalahari desert atop a four-wheel drive, looking out for lions with one eye, trying to glean the election results over patchy internet with the other.

Despair set in as the “climate election” we’d been promised again failed to materialise.

As I looked out from the top of the four-wheel drive, the drought ridden environment around me was a timely reminder of the urgency of the climate crisis.

Earlier that week, we had seen a bloat of hippos huddled together in the last muddy puddle of water left after the rainy season just didn’t arrive.

The outlook for the animals, as for us, was grim.

We couldn’t afford another three years of government inaction or worse.

In all that gloom, there were two silver linings to that election.

First, Zali Steggall won the seat of Warringah, proving that when a community takes a stand against climate inaction, and backs an incredible local candidate, together they can topple a former Prime Minister in the safest of inner-city seats.

Second, Helen Haines was elected as the independent for Indi, following Cathy McGowan’s retirement.

For the first time in Australian history, a federal seat was successfully passed from one community independent to another.

These victories built on the foundation laid by independents who had come before them, including Andrew Wilkie, Tony Windsor, Rob Oakeshott and Kerryn Phelps.

After the 2019 election, several communities realised the significance of what these independents had achieved, and set out to try and replicate their success.

Veterans from the Indi and Warringah campaigns, including McGowan, Alana Johnson, Kirsty Gold, and Tina Jackson, mentored dozens of communities and helped them find their feet.

Some adopted the “Voices of” model pioneered in Indi.

Others were more energised by what they didn’t want, choosing instead to establish their own versions of “Vote Tony Out”, which had made a strong contribution to Abbott’s demise in Warringah.

In Sydney, the Zali Steggall ‘halo effect’ was becoming apparent, with strong teams emerging in North Sydney, Wentworth, and Mackellar.

“We just want our own Zali” was a common retort.

In February 2021, McGowan held her inaugural national convention for community independents: Getting Elected.

She expected 50 people to attend. She ended up with 300 from 81 electorates.

The enthusiasm, excitement, and energy – even over zoom – were palpable.

It was clear that something exhilarating, and quite incredible, was happening at the community level.

It was interesting for us because climate action and integrity seemed to be some of the most consistent motivators for those involved.

On climate, the Black Summer Bushfires had taken their toll, as had the federal government’s weak response. Cocktails in Hawaii anyone?

On integrity, people had had enough of endless rorts and blatant pork-barrelling and were ready to take matters into their own hands.

Real people were ready to have real conversations in a bid for real democracy.

Following the Convention, people gathered around kitchen tables across the country, and began the process of unearthing authentic, intelligent and passionate local leaders they could put forward as **their** candidates.

Ultimately, these community campaigns mobilised volunteers at a scale rarely seen before.

Two-thousand in the Victorian seat of Kooyong alone.

Together, community volunteers directly engaged a quarter of a million households.

They handed out flyers at supermarkets and train stations.

They knocked on 166 thousand doors, and gave up their evenings to make 63 thousand phone calls to voters.

They braved the cold at polling booths, and, in many electorates, the seas of teal, sky blue, pink and purple on election day were formidable.

And they loved it.

For most, it was their first time engaging in politics.

Nick from Bondi talked about having made more friends in the community volunteering for Allegra Spender than they had in the 16 years they'd been living in the area.

Greg from the Northern Beaches of Sydney spoke about how volunteering for Dr Sophie Scamps had given his life "real purpose" and motivated him to give thousands of hours of his time.

People say Australians are disengaged with politics.

These results were evidence to the contrary.

People are actually highly engaged, they've just been turned off by the party machines, factions, and the toxic negativity, and never felt they had someone to support who truly represented them.

Many factors led to the success of the community independents movement this election – too many to cover here today.

What I'd like to do is outline three capabilities that Climate 200 deployed to contribute to these incredible results.

The first was fundraising.

The major parties are fundraising goliaths.

It is one of the main reasons they have maintained such a stranglehold on Australian democracy for so long.

In 2019 alone, the ALP raised \$126 million, and the LNP \$181 million.

That is a hell of a lot of Bunnings sausage sizzles.

But, of course, that is not how they do it. They prefer \$10,000 a head dinners with the Prime Minister.

The reality is that money is a critical ingredient for running a successful political campaign at the federal level.

The main reason candidates need money is to ensure voters actually know who they are.

There are around a hundred thousand voters in each electorate.

Even with strong networks of supporters, communicating their message to enough people without advertising is almost impossible.

The campaigns knew that, and were working hard to raise money from their own communities.

We were clear that we were never going to be the sole funder of any campaign.

Indeed, we decided to start by limiting our donations to matching what had already been raised locally, by the campaigns themselves.

The fundraising theory was the same as for 2019, when Climate 200 had a successful test run.

The fundamental reason we weren't seeing progress on community priorities like climate, integrity and gender equity was not due to a lack of good ideas or advocacy – we had some of the best minds in the country doing that work.

The problem was the decision-makers that advocacy and ideas were being presented to.

Simon Holmes a Court had hypothesised that striking at the root of the problem required replacing those people.

And so, Climate 200 was his attempt to leverage philanthropy into politics.

The '200' was meant to represent 200 donors.

So when we started working to bring the organisation out of hibernation in 2021, one question we had was: should we change the name?

Could we find 200 people willing to contribute? It seemed like a lot. Especially when 27 had contributed to the 2019 effort.

We felt people were turned off by politics, and were generally cautious about sticking their necks out.

To complicate matters, not a single candidate had yet been nominated by their communities.

Fortunately, we had good examples of the types of candidates we hoped would emerge in the likes of Zali Steggall, Helen Haines, Rebekha Sharkie, Andrew Wilkie, and Kerryn Phelps.

But would that be enough?

No one could come up with a better name, so we decided to charge on and see how we went.

We started banging the can in mid 2021.

Safe to say it went better than any of us expected.

By October, we had raised \$2 million from over 2,000 donors.

Gone was the anxiety around being able to find the two hundred!

Key to our success was a series of matching challenges where larger donors only agreed to donate a certain sum if the public matched their pledge - dollar for dollar.

The larger donors loved it because they could see their contributions bringing in others.

The smaller donors loved it because they could see their donations being doubled. It was a win-win.

By election day, we had raised \$13 million from 11,200 donors.

Now the question was whether to rebrand as Climate 11,200. Doesn't exactly have the same ring to it.

Our donors come from all walks of life.

They include entrepreneurs, farmers, tradespeople, teachers, pensioners, and health care workers.

One-third of our donors are from rural and regional Australia. Collectively, they hail from every single electorate in the country.

All of them hope for a better future for the planet and a more civilised politics.

Wendy Chalenor was one. The former primary school teacher grew up in the wheat belt of WA and had voted for the National and Liberal Parties her whole life.

Now, she was fed-up with the LNP dragging its feet on climate, and wanted to do something about it.

After the election, the most consistent feedback we got from donors was: “best money I’ve ever spent.”

Thanks to their support, we were able to donate to 23 values-aligned community independents.

And what an incredible cohort of true community leaders they were.

The quality of the candidates was a huge factor in the success of these campaigns.

None of them put their hand up because they wanted a promotion or to be Prime Minister.

They didn’t have to do this to be successful. They were already successful.

They stood because they were fed up with decades of inaction on the things the community cared about.

I won’t name them all, but there are a few I’ll single out.

The first to be selected and announced was Kylea Tink in North Sydney.

A Liberal-voting former charity executive, and a formidable advocate with a track record of delivering the seemingly impossible.

As the CEO of the McGrath Foundation, she had played a central role in establishing the Pink Test Match.

Any woman who could convince a bunch of the blokiest blokes on Channel 9 Sports to turn a test match pink was a force to be reckoned with.

Next came Allegra Spender, a management consultant and corporate executive, and daughter of a former Liberal MP and the iconic fashion designer, Carla Zampatti.

As the Chair of the Sydney Renewable Power Company, she had first hand experience with the economic opportunities that decarbonisation presents.

For someone of that calibre and Liberal Party pedigree to be stepping up as the community independent for Wentworth was saying something.

These were people who, in a different era, would have joined the Liberal Party.

As I would hear Kylea Tink say many times during the campaign, she didn't feel like **she** had left the Liberal Party. The Liberal Party had left her.

Next came Zoe Daniel in Goldstein.

The journalist and former foreign correspondent who had reported from war zones and covered some of the world's most significant events.

Her cut through ability was phenomenal, as her launch video, which received 300 thousand organic views, testified.

After that, the flood gates opened.

In Mackellar on Sydney's northern beaches, where I grew up, they selected Dr Sophie Scamps.

A local GP, community organiser, and Olympic qualifying athlete.

The community in Kooyong selected Dr Monique Ryan, the head of neurology at the Melbourne Children's Hospital.

In WA, Kate Chaney, another former management consultant and business strategist was put forward.

And in the ACT, the community nominated David Pocock, the former captain of the Australian rugby team and long time conservationist and community leader.

He was to take on an altogether different challenge: contesting one of just two ACT Senate seats.

True community leaders of incredible quality.

The second key capability that Climate 200 deployed was sophisticated and high quality communications content.

One thing we realised very early on was that if voters were educated about who the candidates were and what they stood for, they wanted to vote for them.

So we set out to do our bit bringing these outstanding community leaders to the voters' attention.

Our talented team of creators made 16 podcast episodes, 87 videos, and 13 hundred social media ads to supplement the efforts of the campaigns themselves.

The messages and stories we produced amplified the voices of candidates, their volunteers, their voters and social media influencers.

It was this last cohort – influencers – that proved decisive in engaging a hard-to-reach, but critical voter segment: young people.

2022 was the first election where Millennial and Gen Z voters outnumbered Baby Boomers.

The 'It Takes Three' social media campaign harnessed youth-focussed cultural influencers as trusted messengers to spread a "vote independent for climate" message.

The campaign was promoted by a series of high-profile Australians, including the band Lime Cordiale, who recorded a hilarious launch video.

In the end, the campaign reached an audience of around 2 million people.

I want to acknowledge every creator and cultural influencer who got behind these candidates: your efforts were decisive in spreading the message beyond the press pack, into the newsfeeds and timelines of young Australians.

The third key capability that Climate 200 provided was analytics.

We wanted to be data-driven in our decision-making, so a robust polling program was always going to be central.

It would give us the confidence to make hard decisions, and offer campaigns the information they needed to run effective and efficient races.

We consulted a US-based polling expert on the design of the program, and engaged Redbridge and Community Engagement to roll it out.

By July 2021, we had scraped together enough money to do our first round of polling.

We picked three electorates to start with where we knew strong community campaigns were building: Mackellar, Wentworth, and North Sydney.

From what we had heard, Zali Steggall's brand was strong in those seats, so instead of just asking about a generic independent, we asked specifically about how people would vote if the independent was a candidate "like Zali Steggall".

The results blew us away.

In North Sydney, the vote for a generic independent was 16 percent.

That vote shot up to 28 percent when it was an independent "like Zali Steggall", which could put a candidate like that in a winning position.

The other electorates had similar results.

But, as one sceptical donor said to me at the time, "Zali Steggalls don't grow on trees, mate. She's a bloody barrister and a four time Olympian!"

It was a fair point. But we knew there were amazing people in these seats. The community just needed to find them.

Another thing we learned was that climate change was a **major** issue for voters.

It was the **most** important for voters in North Sydney and Wentworth. And it was second in Mackellar.

When we did our next round of polling in Goldstein and Kooyong in Victoria, this time using Helen Haines as the reference point, the results were even more compelling.

We continued the program, cycling through electorates where the community was most active and the underlying fundamentals were strongest.

By mid December, most of the candidates had been announced by their communities and their campaigns were in full swing.

Their primary numbers were creeping up from low bases of around 10 percent.

But by March, we were starting to get worried.

Most of the candidate's primaries still sat in the mid-teens, and they would be very unlikely to win from there.

But when the election was called in April, that all changed.

Suddenly people woke up to the fact they were going to the ballot box in a few weeks and started paying closer attention to their options.

The candidate's commitments to do better on a raft of issues, including climate and integrity, were resonating strongly with voters.

And the extensive grass-roots community organising efforts were also yielding fruit.

The independent primary vote across the board went through the roof.

But it wasn't JUST their policy platforms that voters were responding to. It was also the WAY they were running their campaigns.

Relentlessly positive, inclusive, volunteer-driven, grass-roots community efforts.

This was summed up for me by Kate Chaney's encounter with two young girls in the days after the election.

The girls had asked their mother to drive them to Chaney's campaign office in search of a poster.

Chaney, of course, obliged and asked why they wanted a poster of her given the election was over.

Their response: "you were the only one who wasn't mean to the others".

By the time we did our last round of polling in mid May, we were relatively confident that IF the trend we had seen emerge over the previous months held (and that was a big 'if'), then seven candidates we had supported would likely win.

The fact that climate change and integrity consistently remained in the top three issues in those seats gave us further confidence.

And so it was.

Chaney, Daniel, Ryan, Scamps, Spender, Tink, and Pocock all won.

And it wasn't just those seven that made progress.

Huge in-roads were achieved by other pro-climate community independents we supported, like Nicolette Boele in Bradfield on Sydney's north shore.

And it wasn't just a city phenomenon either. In the National Party seat of Cowper on the NSW North Coast, Caz Heise took it to within 2.3 percent.

In the rural seats of Calare in NSW and Wannon in Victoria, Kate Hook and Alex Dyson made it into the final two, delivering massive blows to the National and Liberal Party primaries.

So... rigorous data, persuasive content and generous donors were three key contributions that Climate 200 brought to the community independents movement.

It'd be remiss of me to leave this stage without thanking some of the people who enabled us to make this contribution.

First, to our 11,200 donors.

Thank you for believing in our mission, and trusting us to deploy your contributions for maximum impact.

None of what we did would have been possible without your generous support.

To our wise and experienced Advisory Council of John Hewson, Meg Lees, Barry Jones, Kerryn Phelps, Tony Windsor, Rob Oakeshott, Kiera Peacock, Anna Josephson, and Damien Hodgkinson.

You gave us the confidence to put our heads above the parapet and establish clarity of vision and purpose amongst the noise of an election campaign.

To our entrepreneurial, adaptable, resilient, and incredibly hard working staff.

Thank you for believing in this project, for leaving secure jobs to help us build a plane while we were flying it, and for delivering the seemingly impossible day in day out.

Special shout out to our management team, Susie Bayes, Nina O'Connor, Claire Snyder, Alex Rantino, and Mike Clay.

And to our Convenor, Simon, for having the vision and wisdom to dream this project into existence, the confidence in the team to deliver, and the grit, resilience, and temperament to weather the storms with humility and grace.

The major parties learned some **tough lessons** this election.

No longer can they consider a seat as “safe” and take it for granted.

No longer can MPs just vote as their party tells them to, without thought as to what their communities actually want.

The two-party system turned on its head.

No longer can we assume the main choice for voters will be between the ALP and LNP.

This election, nearly a third of us didn't vote for the major parties.

In 1951... just 2% of voters did so.

The party stranglehold on Australian politics **has been shattered**.

A well-organised community with the right support can take on the party machines and win. Even against former and would-be future Prime Ministers.

This result was a launch pad, not a landing zone.

Now the real work begins.

The uncomfortable truth is that the world is still on track for catastrophic levels of warming.

Climate 200's vision is for every government in Australia to adopt a science-based response to the climate crisis.

We're still miles away from that.

Neither major party's 2030 targets are consistent with keeping warming to safe levels.

The LNP's target is consistent with 3 degrees.

The ALP's consistent with 2.

Even at 2 degrees, the Great Barrier Reef will be gone.

An irreplaceable asset that supports more livelihoods than the coal industry: 64 thousand jobs and a 6.4 billion dollar benefit to the economy ... all gone.

But that's just the start. As University of Melbourne research has found, 2 degrees would cost Australia's economy close to \$600 billion by 2030 and nearly \$800 billion by 2050.

The recent floods in Northwest Sydney are just the latest of what are becoming scarily regular reminders that the climate crisis is **not** going away.

And, as the insufficiency of our governments' efforts to address the problem becomes clearer, the calls to take stronger action will grow louder.

Fortunately, tackling the climate crisis comes with an unparalleled economic opportunity for our country...

We're perfectly positioned to reap the benefits, both financial and environmental, as the world races to decarbonise.

We've lost a decade to inaction. We can't afford to lose another.

An enduring crossbench of centrist, pro-climate independents can equip our parliament with the will and the vision it needs to tackle the difficult issues we face.

Voters desperately want a new way of doing politics. The way forward is clear.

Enduring changes to the make-up of our parliaments will have far-reaching implications and benefits for the climate and beyond.

Since the election, there has been a paradigm shift in our parliamentary system.

We are moving towards a system where conflict and chaos will be replaced with community, compromise and conversation as the foundations of governing.

My message to Australians is simple: **lean in**.

If you're watching this from home wondering if you should get involved, or start your own independent community group, the answer is **yes**.

It will be one of the most satisfying things you ever do.

This is a movement of first-timers.

First time donors, candidates, door knockers and letterbox droppers.

It's a movement of professional beginners.

For too long Australian politics has been the domain of political staffers, faceless men and factional warlords, who rely on people being disengaged with politics.

Change is beckoning.

Australians want real people, real conversations, real democracy.

Winning an election is hard work, and the key is people power.

To sustain and grow this movement it needs more.

More great candidates from a diversity of backgrounds.

More campaigners and volunteers.

Climate 200 needs more donors.

We need more gutsy, courageous people to continue streaming in, from all walks of life.

This is just the beginning. The movement belongs to every Australian – people just like you.

To paraphrase Margaret Mead's quote from the start of this speech:

Never doubt that small groups of thoughtful, committed volunteers, community leaders, and donors can change Australian politics; indeed, it is the only thing that ever will.

And they're just getting started.

Thank you.