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### **Independent's movement: the candidates, the government response and the state of play**

AFTER THE LAST election I thought, "I'm gunna give up, Australia decided our climate change election so now I'll have a life". [What made me have another go was the bushfires.](#)

And what I found is that the bushfires saw many people begin the 'Voices for' thing. It wasn't, "Okay, May 2019 elections are over, we're gunna go for broke"; it was after the bushfires that people thought, "Right, we're gunna have a go"; and then came COVID, when so many professional people, mostly women, couldn't do their jobs or had to do their jobs at home. That's when they started Voices.

Then came luck. You might remember that last year Scott Morrison had an election budget and he was gunna go to an election in September. There wasn't one #IndependentsDay independent named then. Then came Delta.

Then he wanted to go late last year, but he couldn't because of Omicron.

As a result, we've seen seven blue-ribbon seat independent candidates on the ground spend months building their profiles with amazing community work. So if there is a God who doesn't want to give Morrison another miracle, maybe this time she's giving us a chance.

Scott Morrison will not campaign in Wentworth, Sydney's most marginal Liberal seat, or, I'll wager, in any other blue-ribbon seat under challenge from Independents. Dave Sharma chose Julie Bishop to launch his campaign for Wentworth on March 27. She'd retired last election after a humiliatingly low vote as the sole moderate to stand for leadership when Malcom Turnbull was defenestrated. The few remaining moderates, many of whom departed at the last election, threw their votes behind Morrison to ensure Peter Dutton, leader of the hard right, did not become Prime Minister. That vote marked the end of influence of a once powerful liberalism force – economically dry, socially progressive, environmentally green – in what was once a broad church of liberal and conservative philosophical strands.

Sharma and other moderates in blue-ribbon seats [rebranded as a 'Modern Liberals'](#) last election to distance themselves from the reality of a party now illiberal, populist, socially conservative and comprehensively captured by the fossil fuel lobby. This time, having proved 'Modern Liberals' powerless to effect serious climate change policy, get a federal integrity commission, exercise fiscal discipline or devise sensible, long term future planning and reform, Sharma omits the word 'Liberal' altogether, copies his independent opponent's campaign colour and markets himself as Wentworth's 'local candidate'.

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There are eight blue-ribbon Liberal seats in play this election, including Zali Steggall's seat, all among the top ten wealthiest in Australia, all with a significant proportion of disenfranchised progressive liberal voters. All but one are held by Liberal Party men. All their challengers are women who are former liberal voters or swinging voters. All are successful in business, consulting (business and nonprofit), medicine or journalism, and would once have been welcomed as star Liberal Party candidates.

Most importantly, all were reluctant candidates who chose, after long discussion with friends and community recruiters, to upend their lives due to a very old fashioned concept: duty. They are uninterested in higher political office or in lobbying or government jobs after politics.

I know this is very idealistic, but I'd like to read quotes from interviews I've done with two candidates, both of whom I think would be priceless assets to parliament and who are the most symbolically powerful candidates in terms of the proposition that the Liberal Party is no longer liberal. They are third-generation establishment blue bloods,

Allegra Spender stands in Wentworth, ground zero in the #IndependentsDay movement, which I see as a unique experiment – a split from the Liberal Party without forming another party – and Kate Chaney stands in Curtin. Their grandfathers were ministers in the government of the Liberal party's founder Sir Robert Menzies. Spender's father and Chaney's uncle were ministers in the Fraser Government. Allegra's mother, Carla Zampatti, was an iconic liberal fashion designer. Chaney's father is chairman of Wesfarmers.

Spender and Chaney both say the Liberal Party has left them. Both are highly educated, successful, have young children and had to be convinced to stand.

[Allegra Spender:](#)

It was a very hard decision to say yes. I had a job I absolutely adored, I have a young family. I've been barely on social media for the last 10 years (and) I had an Italian passport. People said to me in the community it's really important. We don't have infinite time to just hope that the Coalition is going to sort themselves out on climate, hope the parliament is going to sort themselves out on integrity. (I said) 'Look, you know, just find the best person'. And they kept saying, 'Sorry, we think that's still you'. And that was why I decided to do it, because I thought, 'This is not the path that I was planning or choosing, but at the same time I think it is really, really, really important'. And so when something is really important I just can't stand by and say, 'Sorry, good luck but I'm not willing to do that personally'.

[Allegra Spender](#)

I was the first person to [interview Kate Chaney](#) after she announced, and like Allegra I can't tell you how impressed I was. They are *noblesse oblige* liberals. Kate Chaney set up the reconciliation and sustainability policies at Wesfarmers,

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was on the board of Lifeline and she is now Director Innovation and Strategy at Anglicare WA. When I asked Allegra whether she was too privileged to understand regular Australians, she said her mum was a child immigrant who made her work in her business every school holiday and told her “You’ve got to do it for yourself”. She went to Kenya for a year helping people create small businesses in rural areas and has brought big business together to mentor students in disadvantaged schools.

[Chaney:](#)

I’m running because I think we have lost community, integrity and vision in federal politics. There are probably 20 reasons why you wouldn’t do this, and really only one reason that you would, and that’s because it matters. It’s just got to be done. The Liberal Party is about power without purpose now. What they’re good at is the politics – the policies are a whole lot less interesting or important. So it’s ‘get in power and stay in power’ rather than actually using that power to achieve anything.”

[Chaney](#)

Now imagine if Allegra, Kate, Zoe Daniel, Monique Ryan, Kylea Tink, Sophie Scamps and Nicolette Boele joined Zali Steggall in our parliament. Imagine the revolution. These women want to bring fresh clean air into our parliament unencumbered by party-club rules and rituals to help clean up politics, model civility, restore trust in our democracy and collaborate with MPs across politics to pass laws for our long-term prosperity – for future building, as Kate Chaney puts it. They want to serve their constituents and the nation.

If the wealthiest seats in the country can do something for the country, wouldn’t that be nice!

There are comfortable majorities in our parliament and in those seats to enact a serious climate change plan, a strong federal integrity commission, and improve the lives of women. Parliament is stuck because the dominant factions in the Liberal and National parties won’t let it happen.

Malcolm Turnbull’s immediate retirement after he lost the leadership saw pop-up celebrity candidate Kerryn Phelps win the Wentworth by-election with an 18.96% swing. Former Liberal Party leader and MP for Wentworth Dr John Hewson – who took a solid climate change policy to the 1993 election then watched John Howard and Tony Abbott destroy market based frameworks for transition and Turnbull twice destroyed for trying to do so – was her climate change adviser. She also advocated a strong federal integrity commission and a compassionate policy for refugees detained indefinitely offshore.

Sharma’s two-pronged attack: Phelps was a Labor front, and a Phelps win would see an unstable and chaotic minority government. Sharma’s team begged Turnbull to endorse him; he refused, spending the campaign overseas. He said [after Sharma’s launch](#) that it was silly to say that Allegra was a Labor-Green front, many liberals thought Morrison “does not represent their values” and that he’d spend this election campaign overseas too. He’s not going to endorse Sharma,

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and I'd be willing to bet that if Allegra's not quite there and he thinks he can get her over the line [he will resign from the Liberal Party and endorse her](#).

Phelps coined the term "the power of balance" to emphasise the constructive role centrist independents could play in parliament, and built a majority in the House and the Senate to pass the Medivac legislation against the government's will.

Across the harbour, Louise Hislop, founder of Voices for Warringah, tweeted on by-election election night, "Look, we don't want to get too cocky over this side of the harbour, but srsly, if you refuse to listen to the voices of the people, especially in regard to climate change, you will be punished. Wentworth one day, Warringah the next."

Zali Steggall took the plunge assured of a huge team of community volunteers and serious funding and easily won Warringah with an 18.3% swing against Tony Abbott. And Phelps proved her by-election swing was not just a protest vote when she held onto 16.4% of her by-election swing, making Wentworth the Liberal's most marginal Sydney seat.

Labor's post-election review included [a startling finding](#): "Higher-income urban Australians concerned about climate change swung to Labor, despite the effect Labor's tax policies on negative gearing and franking credits might have had on them."

What happened in the other wealthy blue-ribbon seats without a well-funded, volunteer-rich, strong independent liberal candidate to give them choice? On Sydney's North Shore, Bradfield recorded a 4.5% swing to Labor, North Sydney 4.3% and Mackellar 2.5%. In Melbourne Goldstein swung 4.9% to Labor and Kooyong 7.1% to the Greens; in Perth Curtin swung 6.4% to Labor.

Zali's win and Kerryn's close loss saw 'Voices for' groups in all these seats mentored by Zali's team and 'community independents', led by Cathy McGowan, who beat Sophie Mirabella in the safe Victorian regional seat of Indi in 2013, increased her majority in 2016, and helped deliver Indi to another independent, Helen Haines, a first ever achievement in Australia.

The 'Voice for' model tries to encourage voters to identify themselves with their seat, to form a community based on the seat they live in. The ones that worked have a core group of liberal and left wing voters. They go out and have 'Kitchen Table Conversations' with all sorts of people which are about listening – what are your big issues, what do you like about the electorate, what do you think needs to be done – and you do a report of the main issues, the common ground. By then a lot more people join the group. Cathy started the Community Independents forum in February last year, where she brought the groups together to start networking and training for campaigns. She pointed out that you won't get the right candidate to change her life and jump off a cliff unless she knows she'll have lots of volunteers and money. Then in August Simon Holmes à Court went public with his Climate200 funding vehicle.

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If you want to get lifelong Liberal voters to say, 'I'll try something else' there's got to be a split in the establishment, right? The son of Australia's first billionaire had joined Josh Frydenberg's exclusive donors club called Kooyong200. In 2018, he wrote a piece opposing the government extending the life of a coal-fired power station. Josh immediately expelled him. Now I'm not in 1% circles, but I assume that 1 percenters don't do that to other 1 percenters. Simon mirrored Kooyong200 with his own private donors club, Climate200, which privately funded climate change independents last election. Last August, he went public and nuclear, with wealthy businesspeople and philanthropists matching small donors with donations of \$100,000 even \$500,000. He helps #IndependentsDay candidates by matching local fundraising and providing strategic support. I think Climate200 got a few women over the line.

At first I thought we could get one more to join Zali, Helen Haines in Indi and Rebecca Sharkie in Mayo. Now I think we could get three – with Allegra, Zoe and Kate my favourites so far.

We've all seen the NSW Liberal Party fall apart, but I keep going back to what Malcolm said to me last year – apart from NSW and SA, every branch has gone hard right. There's been an influx of fundamentalist Christians, and there's a very conservative, old base. It's been reported that several Liberal members in NSW want the government to lose – they want Labor to win so the Liberals can sort themselves out.

These are seats where the party raises money to spend in marginal seats. Now they need big money to defend them. Allegra has 600 volunteers. Kylea has 765, Sophie has 800, Monique has 12450 and Zoe has 1100. I'm not talking about people on the mailing list – there's many more – I'm talking about people who are in T-shirts as walking billboards, handing out fliers, door knocking, holding their own local events.

Here's a recent Sophie Scamps day. A photoshoot in the surf with a local former world surfing champion. She meets a Tibetan leader – there's a big Tibetan community in Mackellar. She attends a fundraising lunch – 100 people at \$100 a pop. The hostess donates her home for the function. Another supporter donates the food. A well known local band plays for free. The hostess sings a campaign song to the tune of 'April Sun in Cuba'. Some supporters bring items for auction.

Everything is about social media now, right? Imagine if your neighbour says "I'm going to vote for Sophie, I've met her, she's good. I'm going to have a cocktail party at my place, how about you and the rest of the street come and I'll ask Sophie to come along." Face-to-face endorsements are so much more powerful. They create a vibe.

And the focus is on POLICY! First the Voices groups, now the candidates hold live and online forums on current issues and seek local input into policy, being developed with supporters. Civil society groups the Australian Democracy Network, the Centre for Public Integrity and the Australia Institute are heavily involved in forums and policy formulation. Scamps, a local GP, has released a health policy and yesterday a comprehensive integrity policy. Spender is working on a climate change transition plan. Daniel has held aged care meetings to hear first hand the problems her constituents face.

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So how is the Liberal Party going to beat these women?

First you have to understand, as Turnbull and Kevin Rudd attest, that there is an attack dog element of the Murdoch media that is part of the government. We've already had a page 1 story in the *Australian* where they trawled through the tweets of Allegra supporter Blair Palese, found she'd retweeted something about a boycott of the Sydney festival, and used it to falsely imply that Allegra is anti Jewish in a seat with a large Jewish community. As Blair [wrote in the Guardian](#), she actually attended the festival; she told me the reporter door-knocked her for comment. The 'story' was all over Sky, all over 2GB, Dave Sharma jumped on it.

This morning, they published a story saying that Helen Haines and Zali voted with Labor most of the time in parliament, a claim already spread by a Liberal in Indi. But if you take out their stance to oppose gag motions – they think debate should be allowed in Parliament – it's under 50%.

Peta Credlin recently did a 'documentary' on the Labor election which alleged that the independents would preference Labor, a claim repeated in Goldstein. In fact none of the independents will recommend preferences.

One of the candidates said to me that if you're a lifelong liberal voter crossing the bridge is like the five stages of grief. In these highly educated seats voters are worried about their children due to climate change, they realise the system is corrupt, the government has no reform agenda and has expunged fiscal discipline. Their ears are open to change. So the Liberal Party and Murdoch media are trying to say Climate200 is the new GetUp! Labor is running dead in these seats – of course they are, these seats are un-winnable for Labor.

Let's look at the mathematical imperative for an independent to win a safe Liberal seat. The fundamental task is to attract enough Liberal voters to bring the sitting MP below 45 percent of the primary vote.

The independent must finish second, because if she polls below Labor or the Greens, her preferences will push the sitting MP above 50 percent by virtue of his former voters preferencing him.

Therefore the Independent must attract a significant proportion of first preference votes from Labor and Greens voters. And to do that, Labor or Greens voters must preference the independent, not each other. In addition, some Labor or Greens voters must give their first preference to the independent, and that requires education on strategic voting.

In other words, a successful independent campaign in a safe seat requires progressive blue voters to take a chance on an liberal independent who reflects their values and has the power to insist on them in parliament, and progressive labor and green voters to accept that the independent will often not agree with them on economic policy.

So the independent CANNOT preference. Why? Kerryn, when announcing her candidacy at the by-election, said that if people wanted to protest Turnbull's treatment they should put the Liberal last, the left cheers and donates and she realises she's lost the election. The Liberal Party says she's a Labor front, so she announces she'll preference the Liberals

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above Labor. Phillip Adams and Mike Carlton say on Twitter they'll put Kerryn last and left wing donors ask for their money back. She's gone.

I spent 7 days a week 15 hours a day trying to convince the left to be sensible and blocking people who couldn't see sense. Simon did the same, as did a Green from the inner west, a Labor guy from Canberra, a liberal ophthalmologist in Wentworth and my man in Indi. It was a full court press on strategic voting. You would not believe how many people [don't know how preferential voting works](#). The local Greens preferenced Labor because Kerryn was preferencing the Liberal. On the Wednesday before the by-election Bob Brown tweeted a plea for Greens voters to ignore the ticket and preference Kerryn above Labor, and Greens leader Richard di Natale did the same on Thursday. On election night Kerryn was declared the winner within an hour after former liberal voters brought Sharma way below 50 percent and the Labor and Greens vote collapsed.

At the election, with the polls predicting a Labor win, pundits predicted an easy Sharma win now Liberal voters had made their protest against Turnbull's defeat. But she kept more than 16% of her swing and Zali won with more than an 18% swing.

In my interview with Malcolm last August he warned that it's all very well to say independents can win blue-ribbon seats against toxic, unrepresentative sitting MPs like Abbott and Mirabella, but it's a much higher mountain to climb against inoffensive Liberal MPs. But that's what David Sharma is.

Now you've got to get a significant minority of liberal voters to say, "Okay, Trent Zimmerman is a very nice guy in North Sydney, but he can't represent our values because the Liberal Party won't let him."

Are they prepared to make that jump? I say, and obviously I'm extremely idealistic, that the community these independents have developed across their electorates – they've got people in hubs in every suburb walking the streets, meeting in cafes and bars talking to people – mean it can be done. For the Liberals to say that Allegra and Kate and Kylea and Sophie are Labor fronts is a complete insult. The fact is that there is enormous common ground between true liberals, Labor and Greens. There's not much common ground on economics, but there is common ground on climate and the need to clean up politics. There is common ground on letting refugees out of detention, supporting the Uluru Statement and defending the ABC.

There is one reason why the government let the refugees out of the Park Hotel today and finally agreed to the New Zealand offer of resettlement – #IndependentsDay pressure. There is one reason why Morrison blocked an exploration licence in the waters off the North Shore – #IndependentsDay pressure. Why did he finally agree to net zero by 2050? #IndependentsDay pressure.

If we can just get the community to go with the common ground and prepped on strategic voting this is doable, despite concerted Liberal Party attacks.

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The trickiest issue for the candidates is one the Liberals are pushing very hard – what will you do if there's a hung parliament? In theory it is impossible for the liberal independents to say either way. If they say they'll support the government, Labor voters will desert them, if they say they'd support Labor there goes the liberal vote.

But how can they say they'd support a Coalition government when it can't possibly agree to serious action of climate change because it would split the party and the Coalition. Allegra, in the interview she did with me, suggested she could grant confidence and supply to a minority Coalition government, but work across parliament to enact a federal ICAC and serious climate change action.

It is axiomatic in my view that on this fundamental question the electorate must decide, given that Independents pledge to be the voice of their electorate and they're representing formerly blue-ribbon Liberals seats. I reckon an #IndependentsDay MP should say that they would go back to the electorate, put the options on the table, and ask constituents to decide. They could hold town halls with representative groups or maybe commission a poll,

I honestly think that given Coalition intransigence on climate change, voters in one or more #IndependentsDay seats might want their MP to give confidence and supply to Labor on condition parliament enact serious climate change action and a comprehensive honest politics plan, then sit on the crossbench to keep Labor honest and vote down bills their electorates oppose.

I believe there is a strong possibility that wealthy seats could give this country and our faltering democracy a gift that would reinvigorate our democracy, and I pray that they do.

To end, as you know there are several #IndependentsDay candidates in regional seats. At present there is only one in play, Rob Priestly in the open Nats seat of Nicholls next to Indi, who has lots of money – nothing from Climate200 – and a big volunteer army.

It's a net negative to accept Climate200 money in safe Coalition regional and rural seats – the old city/country divide and distrust of wealthy city elites thing. But these seats are getting, in some for the first time, a robust conversation about politics. They are bringing people together across the political spectrum to find common ground and identify as a seat community. It's very difficult – not much money, three or four centres of population, a huge geographic area, but candidates and the volunteers who support them are developing the skills to be competitive next time. Participatory democracy in the federal sphere is a wonderful thing.

**Margo Kingston**

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