

‘If not now, when? If not us, who?’ The teals’ no-nonsense blow to the two-party system

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Surpassing expectations, the success of the teal independents at the 2022 federal election marked a turning point in Australian democracy, long dominated by the two major parties. The ‘teal independents’ is the name given to community independents who had received support from the Climate 200 group and ran on a platform of climate action, gender equity, and democratic integrity. Most were professional, ‘no-nonsense’ women with successful careers, and their risky switch to politics spoke to their narrative of the urgency on these issues. This article considers the political and social context that led to the teals’ success and their likely impact on Australian politics. The Coalition’s conservative policies left many moderate voters unrepresented, creating a political space for the teal candidates. Now, six historically Liberal electorates are represented by teal independents, and the movement is emboldened. Although the teals do not hold the balance of power in the 47th parliament, they might nevertheless influence policy and the culture of parliament. They pose an ongoing electoral threat to both major parties.

KEY WORDS: teal independents; community-backed independents; Climate 200; two-party system; moderate liberals; professional women.

Surpassing expectations, the success of the teal independents at the 2022 federal election marked a turning point in Australian elections, long dominated by the two major parties. The Coalition, led by Prime Minister Scott Morrison, experienced its largest post-war defeat. The Labor Party, despite being able to form a majority government, also saw a decline in its primary vote. While the Labor Party gained a small majority, the new teal MPs sit alongside other independents and minor parties to produce the largest crossbench in the House of Representatives since 1910. Six teal independents were elected to the House of Representatives; four independents returned to the House with ‘teal’ support; and one teal independent was elected to the Senate. A further three formerly safe Liberal seats challenged by teal candidates are now marginal. It was a dramatic outcome after nine years of conservative government, and the community campaigns in teal seats have re-energised the relationship between citizens and their elected representative.

The election of the six teal MPs in metropolitan seats in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth proved particularly catastrophic for the Liberal Party. Several of these seats were regarded the ‘jewels in the crown’ for the Liberals, and had been held by the Party since they were established. The MPs holding these seats might have been entitled to believe that their political careers would be long, and that they were future leaders of the Party, if not the country. The implications of the 2022 election and the success of the teal candidates for the Liberal Party, Australian politics and the two-party system

are potentially far-reaching, well beyond the parameters of the 47th Parliament.

The label ‘teal independent’ refers to community independents whose campaign for election received the support of the group Climate 200, a donor network. To receive this support, the candidates had to demonstrate that they had genuine community support and a commitment to three values: action on climate, integrity in politics, and gender equity. These three issues were key weaknesses for the Coalition government, which had shifted sharply to the right of politics over the last decade, and was seen to have been captured by vested business interests and the Christian right (Wilkinson 2020; King and Burns 2022). This shift to the right likely alienated voters who had historically supported Liberal ‘moderates’ (Kean 2022). The teal candidates, mostly high-achieving, professional women, presented a viable alternative at what is sometimes termed the ‘sensible centre’ of the political spectrum. While they targeted solely Liberal seats at the 2022 election, their success puts Labor on notice for elections to come, especially if current MPs are regarded as not sufficiently representing their communities (Read 2022).

The Game Has Changed: Independents in Australian Politics

‘The “game” has changed’, wrote Brian Costar and Jennifer Curtin (2004) when they lauded the election of three independents to the Australian parliament in 2001, ‘the largest number to succeed at a federal poll in decades’ (2004: 7). Costar and Curtin point out that independents have

often held positions of significant power in state and federal governments, including bringing down a government in 1941, although the story of guaranteeing supply is more common. They note the disproportionate number of independents that come from rural and regional seats (2004: 8); the fact, therefore, that the Coalition is twice as likely to lose a seat to an independent; and the notable frequency with which these seats were previously considered safe.

Since 2010, independents have had notable influence in the federal parliament. In 2010, independents Tony Windsor, Rob Oakeshott, Andrew Wilkie, and, to a lesser extent, Bob Katter played an instrumental role by supporting Julia Gillard's minority Labor government (2010-2013). With the exception of Wilkie, whose seat of Denison (now Clark) was a formerly Labor-voting seat in metropolitan Hobart, these independents were from conservative rural and regional seats. Oakeshott was a former National candidate before turning independent, and Windsor had supported a minority Coalition government as an independent in the NSW parliament before pursuing federal politics.

In 2013, independent and political neophyte Cathy McGowan surprised the Liberal Party by winning the seat of Indi, a regional electorate in Victoria's north. Indi was considered a safe Liberal seat, but the incumbent was regarded by many constituents as failing to represent the interests of the Indi community. Supported by the grassroots group 'Voices for Indi', McGowan held 'kitchen table conversations' with small groups of people to listen to and connect with the community. This model of community engagement and embeddedness reconnected Indi constituents with their elected representative, and 'reinvigorated how the electorate views, and engages in, politics more broadly' (Hendricks 2017: 483). After two terms, the Indi community voted for McGowan's successor Helen Haines in 2019, making Indi the only seat that has been transferred from one independent to another.

It can be argued that McGowan laid the ground for the many independents' election successes in 2022 in three key ways. First, she devised a clear template for a grassroots election campaign that promoted independents as uniquely positioned to represent the needs of the community. Unencumbered by commitment to party machines, independents like McGowan were answerable only to their constituents. McGowan has also shared her campaign knowledge widely, and her 'Voices for Indi' model formed the blueprint for many of the teals' campaigns (Cohen 2022). Second, on rare occasions McGowan was able to demonstrate to her constituents that she could play a decisive role in policymaking. For example, in 2019 she worked with other independents, Greens and Labor to seize the opportunity created by a rare parliamentary crisis to introduce a bill to provide medical treatment to people detained in Australia's offshore processing system

(Belot 2019). In so doing, McGowan and her colleagues intervened on an issue that, because of bipartisan politics, had long been considered intractable. McGowan's third major legacy relates to her political style. McGowan adopted a steady, collaborative, centrist and pragmatic approach in parliament, which has set the tone for other independents later on (Cohen 2022).

Enter Simon Holmes à Court and his fundraising group, Climate 200. Holmes à Court, an investor in the renewables sector, son of Australia's first billionaire, and former Liberal Party fundraiser, had broken with the Party over their lack of action on climate. Holmes à Court established Climate 200 as a fundraising vehicle to elect people committed to action on climate to parliament. In the Victorian seat of Kooyong, held by the then Treasurer Josh Frydenberg, Climate 200 ran a full-page advertisement in the *Age* newspaper calling for candidates. Answering that advertisement, Monique Ryan was subject to a rigorous process of interviews and character checks before she was selected to run for office. Elsewhere the group evaluated candidates who had arisen from 'Voices for' or similar community groups. Climate 200 backed 22 candidates for the House of Representatives (including four sitting MPs: Wilkie, Sharkie, Steggall and Haines), and two candidates for the Senate (Wahlquist et al. 2022). The level of funding (amounting to around \$12 million in total), organisation, campaign support and media attention created by Climate 200 was the crucial element for success of so many independents in 2022.

Independent candidates had to qualify on two grounds to receive Climate 200 funding. First, they had to show that they had sufficient community backing for their campaign, and, therefore, a likely chance of success. Second, they had to commit to three core values: action on climate change, political integrity, and gender equality. Once selected for Climate 200 support, candidates also had to commit to a Politician's Pledge developed by the St James Ethics Centre (SMH 2015) for respectful and ethical behaviour during and after their campaign. For their part, Climate 200 leveraged significant financial and campaign support to raise the candidate's profile and visibility. According to the organisation's website 11,200 donors raised over \$12 million; 18,953 volunteers were mobilised, 166,086 doors were knocked on, and 62,959 phone calls were made (Climate 200 2022; Millar 2022). In Kooyong alone, 3000 people donated \$1.1 million to Monique Ryan's campaign (Milligan 2022), and volunteers knocked on all 55,000 doors in the electorate (McCubbing 2022). The Liberal Party was forced to spend equally large sums to 'sandbag' previously safe electorates: money that it would have preferred to spend shoring up marginal seats (Millar 2022).

If Not Now, When? If Not Us, Who?: The Candidates

The phrase 'doctor's wives' emerged into the political lexicon in the 1990s. It was a descriptor used by politicians and political journalists to describe a demographic of women 'from comfortable families created by high-income husbands' (Farr, cited in Grattan 2004) who, angry with the Liberal Party over the commitment to the Iraq war and other policies, threatened to vote Labor or Greens in protest. 'Doctor's wives' were identified as a particular problem for the Liberal Party in safe, metropolitan Liberal seats. A 2004 news article identified Wentworth in Sydney, and the suburbs of Kew and Camberwell in Melbourne's east, as areas of particular concern for Liberal Party strategists (Grattan 2004). Nearly two decades later, Liberal strategists' concerns about the geography, gender, and motivations of the voters proved prescient, but missed the mark with the possessive 'wives'.

The 22 teal candidates were professionals with well-established careers and strong reputations in their field. All except three were women. Of the six elected teals, two were medical professionals. Monique Ryan, in Kooyong, was a professor of neurology at Melbourne's Royal Children's Hospital. Sophie Scamps, in the NSW seat of McKellar, worked in an emergency department before becoming a general medical practitioner. Others had successful careers in the business and not-for-profit sectors. Allegra Spender, in the NSW seat of Wentworth, had worked for consultancy McKinsey and in the UK treasury before returning to Australia to lead her mother's fashion business Carla Zampatti. Kylea Tink, in North Sydney, was a PR consultant and former CEO of cancer charities McGrath Foundation and Camp Quality. Kate Chaney, in the Western Australian seat of Curtin, had held multiple roles in the corporate and consultancy sector and board positions on community organisations. Zoe Daniel, in Goldstein, was an ABC journalist (Turner 2022).

Demographically, the 2022 class of teal independents are middle-class, highly educated, white, heterosexual women. Most are in their 50s with teenage children, with the exception of Spender, the youngest, who was in her mid-40s with primary-school aged children at the time of the election (Turner 2022). Most were educated in the private school system, and send their kids to private schools. They also own their own homes in wealthy suburbs (Turner 2022). Their websites speak of a commitment to community representation and the three values of climate action, gender equality and political integrity, but beyond this, some of the platforms and the policy details are quite thin. Daniel's website is a notable exception, with a large number of well-researched essays on social, economic, political and climate issues. Overall, the teals presented themselves as economically conservative and socially progressive, and therefore consistent with the electorates they represent.

Yet while they may not be ideologically radical, these six teals and their less electorally successful colleagues took an enormous personal risk running for office. They resigned from high-paying roles, and stepped off their so-far successful career trajectory, despite the improbability of their success. They did so because, they said, the times demanded urgent and drastic action, an idea captured in Daniel's campaign slogan 'If not now, when? If not us, who?' This narrative — and the brave leap of faith itself — was a compelling part of their appeal. Only David Pocock, the sole male teal candidate newly elected for the Senate, was an exception to this narrative. Known as a well-respected former captain of the Australian rugby union team, Pocock's pitch for parliament is better understood as an extension of his work as an environmental activist.

Another part of the teals' appeal to voters was the fact they were not career politicians rising through the ranks of unions, think tanks or the party machine. Instead, they argued, they would transfer to parliament the competencies they had developed in other careers. The political outsider is often associated with populist movements, but with their commitment to introduce evidence and science into the policy and political debate, the teals are not populists. Rather, they are professional, middle-class, highly educated, centrist women who appeal to voters of the same demographic.

Some commentators have suggested that the teals in fact offer a new archetype of politician in Australia (Blaine 2022: 23). Until now, it is argued, Australian politics has been dominated by the 'top bloke' archetype: a man with a larrikin heart, non-consultative, and antagonistic to alternative opinions. Scott Morrison energetically and conspicuously cultivated his 'top bloke' persona with his 'daggy dad' routine, an invented devotion to a football club, and policies to appeal to tradies in hard hats. Yet this inauthentic identity matched his incompetence as a policymaker, and ultimately became transparent to voters (Kelly 2021).

The teals introduced a different persona to the Australian political landscape: the 'no-nonsense' woman. Following the style of Cathy McGowan, Helen Haines and Zali Steggall, the no-nonsense woman doesn't end her parliamentary session 'at the pub cavorting with staffers' (Blaine 2022: 33). They bring to the job competency, sharp focus and discipline, academic and emotional intelligence, and well-honed bullshit detectors. It is quite possible that this new archetype has electoral currency. Australia has two million female professionals, roughly half a million more than there are tradies (Blaine 2022: 24). More women than men have graduated from university each year since 1987. Yet at the same time, the gender pay gap remains stubbornly high, taxation policies have

discriminatory effects, and women are still picking up the majority of housework and family caring. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the caring burden increased, while women bore the brunt of the COVID-19 recession. Concurrently, several high-profile sexual assault cases drew the public's attention to the appalling lack of women's safety in the home, workplace, on the streets, and even in Parliament House. The no-nonsense woman tapped into a sense of anger and frustration about this continued inequity, promising to apply her skills and expertise to these problems and others (Wallace 2022).

Holmes à Court (2022) has taken pains to explain that Climate 200 has not created a political party. So where exactly do the teals sit in the political landscape? Some have observed that these candidates should have been candidates for the Liberal Party. Perhaps this might be accurate if the Liberal Party looked like a feminist, moderate version of Menzies' party. It is true that two of the successful teals come from Liberal Party dynasties: Spender's late father was the federal Member for North Sydney; Chaney's uncle, a Liberal Party minister and deputy leader, wrote in support of his niece's candidature. On the other side of politics, Daniel's father was a Labor Party member, and Ryan herself was a Labor member for a short time. Others have suggested that the teal independents fill a gap in the political landscape once filled by the Australian Democrats, and that ultimately they may come together to form a political party. For now, the fact that they are independent is perhaps the most important part of their relationship with their electorates. One of the challenges for the teals will be to show that they each, independently of the others, bring unique value to the parliament. As Ryan has said, 'We all have to have a presence in Canberra and we all have to demonstrate to our community that we are delivering on the things that we've been elected to do...in many respects our priorities overlap so we will each be struggling to demonstrate impact individually' (cited in Milligan 2022).

The geography of the teals' support

From an overall electorate of 17.2 million registered voters (AEC 2022), 5,178,120 Australians did not give their primary vote to Labor or the Coalition (Raue 2022). At 68 per cent of the overall vote, consistent with the trend of declining support (Biddle and McAllister 2022), the major parties received their lowest share of votes since the entrenchment of the two-party alignment in 1910. Of those five million plus voters who voted for an alternative to the two major parties, approximately 50 per cent voted left and centre (including the Greens and teals), 35 per cent for minor parties or independents on the right, and 15 per cent for other parties. Across the country, 3.97 per cent of the primary votes were for one of the teals (Raue 2022).

The incumbent independents and crossbench MPs were returned, including comfortable re-elections for the four incumbent independents (Steggall, Haines, Sharkie and Wilkie) with new Climate 200 support. Sixteen independents made it to a two-party preferred run-off in their seat, and all but one of these were teal candidates. Of the six teals elected to the lower house, their vote-winning margins are small, ranging from Chaney's 1.04 per cent in Curtin (WA) to Spender's 4.1 per cent in Wentworth (NSW) (Raue 2022). Several minor parties also did well. The Greens gained three new MPs and six new senators, Tammy Tyrell was elected to the Senate for the Jackie Lambie Network, and Ralph Babet to the Senate for the Palmer United Party. Dai Le, the only new independent MP elected without Climate 200 support, claimed the safe Labor seat of Fowler (NSW) as voters protested the party's decision to parachute in a candidate not connected with the community (Milligan 2022).

As in all elections, demographic factors such as gender, education status, and age mattered in how people cast their vote. The issue of gender equality was front and centre of the teals' campaigns to unseat the 'sons of the Liberal Party' (Maley 2022). A 2022 exit survey showed the Coalition were vulnerable. The Coalition received the lowest level of support from women on record: only 30 per cent of women gave their primary vote to the Coalition, compared with 37 per cent of men (Australia Institute 2022). As a result, centrist and progressive female candidates generally fared very well in this election: 15 of the 17 seats that changed hands were won by women (Wallace 2022). In addition to the six teal independents, Dai Le in Fowler (NSW), and Elizabeth Watson-Brown for the Greens in Ryan (QLD), seven Labor women won seats held by the Coalition. On the other side, the number of female Coalition MPs fell from 13 to seven MPs.

Although gender received a lot of attention in the campaigns, the ANU Poll/Comparative Election Survey indicated education levels and age provided the starkest predictors of voting behaviour in 2022 (Biddle and McAllister 2022). For example, only 29.3 per cent of people who had completed Year 12 voted for the Coalition, compared with 47.1 per cent of people who had not completed Year 12 (Biddle and McAllister 2022: 16). Similarly, 49 per cent of those aged 65 and over voted for the Coalition compared with 26.7 per cent of those aged under 65, and only 18.1 per cent of those under 35 (Biddle and McAllister 2022: 16). Several long-term demographic trends also impacted the 2022 election. For example, this was Australia's first election in which baby boomers (aged 65+) were outnumbered by millennial (25-39) and generation Z (18-24-year-old) voters (Kolovos 2022). Young women are more likely to have degrees (31 per cent of young women aged 15-24 compared with 26 per cent of young men, and 79 per cent of women aged 25-

44 compared with 75 per cent of men in this age group) (ABS 2022). The ANU Poll tells us that young, educated women are more likely to vote progressive.

Young people are also less likely to own assets, and are more likely to rent, and this also had a significant impact on voting behaviour (Ratcliff 2022). The Australian Comparative Election Survey found a correlation between the number of asset types owned by voters and their likelihood of voting Coalition. These data explain why the typical age of Coalition voters remains stubbornly over 65 years: increasingly, older voters are more likely to own their own home and other assets than younger age categories. In contrast, people aged 18-29 are least likely to own any assets and were more likely to vote Labor, Green or teal. Far from the poverty line, these voters are 'human capital rich, asset poor young professionals' (Ratcliff 2022), renting where they want to live rather than buying a long way from the city centre.

The End of Two-Party Dominance in Australian Politics?

Citizen engagement with formal politics has been in decline for over half a century, and waning support for the two major parties is a part of that trend. As many scholars have noted, however, it would be incorrect to diagnose this lack of formal engagement with a general lack of interest in politics. Rather, citizens are innovating new ways to engage in a more participatory, issues-based, and non-partisan form of politics (Hendriks 2017: 481). The campaigning and electoral success of the teals is co-constitutive, in that it at once reconnects citizens with their representatives, and reinvigorates the way that the electorate engages with politics more broadly (Hendriks 2017: 483).

The teals do not hold the balance of power in the 47th parliament, so they do not have the unusual power enjoyed by Windsor, Oakeshott, and Wilkie in 2010-2013. They are not 'kingmakers', and neither can they hold the government to ransom. Yet they might still have some policy influence. This will depend on the extent to which the Albanese government is willing to grant the teals this leverage, and the government's decisions are likely to be informed by an assessment of the teals' ongoing political threat.

The teals' larger impact might be the longer-term disruption to the political landscape, so long dominated by the two major parties. The damage to the Liberal Party was immediate: with only 58 seats, the Liberal Party had their 'lowest haul' in an election since 1946 (Blaine 2022: 35). The Liberal Party loss in inner Melbourne was particularly stark: the safest Liberal seat in greater Melbourne, the electorate of La Trobe, is now 50 km from

the CBD. In the ACT, the election of the teals' Senator David Pocock, taking the seat of the Liberals' Zed Seselja, means the territory has no representative from the right of politics (Beaumont 2022a).

The loss of the former treasurer, Josh Frydenberg, in Kooyong and others from the 'moderate' faction of the Liberal Party means the Party has lost the next generation of leaders. As such, the Liberal Party in 2022 looks less like Howard's 'broad church' than it did two decades ago, which was less moderate than Fraser's party two decades before that. While some conservatives have welcomed the shift to the right (Grattan 2022), this does not make for a realistic election strategy at a time when voters have indicated they want more progressive and inclusive politics. The problems for the Liberal Party are also demographic: their base of older, home-owning, lower-educated voters is diminishing. Although support for the Coalition in rural and regional Australia remained steady, there are not enough rural and regional electorates to swing an election (Beaumont 2022b). Even these seats are not safe from future challenges: strong teal contests in four regional seats in 2022 will embolden independents in regional areas (Raue 2022).

The Labor Party did not have a good election either. Overall, its primary vote was 3.1 percentage points lower than the Coalition, but it made up ground on preferences to finish with a two-party-preferred (2PP) swing of 3.7 per cent. Of its 77 seats, several have margins of only a few hundred votes (Beaumont 2022b). The Party's shock loss of Fowler was a clear message that community representation is more important than the party. The possibility of an even larger crossbench in 2025, with both Labor and Coalition seats going to independents, is quite realistic if the major party primary vote continues to decline.

A reinvigorated Australian democracy

Buoyed by success, Climate 200 is supporting teal candidates in the Victorian and NSW state elections in 2022 and 2023 respectively, targeting both Liberal and Labor seats. Yet hard caps on campaign funding, and less appetite for changing state governments, means it will be difficult to mobilise the same number of community volunteers, energy, or donations. Federally, Holmes à Court has indicated an ambitious goal to double the number of teals elected to parliament in the next election. In the meantime, work is needed on the important task of creating favourable conditions for the election of independent candidates from diverse ethnic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds.

Given the factors that have led to the teals' success in 2022, predictions of a consolidation of their power and

further expansion of the crossbench in the next federal election have merit. Much depends on the ability of the teals to represent their communities in parliament. The teals will be watched more closely than backbenchers in either major party, and there is pressure on them to demonstrate their effectiveness. The increased scrutiny on our representatives is surely a good thing for our democracy.

We can make several other reasonable predictions about the teals' impact on our political system. The first is a return to real community representation. The election of so many teals in 2022 requires the major parties to think much more seriously about community representation, and this includes ensuring that representatives are genuinely local residents and have strong backing from their community. We are likely to see an end, at least in the short term, to party candidates being parachuted into safe seats from elsewhere under a party deal. Related to this point, the mobilisation of huge numbers of volunteers for the teals indicates that voters will be politically engaged if given meaningful opportunities. Increased interest, engagement, and investment in politics will be rewarded with transparent and accountable MPs and a rejuvenated political system (Hendriks 2017).

The second benefit will be the insertion of different perspectives into the policy debate. Specifically, the teals are well-positioned to provide opposition in several policy areas that enjoy bipartisan support and therefore do not receive the parliamentary scrutiny they deserve. Their ability to influence policy will depend on the extent to which Prime Minister Albanese considers them a threat to the Labor Party at the next election. If he takes the threat seriously, which he should, Albanese's policymakers will feel the tug from both the progressive and conservative side of politics. The pressure from the left of centre — Greens and teals in particular — will distinguish this term of parliament from the previous Labor government (2007-2013), which was characterised by the overwhelming domination of the Coalition opposition over policy debates. If Labor gives the teals some prominence and influence over policy formation during the present parliament, it will increase the chance that they will hold their seats in the face of Liberal challenges at the next election.

Finally, the 'no-nonsense' demeanour that the teal independents bring to parliament and political debate has the potential to be genuinely, if quietly, transformative. Voters will welcome the reinsertion of expertise to policy debates, respectful behaviour, especially towards women, and sincere and good-faith collaboration within parliamentary processes. This will increase trust in Australian politics, and have other flow-on effects such as encouraging high-calibre people from all backgrounds to

engage formally in the political system. Perhaps we can hope that an expanded crossbench in future parliaments will encourage amendments to remove the two-party dominance in question time and other parliamentary processes. Until then, some sensible politics would be a nice reprieve.

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on the rocks

do you remember that night
drinking tawny port on ice
with the Brazilians we'd met at the beach
that place you go for photography's sake
and we stayed longer than was usual for us
the sun turned yellow
and one of us grew especially tired

you waded softly into the ocean
sporting a bright new haircut
some of us were honestly happy
the photographs lifted us all skyward
despite our simple bogan frames
this was just what we were hoping for

and tho some of us were morose
meandering the shallows, sheathed iPhones
dangling from our bikinis
the sun was now orange
and cyclones of pink chocolate
sang in all directions up above us

and despite all our minor jealousies
and no matter how much we protested that fact
we made an effort to weld ourselves
to the one cheeky emoticon we had left

GARETH MORGAN

rococo party scene

they should have the purplish
stupid one in the middle

praying that this might be this
and not the other thing, mindless celebration

I save as much as I can but I can
relate to a lot of what you're saying

goes a hundred miles an hour that's
the only way he knows

an extra bedroom is a fifty k jump
better engage

nothin like rocksteady, he says,
LAME! He says, send my daughter to Spain!

song like a business trip, contigo por siempre
baby— one day you'll love me again

GARETH MORGAN