

# The Wise Voter and the ‘Voices of’ Independents

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28 April 2022

## Background

I first became aware of the of the ‘Voices of’ community movement in the latter part of 2021. It begged the question: Why would anyone vote for an independent? I'm told that doing so is a wasted vote. And why would anyone put themselves forward as a candidate? After all, the chance of an independent being elected to the Lower House of Federal Parliament is slim indeed.

Over the last few months I have accessed everything I can find out about this movement and why it exists. I have scanned or downloaded several hundred news stories and opinion pieces and stored them in a searchable database. The audio from video programs and podcasts were converted into text through an AI app and included in the database. From this material I have pieced together what this movement is about, what it is trying to do and why it is now being seen as a new force in Australian politics.

**Disclaimer:** I am a researcher, writer, occasional blogger—and a student of wisdom. At the time of this writing I have no affiliation with the ‘Voices of’ community movement or with any political party, past or present.

There are two parts to this essay:

**Part I** examines at the pioneering work of the ‘Voices for Indi’ community movement in the Federal electorate of Indi and the election of independent member Cathy McGowan.

**Part II** explores political wisdom for both voters and elected members of Parliament and examines the role of ‘Voices of’ Independents in the forthcoming election.

# Part I: Independents—A new force in Australian Politics

## Introduction

*The goal in the end is not to win elections. The goal is to change society.*  
—Paul Krugman, American economist.

Most of the commentary about the ‘climate change’ Independents ignores the key difference in this new force of politics from the major parties: the fact that they are community-driven organisations. Dr Helen Haines made this point in her maiden speech upon being elected as a ‘Voices for Indi’ Independent in 2019:

The vision and leadership of a small group of people who began Voices for Indi in 2012 started a great big community conversation about doing politics differently. What they created is what has been described as ‘new power’—open, participatory and peer-driven. It operates on shared values and radical trust.<sup>1</sup>

There are currently 51 Voices groups in 44 electorates throughout Australia and growing in number. These groups have endorsed 20 ‘Voices of’ or ‘Voices for’ Independent candidates for the 2022 election of the 47th Parliament—eight in NSW and Victoria, and one each in ACT, Qld, SA and WA.<sup>2</sup>

These community groups are not a part of a political party but they do have much in common. They are concerned that their current elected representatives are not addressing the concerns of their constituents when it comes to integrity, climate change, and equality for women.

For example, the Voices of Goldstein Community Group came about after a meeting held in September 2020 by disgruntled voters of all political persuasions. Further discussions with small groups of voters took place over the following 12 months before advertising for an independent to represent the electorate. Ex-ABC journalist Zoe Daniel was one person who responded and was ultimately endorsed as the independent candidate in November 2021. As Daniel explains:

I have waited, like many, for our governments to develop costed and structured strategies to safeguard our community and economy, to innovate and to embrace the immense business and job opportunities that a renewable climate economy presents. In short, to lead.<sup>3</sup>

Why are these 20 articulate, well-educated individuals—almost all women—putting their professional careers on hold while they take on the hard slog of election campaigning with no guarantee of success? They’ve all been inspired by the success of Cathy McGowan as the first independent for the seat of Indi in Victoria in the six years following the 2013 election.

## Cathy McGowan, AO—From kitchen table conversations to Parliament

Cathy McGowan served as the independent member of the House of Representatives for the seat of Indi (*pron. ‘in-die’*) from 2013 until she stepped down in 2019. It was the community effort plus her dedication and leadership that proved to be the model for the spectacular growth of the ‘Voices of’ community Independents making headlines today.

## The lower house Seat of Indi

The Commonwealth Electoral Division of Indi is located in North-Eastern Victoria and is one of the largest in the state. It takes in the regional cities of Wodonga, Wangaratta and Benalla, while much of the electorate is located in the largely

uninhabited Australian Alps with Mount Kosciuszko across the border in NSW. The southern end of the electorate is just beyond the outskirts of Melbourne.

Historically, Indi had been a safe conservative seat. When Lou Lieberman, the sitting Liberal Party MP did not recontest the 2001 election, Melbourne-based lawyer Sophie Mirabella (nee Panopolous) gained preselection and won with a vote of 61% on a two-party preferred basis. Her margin increased to 63% in the 2004 election, but steadily dropped to 54% in 2007 and 53% in 2010.

Being in a safe seat meant there was no need by the Liberal or Labor parties to spend money in the electorate. And Mirabella wasn't helping herself by neither understanding nor supporting the needs of local communities. Her sole aim was to be a cabinet minister in a Coalition government.

By 2012 some people were realising they were being short-changed and not being properly represented.

According to Lesley Howard, who had a close connection with Mirabella for many years, Sophie failed to take on board the electorate's concerns because she really didn't know what they were:

Her disregard for the views of those around her was not just bad judgment. Her lack of empathy, her apparent lack of eye contact with the people of her electorate, her trademark arrogance and disdain, honed under the guidance of poorly selected mentors, were the fundamental flaws.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, most people—including the rusted-on Liberal voters—kept voting for her. But not everyone was happy.

### **About Cathy McGowan**

Catherine McGowan was born in 1953 and grew up on a dairy farm located just south of Wodonga. She is the fourth of thirteen children and she says the early family experience helped her later in life:

Anybody who's grown up in a big family or small rural community will tell you how much of your time is spent on negotiating and building a support base so you don't fight alone.<sup>5</sup>

Cathy could be described as a late-bloomer. She struggled with study and would have preferred to have worked on the farm but her parents insisted she should have a university degree. Having failed first year in her Arts Degree at Monash University, she worked in an ice-cream factory while she repeated first year and then went on to graduate. This experience taught her to be resilient and to take responsibility for her own actions. She also wasn't put off from further tertiary study as she holds a Diploma in Education from the University of Melbourne and later gained a Master's Degree in Applied Science from the University of Western Sydney.

After several years as a school teacher she decided she was still attracted to the rural life and owning her own farm. In 1980, at the age of 26, she bought a property close to Albury-Wodonga where there was an airport and opportunities for off-farm work.

Her initial involvement in politics was to work as a research assistant for the newly-elected MP for the Indi seat, Ewan Cameron. She found working in the electoral office in Wangaratta and Parliament House in Canberra to be an enjoyable and a valuable experience. She did learn, however, just how demanding the life of a

dedicated Member of Parliament really is – enough to put her off from ever becoming a politician.

In 1983 she set up her own consultancy business working within her local community, before becoming in 1986 a rural affairs advisor in the Victorian Department of Agriculture under the Labor Government led by Premier John Cain.

In the early '90s she was back in her own business, Catherine McGowan Consulting, but now with much broader scope of recognising the issues facing women and their role in the economy, especially in rural settings. During this period she travelled to Canada on a Churchill Fellowship “to study rural women’s networks and their role in improving communication with governments.”<sup>6</sup>

She was also a founding member and president of Australian Women in Agriculture and a regional councilor for the Victorian Farmers Federation.<sup>7</sup>

In 2004 she was made an Officer of the Order of Australia “for service to the community through raising awareness of and stimulating debate about issues affecting women in regional, rural and remote areas.”<sup>8</sup>

### **The invitation to stand for Parliament**

One evening in May 2012 Cathy received a phone call from her niece, Leah Ginnivan and nephew Ben McGowan. They had grown up in the district and had gone to Melbourne for study and work opportunities. They still had close bonds to the community and had concluded that things had to change. They said Cathy should stand as an independent Member of Parliament and make Indi a marginal seat. This way the two main parties would more likely to spend money in the electorate and perhaps solve some of the problems in the region that were being neglected—especially the poor train service, bad mobile phone reception, no internet and few jobs.

Cathy had no intention of going into Parliament, but she did want to help in some way:

I did not want to be the candidate . . . I was happy, well established in my career, settled in my relationships, and was not looking for any major disruptions. But I did agree with them. Something needed to be done.<sup>9</sup>

### **From little things big thing grow**

A month later Cathy met with a group of twelve people who came together in the Wangaratta Public Library to share their concerns. Some had previously been involved with the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation which had a process for building trust and bringing about positive change through conversations and connections. This meeting led to the formation of a grassroots community group called Voice for Indi aka V4i.

During the latter half of 2012 plans were put in place for community engagement to be based on a series of “kitchen table conversations” throughout the Indi electorate.<sup>10</sup> This proved to be a good way for people – regardless of their political persuasion – to express their views on what the issues were and what could be done about them. During February and March of 2013 over 440 people participated in 55 conversations using trained facilitators. By this time the Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, had announced that the 2013 federal election would take place on September 7.

All these conversations were recorded and were published in a 16-page report in May, before the election. The consultation process revealed that a large number of

Indi constituents wanted an opportunity to choose an independent as their representative.<sup>11</sup>

It was during these conversations with that participants continued to suggest Cathy should represent them and she started to feel that maybe she should step forward. The V4i committee placed an advertisement in local papers for expressions of interest for an Independent candidate and four individuals responded. After a vetting process, Cathy was finally announced as the V4i candidate.

### The Campaign

Cathy was experienced in the community consultation process to achieve change but not in how to run an election campaign for becoming a Member of Parliament. Policies she would run with came from the kitchen table conversations, one being the need for action on climate change:

The need for positive and strong action on climate change was raised during the kitchen table conversations and was a key plank in my policy platform.<sup>12</sup>

Other key issues for Indi residents were public transport, mobile phone coverage, health, education, broadband and marriage equality.<sup>13</sup>

She had no campaign strategy to begin with, so she turned for advice to people she knew who had been successful candidates in the past.

A subcommittee of the Voices of Indi community group was formed to support Cathy with Phil Haines, one of the foundering members of Voices for Indi, as campaign manager. The community involvement in the campaign was an outstanding feature. The kitchen table conversations and the social media communications led to the mobilization of over 600 volunteers with 400 attending Cathy's campaign launch on 4 August.

Cameron Klose, one of the original young instigators for Cathy to run for parliament, became media advisor. Klose had been in the US during the election campaign for President Obama and he observed the role social media played in the campaign. Klose and other young volunteers – the 'Indi Expats' - played a vital role in making the most of technology and training other volunteers in how to use Facebook and Twitter. This enabled an ongoing connection with the 5,000 on-line supporters. Over 1,000 donors contributed a total \$117,000 in donations, made up of relatively small amounts. All the same, this amount was be much smaller than that spent by the Liberal Party in Indi, estimated by some as being up to half a million dollars.<sup>14</sup>

Another key player in the support team was a Wodonga local, Nick Haines, a political science graduate from Melbourne University. As an exchange student at McGill University in 2011 he had been involved in student voting and saw the use of digital campaign management technology. In an ABC interview in 2013 he explained how the NationBuilder community-building software platform was being used to coordinate campaign activity across the electorate:

We've been working really hard to build up a large supporter base online, and also with using some new tools to help harness that . . . NationBuilder is for organising volunteers and supporters on the ground in real time, so it connects our social media and online supporters to on-the-ground ones and organisers all at the same time.<sup>15</sup>

The Liberal Party did not use social media in the same way for the 2013 campaign and this put them at a disadvantage. In the weeks building up to the election the

community participation was beyond the expectations of the original V4i group. Cameron Klose and Nick Haines explained:

Indi has never seen anything like this before. For the first time in living memory thousands of people from all walks of life were engaging in politics and having a say in how they would like to see their electorate represented. For too long they had been taken for granted. Labor knew it couldn't win it, so it hadn't ever bothered trying; the Liberals knew they were going to win, so they didn't bother either.<sup>16</sup>

On the September polling day Cathy had some 650 volunteers on duty to hand out how-to-vote cards at 89 polling booths across the electorate.<sup>17</sup>

### **Win for Indi Independent**

The end result was a close win by Cathy McGowan over Sophie Mirabella by just 439 votes.

The Liberal Party won the election overall with a swing of 3.6% and Tony Abbott became Prime Minister. Indi was the only Liberal seat to be lost with a negative swing of 12.7%.

The Indi win by Cathy McGowan was a shock. One of the safest Liberal seats in the country was now held by an independent - a rarity it itself for the Lower House - and female as well, the last being Doris Blackburn in 1946.<sup>18</sup>

Some commentators believed the Liberal Party loss was due to the personalities involved.<sup>19</sup> Political journalist Melissa Fyfe reported what locals thought of Mirabella:

Many in the electorate – and not just Voice for Indi members – believed she was rude, abrupt and talked at people.<sup>20</sup>

Writer Lesley Howard compared the abrasive style of Sophie with Cathy, describing Cathy as:

A gently spoken, well-educated, kindly mannered person, professionally experienced in business with a long family history in the region.<sup>21</sup>

However, Professor Carolyn Hendriks from the Australian National University believes the most important aspect about this win was the community participation, not only with the election campaign, but through the on-going participation in community development. This was driven in the first instance by the realization that the people of Indi were being ignored by their elected representative and they needed to step up to do something about it.<sup>22</sup>

### **Cathy McGowan MP goes to Canberra**

Cathy had a lot to learn about workings of Parliament even though she had worked there years before. She received helpful advice from other members as well as past members. Her maiden speech was delivered on 2 December 2013 with Indi supporters in the visitors gallery.

One advantage from being on the cross bench in Parliament was that she obtained briefings on pending legislation. This required a lot of work on her part to understand just what was being proposed. Coalition back-benchers didn't get the same attention as they were simply there to vote with the Party:

The parliamentary agenda was full, the days were long, beginning no later than 8am and finishing at 10pm, and it was a huge job to be across every piece of legislation - and we tried.<sup>23</sup>

One of the first pieces of legislation that required her vote was the Abbott government's repeal of the Clean Energy Legislation introduced by the previous Gillard government. She voted with Labor and the Greens as her constituents wanted. She also opposed cuts to Higher Education, Social Services and Youth Allowance. From then on she would be labelled by members of the Coalition as "she votes with Labor and the Greens" when in fact more than 90% of the time she voted with the government.<sup>24</sup>

It's often said by the major parties that one shouldn't vote for Independents because they're not in government and therefore can't achieve anything. This was not true for Cathy—she had many achievements over her two terms in Parliament—that in itself a major achievement and with an increased majority.

One of her major achievements was the upgrading of the mobile phone infrastructure. Starting in 2015, the government was allocating funds for a Mobile Black Spot Programme throughout Australia, based on demonstrated need. Cathy was responsible for forming the Indi Telecommunications Action Group which identified mobile blackspots in the electorate. As of 2022, Indi is the most successful electorate in Victoria with more 65 towers built or upgraded.<sup>25</sup>

### **North-East Train Line Service**

The north-east train line is the Victorian section of the Sydney-Melbourne rail link. This was once a show-piece in fast, reliable travel between Australia's two largest cities but over the decades governments preferred to invest in roads rather than rail infrastructure. In 2010 there were 700 mud holes in the 208km Victorian section which meant a bumpy ride and speed restrictions down to 40kmh or even 25kmh. The trip was slow, uncomfortable with frequent breakdowns.

Cathy McGowan worked closely with the Border Rail Action Group to get action through Parliament:

I presented private members bills, moved motions and asked questions seeking more information about the holdups and plans for improvement.<sup>26</sup>

The Commonwealth allocated \$100 million in the 2017 budget which was followed by another \$135 million coming from the Commonwealth and Victorian governments. One of the reasons she was successful in prodding this project along was by learning what it takes to make noise, particularly with stories in the regional press:

The point here was that it wasn't just me jumping up and down trying to get the money. The people of Indi got organised, became strategic and put up plans. Everything we argued for was properly thought-out and based on a genuine need. . . . The process of winning funding for the train line was a good example of how being an independent works and the effectiveness of building strategic partnerships, badgering decision-makers and making noise.<sup>27</sup>

Cathy's badgering for funding worked but it still took years before the service improved. Even today work continues on the line with new VLocity trains introduced on the Standard Gauge North East Line only in late 2021.<sup>28</sup>

These were just some of her achievements during her two terms as an MP - much more than a typical back bencher.

### **Due Recognition**

In October 2019 McGowan received the Alan Missen award from the Accountability Round Table, named in honour of the late Victorian Liberal senator Alan Missen for

conspicuous integrity in the 45th Parliament. In presenting the award, Kenneth Hayne, former justice of the High Court and Royal Commissioner to the Banking Royal Commission, said:

Ms McGowan’s commitment to reforms essential for open, accountable and transparent government has been exemplary. We recognise her commitment to those in her electorate, and her embrace of significant issues crucial to Australia’s Parliamentary democracy, in particular her work on the National Integrity Commission and parliamentary standards Bills.<sup>29</sup>

The win in the Federal seat of Indi by Independent candidate Cathy McGowan in the 2013 Federal Government election dismayed the Liberal Party. However, it was thought to be one-off aberration and the Liberals would win it back at the next election. After all, Indi had been a safe Liberal seat since 1931. That Cathy McGowan went on to win the 2016 election and for another independent candidate, Dr Helen Haines, to replace her in the 2019 election showed that something significant was happening in Australian politics.

### **Sharing the success—a family affair**

These days Cathy McGowan is not only enjoying her life on the farm but also actively involved in helping other communities interested in following *The Indi Way*.

Cathy’s sister, Ruth McGowan, assists other potential candidates prepare for public office and has published a book based on the Indi experience, *Get Elected: A step-by-step campaign guide to winning public office (local, state and federal)*.<sup>30</sup>

Cathy’s brother-in-law, Denis Ginnivan, a former president and foundation member of Voices for Indi, is also sharing his knowledge and experience from the Indi campaigns as a model for multiple communities through his Events that Matter consultancy.

Cathy’s nephew, Dr Ben McGowan, together with Denis Ginnivan and others have been involved in a major community-based initiative, Totally Renewable Yackandandah.<sup>31</sup>





## Part II: The Wise Voter and the ‘Voices of’ Independents

### Political Wisdom

*Mankind will never see an end of trouble until lovers of wisdom come to hold political power, or the holders of power become lovers of wisdom.*

–Plato

If we think of wisdom as good judgement about important matters, then it is reasonable to expect our representatives in Parliament to exhibit political wisdom. This means ensuring that decisions that restructure social systems—by new laws or funding allocations, for example—work for the betterment of everyone. Whenever a decision is made, a change must result whenever that decision is enacted.

Such decision-making is not easy. Barak Obama recognized that “finding the right balance between our competing values is difficult.” An example of this challenge, he says, is “to balance our collective security against the equally compelling need to uphold civil liberties.”<sup>32</sup>

This dilemma was brought home recently in Australia with lock-downs introduced to protect the population from spreading the COVID-19 virus resulting in protests from those offended by their loss of ‘freedom’.

Currently there is an unhealthy disconnect in the relationship between electors of major parties and their elected representatives, the politicians who make changes to the lived environment and social systems. This is why it is said, “the system is broken”.

### The System is Broken

*We’ve lost wisdom. Wisdom was making decisions on how will this affect our people generations ahead. Now people don’t seem to care about generations in the future. It’s all about making money, struggling to live if you’re very poor, taking more than you should if you’re not very poor. And making money—the bottom line—making shareholders money—the next political campaign – me – now!*

–Jane Goodall, English primatologist

The proof is this statement is the lack of trust in politicians, government ministers, media and political parties—an all-time low.

The 2021 Ipsos' Global Trustworthiness Survey found that Australians rated doctors, scientists and teachers as the most trustworthy professionals and politicians and government ministers as among the least trustworthy.<sup>33</sup>

Mark Evans, Professor of Governance, University of Canberra suggests without trust the connection between citizens and government leads to adverse outcomes:

Weakening political trust erodes authority and civic engagement, reduces support for evidence-based public policies and promotes risk aversion in government. This also creates the space for the rise of authoritarian-populist forces or other forms of independent representation.<sup>34</sup>

If there was greater trust in government there would probably be no need for the ‘Voices of’ movement.

The Democracy 2025 Report<sup>35</sup> released in 2021 provided greater detail on just how the Australian population viewed trust of governments:

Federal government is trusted by just 31 per cent of the population while state and local government performs little better with just over a third of people trusting them. Ministers and MPs (whether federal or state) rate at just 21 per cent while more than 60 per cent of Australians believe that the honesty and integrity of politicians is very low.

The study found that among the third of the population that are content with the system, they are most likely to be over 55, earning more than \$200,000, vote for the Coalition or are overseas born, are male and believe they are fortunate to live in a liberal democracy.

For the majority of the population lacking in trust, the major issues identified were:

- Politicians are not accountable for broken promises
- They don't deal with the issues that really matter
- Big business has too much power
- Trade unions have too much power (more of a concern with older, male Coalition voters).

The study also found those critical of the major political parties are more likely to identify with minor political parties or independents, "to either secure greater resources for their communities or to register a protest vote against the two-party system."

### **Why is there a disconnect between politicians and their constituents?**

One reason for the disconnect is because party system demands that MPs vote along party lines. This means that the particular needs of an electorate may be ignored—as was the case of the Indi electorate prior to Cathy McGowan's win. Only rarely are MPs given the opportunity of a conscience vote.

Another reason is the unbalance in access to politicians and ministers. There are currently 673 lobbyists and 323 firms registered on the official [Lobbyists Register](#), maintained by the Attorney-General's Department. A report from the Grattan Institute<sup>36</sup> states that the access to politicians gets results:

There are there are plenty of examples of interest groups successfully lobbying for policy changes to be put on—or taken off—the table, which look contrary to the public interest.

Kate Griffiths, a senior associate at the Grattan Institute, says mining industry lobbyists are particularly active in federal and state governments.

A report from InfluenceMap goes further to claim that the "fuel sector's monopolization of climate lobbying is clearly delaying Australian climate policy."<sup>37</sup>

The real concern is that Australia is heading towards being an oligarchy, if it isn't already one.

According to the dictionary, "An oligarchy is a small group of people who control and run a particular country or organization. You can also refer to a country which is governed in this way as an oligarchy."<sup>38</sup>

In Australia's case there is substantial evidence available that powerful corporations and affluent individuals have a significantly larger influence on policymaking than ordinary citizens. That's not how a democracy is supposed to work.

Biotechnological and biomedical sciences specialist, Dr Keith Mitchelson, recently wrote an opinion piece<sup>39</sup> on the evidence of the rise of oligarchs in Australia:

The wealth of many Australian magnates is underpinned by a government dedicated to creating highly favourable laws and tax breaks for their business, to the point where many pay zero tax. Occasionally the venality of Australia's oligarch political-regime axis is seen when a line is crossed that the rest of the world finds objectionable—Rio Tinto's legal dynamiting of irreplaceable 46,000 year-old Indigenous rock paintings at [Juukan Gorge caves](#), and the bugging of [Timor-Leste's](#) government to favour Woodside's commercial oil and gas objectives are examples of notoriety. . . . instead of fallout harming politicians, it's the whistle-blower who is prosecuted, it's the newspaper offices raided and individual journalists and defence lawyers prosecuted for 'handling state secrets'.

Here, political opponents are **taken to court**, or enquired into, while the Murdoch 'News Corp' media, an apparent extension of the Coalition government's propaganda machine, literally scream ideological venom against all who question Australian miners rights to dig and pump and sell carbon dioxide.

If the Coalition should win the next federal election, perhaps we shall see overt repression against climate protesters, alternative news media and public critics to levels more associated with regimes such as Putin's. If we want to save our livelihoods and our planet and save our souls too, we need to restore political integrity.

However, one of the big issues in lack of trust, particularly for female voters, is due to the lack of women in Parliament.

### **Women, Wisdom and Politics**

*Politics is an art and not a science, and what is required for its mastery is not the rationality of the engineer but the wisdom and the moral strength of the statesman.*

—Hans J. Morgenthau, political scientist

*In politics, if you want anything said, ask a man; if you want anything done, ask a woman.*

—Margaret Thatcher

Participation by women in politics is a human right. It is enshrined in both the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Historically, parliaments around the world have been male-dominated and females have been looked upon as 'space-invaders' into their (white) boys club. For example, the new Parliament House on Capital Hill in Canberra did not include a child-care centre. Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins, in her recent report *Set the Standard*<sup>40</sup> found there were many issues within Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces:

We heard that these workplaces are not safe environments for many people within them, largely driven by power imbalances, gender inequality and exclusion and a lack of accountability. Such experiences leave a trail of devastation for individuals and their teams and undermine the performance of our Parliament to the nation's detriment.

It is unclear at this time just how many of the 28 recommendations from her latest inquiry will be acted upon.

Currently, the low number of women in Federal Parliament and in leadership positions is a problem, especially with the Coalition parties. In the 46<sup>th</sup> Parliament which was dissolved on 11 April 2022, only 31 per cent of the 151 members in the House of Representatives were women. While 42.6 per cent were Labor MPs, only 21 percent were Liberal Party and 12.5 per cent National MPs.

There are benefits in having a more balanced female-male representation. In 1921 Edith Cowan was elected as a member of the Western Australia state parliament and was the first woman to be elected to any Australian parliament. She held the view that, not only was it a **right** for women to be in parliament, there was a **need** for women to be involved.<sup>41</sup>

Having gender diversity is important in arriving at better decisions. According to a recent paper in *Frontiers in Psychology*, “Women and men have different relative strengths in wisdom, likely driven by sociocultural and biological factors.” After conducting a series of tests for wisdom, the researchers found that women achieved higher scores on compassion-related domains and self-reflection than men. On the other hand, men scored higher on cognitive-related domains higher in decisiveness than women. The authors contend that “compassion is the single most important component of wisdom” and that the differences the relative strengths in wisdom are likely due to biological and socio-cultural factors.<sup>42</sup>

Asiedu et al., in a report<sup>43</sup> studying developing countries found that “women parliamentarians are more likely to pass comprehensive laws on sexual harassment, rape, divorce and domestic violence.” The report stated:

Including women in the political process engenders political and economic benefits. Politically, it increases the number of women in the parliament, curbs corruption, improves policies outcomes, and promotes the inclusiveness of minority groups in public spheres. Economically, it considers women as actors of development, encourages the integration of women in the labor market, and promotes economic and development growth.

Fixing this gender imbalance in Australia is overdue. Almost all of the ‘Voices of Independent candidates are women.

### **Independents - Wasted Vote or Wise Vote?**

*A wise man changes his mind sometimes, but a fool never. To change your mind is the best evidence you have one.*

–Dr Desmond Ford, Australian theologian

Dr Dilip Jeske is an American neuropsychiatrist and author of *Wiser: The scientific roots of wisdom*.<sup>44</sup> He has published a number of influential papers detailing the neural activity associated with wise behaviours and decision-making, including voting wisely. He says when we vote in an election for Parliament, for example, there is no unanimity:

The vote will be split. Politics is a matter of opinion and everyone has their own. But in at least one way, I think we all mark our ballots with this singular desire: That our choices be wise and our elected leaders be wiser. . . . As voters, but more importantly, as members of a wondrously sprawling and diverse society, we seek wisdom in our leaders to help ensure we might all lead rich and fulfilling lives. We can actively work to make ourselves wiser. Voting and voting wisely is an act of practical wisdom. If we choose wise leaders, they will help make the rest of the society wiser too. Then everyone wins.

So how do you go about making a wise choice when voting?

Reflect! In his book, *Wiser*, Dilip Jeste says *reflection* “gives the brain time to pause, to untangle and sort through the myriad observations and experiences that wash over you.” He also goes beyond reflection of our external world:

Self-reflection is the exercise of introspection, the examination of our own mental and emotional processes to better understand their fundamental nature, purpose, and essence. It’s a profoundly important and obvious element of wisdom. “The unexamined life is not worth living,” wrote Plato in ‘*The Apology of Socrates*’, a recollection of the speech his mentor gave at his ill-fated trial.<sup>45</sup>

Some questions to ask: Is the Government delivering what you, your community, the nation and what the international community needs? What are the gaps and how can they best be addressed?

Listen with an open mind to what others are saying. As Jeste notes, “You cannot be wise if you lack empathy and compassion—for others and for yourself. Compassion and self-compassion should be balanced.”

This is exactly the path taken by the people who came together to form the ‘Voices for Indi’ movement. They reflected, came together to listen to what others in their small group were thinking before expanding into the Kitchen Table Conversations in the wider community.

### **Kitchen Table Conversations**

This was achieved in the Voices for Indi movement through initiating what became known as *The Indi Way*,<sup>46</sup> involving Kitchen Table Conversations, selecting a candidate, recruiting and training volunteers and in doing so inventing a new social system.

The process for conducting Kitchen Table Conversations is well documented in the book, *Kitchen Table Conversations*<sup>47</sup> by Mary Crooks AO and Leah McPherson for the Victorian Women’s Trust. ‘Voices of’ groups throughout Australia are employing the use of KTCs kits in their community consultations.

The same process commenced in the Kooyong electorate in Victoria in early 2021 when 50 locals came together. They had found each other on social media during the COVID-19 lock-down and all believed they were not well represented by their existing MP. They founded the Voices of Kooyong<sup>48</sup> which grew to 800 members by the end of the year. The stated aim is to “improve the quality of democracy in Kooyong, to provide a way for residents to engage and make their voices heard.”

Kitchen Table Conversations (KTCs) took place and a survey of constituents took place in the July – December 2021 period. In A 22-page report of the findings, *Kooyong Speaks*,<sup>49</sup> has recently been published.

In November 2019 Cathy McGowan and Kerrie O’Brien spoke at a community meeting and on 11 December 2021 at the Hawthorn Arts Centre Dr Monique Ryan was announced as the Voices of Candidate Independent candidate.

### **A Growing Movement**

In spite of the negative press, the ‘Voices of’ movement is gaining traction. There are thousands of individuals volunteering to help these Independent candidates. The latest polling shows that three times the number of voters from the 2019 election would vote ‘1’ for their Independent candidate.

Many of the 'Voices of' candidates' campaigns are being partly funded by Simon Holmes à Court's Climate 200 fund-raising entity.<sup>50</sup> Independent candidates sign the Politician's Pledge<sup>51</sup> for respectful, ethical behavior during and after their campaign to become an MP. It was developed by Simon Longstaff from the Ethics Centre.

Some prominent individuals supporting the 'Voices of' movements include:

**Chris Barrie**, AC, retired head of the Australian Defence Force, Admiral:

I think that voters throughout Australia must take responsibility for how they cast their vote. If the next Parliament fails to grapple with climate change effectively, we will not have the opportunity in 2025 to recover from this dire situation. Moreover, the legacy we will leave for future generations of Australians will be an ugly one, and there is no one we can blame for this but ourselves.<sup>52</sup>

**Fred Chaney**, AO, former Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party:

I don't think the political system is going to reform from within. I think we are past that. And so it does need a shake.<sup>53</sup>

**Carolyn Hendriks**, Associate Professor, The Crawford School of Public Policy, ANU

McGowan's two community-driven electoral campaigns provides evidence that competitive elections can be successfully won when candidates focus on issues and people, rather than parties and personalities. Her ongoing attempts to communicate and empower her constituency demonstrates that political representation can be activated well beyond the goal of re-election.<sup>54</sup>

**John Hewson**, AM, former Leader of the Liberal Party:

In my view there has never been a more compelling case for increased representation of community-based Independents in our politics and government at the next election. Indeed, I can see the possibility of Independents pulling electoral support from the major political parties to actually hold the balance of power, or should I say the power of the balance, in both Houses of our Parliament. Collectively they could then work to ensure better government in the interests of both their communities and our nation.<sup>55</sup>

**Simon Holmes à Court**, former member of the Liberal Party and Chair of Climate 200:

This election, voters in over 20 electorates are being offered a new political choice, a viable option for breaking the political deadlock on vital issues. These communities have the opportunity of a community-backed independent candidate. These candidates are genuine community leaders, not career politicians."<sup>56</sup>

**Barry Jones**, AC, former Labor Minister and National President of the Labor Party:

Only an active citizenry can prevent sliding towards authoritarian or populist democracy with its endless appeals to the short term and self-interest.<sup>57</sup>

**Ian Macphie**, AO, former Minister in the Fraser Liberal Government:

I believe that she Zoe Daniel will enrich the quality of federal Parliament because she will listen to the electorate and represent its views on important issues in Canberra. That is crucial to the functioning of our democracy.<sup>58</sup>

**Malcolm Turnbull**, former Liberal Prime Minister:

Clearly a lot of traditional Liberal party voters feel the party has moved way off to the right on a bunch of issues, in particular on climate, and they are frustrated by that . . . and are now getting the opportunity to vote for the sort of candidates that share their values.<sup>59</sup>

### Accusations about the ‘Voices of Independents’ campaigns

Many accusations are being made about the Independents by the Liberal Party and are often being amplified by an unquestioning media. How many are true or are gross simplifications, not telling the full story and therefore misleading?

What is the truth behind these accusations? The wise voter might wish to find out:

- Why are the Voices of Independents targeting Liberal-held seats?
- Why is voting for an Independent candidate a wasted vote, as is being claimed?
- Is it true that an Independent MP will achieve nothing unless there is a hung parliament?
- In the case of a hung parliament, which party will the elected Independent support and why?
- Will a hung parliament result in chaos?
- Where will the Independent’s preferences go?
- Do the Independents in Parliament really have a record of voting for Labor most of the time?
- Are the ‘Voices of’ Independents ‘Labor/Greens puppets’ and members of the ‘hard left’?
- If an Independent candidate had voted for Labor in the past does that mean they are “Labor stooges” or just discerning voters?
- Why aren’t the names of donors disclosed?
- Are the ‘Voices of’ Independents a political party?

The wise voter might also apply a similar critique of the opposition campaigns and ask if they have signed up to the Politicians’ Pledge.<sup>60</sup>

In conclusion, during this 40 day period of the election campaign you might like abstain listening to the noisy electioneering media and use this opportunity to quietly reflect before casting your vote.

It’s your vote—think about it and don’t waste it.



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