

**Appendix 46: My response to the mistruths**  
**Response to Ben Smith's PDF on Michael West Website**  
**by Dr Sarah Russell**

*"This was not the case in the federal electorate of Flinders. Climate 200 was pulling strings well before the election campaign even began. However, their preferred candidate, Ben Smith, got 21.2% of the primary vote, and fell short on preferences to the Liberal Party's Zoe McKenzie."*

- Climate 200 were not pulling strings. They provided funding to assist I4F in advertising for a candidate whom they would select.

I was sent copies of 2 emails from prospective candidates in which Chair I4F said Climate 200 was mentoring I4F. (Appendix 11 of the report)

In addition, Sean Marsh, a climate 200 employee/contractor, rebranded I4F long before you were selected as the candidate.

*"Worse was to come. Without any explanation to I4F members, the selection process was changed. Two frontrunners emerged – Ben Smith and Bronwyn Currie. Smith got the guernsey, despite members of I4F unanimously saying at a meeting in June that they preferred a female candidate."*

- "Worse was to come"? Is this a lesson in persuasive writing or quality investigative journalism?

I make no comment about Hast's writing style. I do, however, know that Hast was referring to the I4F meeting in June in which members of I4F unanimously said they wanted the community independent candidate to be female.

Hast also referred to the selection process changing. When members of grassroots organisation agree on a selection process and it changes, members of the community group get annoyed (evidenced by emails I received about the selection process from those who had been chosen to be on the selection panel).

FYI - I ascertained (via Gerard) that he, Pam Pitt and Debbie de Laps replaced the experienced people who had been chosen for the selection panel. I also ascertained from Luke O'Brien that Kate Lardner was on the selection panel.

You told me that Kate and Conal Feeley had encouraged you to apply. I phoned Kate recently to ask how she managed this conflict of interest?

If the community independents are claiming to "do politics differently", I believe we need to practice what we preach (I recall letters to MP News that made a similar point).

- Did you put questions forward to the I4F Committee to corroborate this piece?

I asked Hast this question. He replied:

“My story was always intended to be my opinion/analysis. Not a she said/he said piece. If C200 and I4F want to put another point of view, let them contact MWM and request space.”

- I suggest this wasn't done and therefore only provides opinion of one person.

This is incorrect. My report is NOT my opinion – it is a collation of hundreds of unsolicited emails, texts, screenshots, personal messages - sent to me by people who were critical of your campaign and character.

- Interesting that your source, Dr Russell, released confidential information after signing an NDA.

It is disappointing that you have made your reply personal. In my profession, people never use ad hominem debate. In addition, the allegations you have made in the WhatsApp group are very very disappointing. I am sure you are familiar with defamation law.

I have several journalist friends/colleagues, who have written to offer me their support. As journalists, they are accustomed to receiving comments like the ones you have made about me.

*“Just bear in mind that they will run a campaign to shoot the messenger. This is from the old-world playbook, what Labor and Libs (and now Greens) have been doing for years.”*

Another wrote:

*“I understand what you are going through. It's bloody horrible. But please keep playing the ball.”*

Rather than shoot me as “the messenger”, I suggest you remain mindful of the facts: My report was one of many sources Mike used to write this piece. Mike is a journalist not a stenographer.

I did not sign an NDA. Please remove this from your statement.

- Bronwyn Currie doesn't live in this electorate, and is an organiser in another political party, which is likely why she wasn't selected.

Although Bronwyn Currie was public about the fact that she applied to be the endorsed community independent candidate, I am very concerned that you have included personal information about Bronwyn in your public comment.

All candidates were given an assurance that the I4F selection panel would keep information about candidates confidential.

How did you get this information about where she lives? What made you think she is an organiser in another political party (she isn't)?

Bronwyn Currie contacted me about you referring to details about her in your public reply. She is understandably annoyed that you breached her confidentiality.

Bronwyn wants details about her removed from your public statement.

*"Five people from outside the Flinders electorate were employed to run Smith's campaign, including a Climate 200 employee."*

- At no time did I hire a Climate 200 employee. It took a number of months to hire all my staff, and of course I would select people with experience in successful campaigns, something no Independent had done on the MP.

According to LinkedIn, Sean Marsh works for Climate 200 though it is not clear whether as an employee or contractor of Climate 200.

I was told he was working on your campaign. If this is incorrect, it should be removed from Hast's article.

If Sean Marsh is a contractor of Climate 200, not an employee, Hast should replace "employee" with "contractor".

*"Almost overnight, Smith's face appeared everywhere"*

- This is how campaigns work. One day they don't exist, then they launch, then the candidate is everywhere.

Agree.

The point Hast is making here is the amount of advertising suggested the campaign had a lot of money. However, the lack of transparency about who donated to your campaign led many people to assume Climate 200 was the main funder to your campaign. This made the Liberal Party's "anti-teal campaign" in Flinders more effective, and may indeed have cost you the election.

On 24 September 2024, Simon Holmes à Court sent me a text highlighting the importance of the damage that would be done if I4F was seen as Climate 200's group. *"starting up I4F is a huge credit to you, and people should be very grateful for your work... healing the divisions of 2022 is not easy and you guys have done really well there. i think your instincts are correct that it would be highly damaging if I4F was seen as "sarah's movement", or worse "sarah's lefty group"... and likewise really bad if it was seen as my group or C200's group, even though newscorp will claim that regardless and 40% of the electorate will parrot it."*

FYI – a very well-informed source from the independent movement contacted Michael West Media to say "it was about time this story got told," and added these concerns of how C200 operate go well beyond Flinders.

*"Arguably, the biggest misstep by the Smith campaign brain trust was hiding his strong connection to a breakaway branch of the Mormon church. In fact, he was an ordained*

*minister in the Community of Christ, which had changed its name in 2001 from the Reorganised Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Church is the second-largest of the Latter-day Saints movement."*

- Good to see you got as far as Wikipedia for this bit of "research".

This is an unfortunate comment to put on the public record. It is nasty and says more about you than it does about Hast's article.

You may be interested to know that Hast closely followed this election campaign in Flinders (and Dunkley; both in his patch) right from the start, that is, right from when the first speculation about the election date.

Hast has been following these two electorates since 1971, albeit with far more interest since returning from Melbourne to live on the peninsula in 1996 and returning to local newspaper journalism in 1999.

Hast's CV (showing he is not some inexperienced hack. The fact that Luke has never heard of him says more about Luke than Hast).

Former editor Mornington and Southern Peninsula Mail (2006–10), Peninsula Weekly (2010) and Mornington News (2010–15).

Former journalist (on the Mornington Peninsula) with Standard Newspapers (1970s), Independent News Group (1999–2006), Fairfax Community News (2006–2010), and MP News Group (2010–15, 2017).

Former journalist and sub-editor (in Melbourne 1970s, '80s and '90s) with Sunday Observer, Sunday Press, The Herald, The Sun, Sunday Herald Sun.

Former associate publisher general books division Macmillan Australia (1983–88).

Broadcaster and producer RPP FM (Radio Port Phillip) 2006–2014, 2025–

At no time did I hide my connection with Community of Christ. It was in my first press release. It was on my campaign website. It is clearly in my work history on LinkedIn.

After meeting you with Peter Orton on 5 August 2024, I checked your LinkedIn. So I knew about your involvement with Community of Christ church from long before you were selected to be the candidate.

You being an ordained minister was not an issue for me. I have fond memories of Brian Howe as a Labor MP and an ordained minister in the Uniting Church.

However, I had never heard of the Community of Christ church so I googled it. I found it was the Reorganised Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. As I once told you, I lived with a family in Blue Springs, Missouri who practiced the same religion.

If the selection panel had checked your LinkedIn, Pam would not have told people that you were no longer an ordained minister. She may also have not sent people AI generated content about your religion.

However, it is not true to say this information "was on my campaign website". The fact that you are an ordained minister in the Community of Christ was NOT on your campaign website.

The information on your website (under heading 'Is Ben a Mormon?') makes no reference to Community of Christ or you being an ordained minister.

Was it written somewhere else on your website? If not, please remove “It was on my campaign website” from your statement.

*"Campaign bosses claimed that [media reports \(\\$\)](#) of Smith's Community of Christ membership were “misinformation”. Campaign workers at pre-poll places and on election day, asked about Smith's Community of Christ connection, told voters it was “in his past”. This does not appear to be true given recent Facebook posts [here](#) and [here](#)."*

- At no time did any of my team suggest my membership of Community of Christ was misinformation.

I was sent an email in which Emily Jones had written: “That was misinformation published by the Age (classic).” (Appendix 21 of my report)

I was also told that members of I4F organising team told people that you are “not a member of the Latter-Day Saint church”. It is my understanding, from my family in Blue Springs (i.e. not Wikipedia) that Community of Christ church is the second largest Latter-Day Saint Church in the world.

Finally, I was also told that members of I4F organising team told people that you are “no longer an ordained minister” of the Community of Christ church. Yet in a text you sent me on 11 December 2024, you said you remained an ordained minister.

*“Yes that’s correct Sarah. I’m not a regular attendee these days, mostly because of distance to the closest congregation, but still hold that title.”*

- What was misinformation was the use of the term 'Mormon' and any reference to the LDS church - clearly misidentifying my faith. Community of Christ is completely separate from the LDS church. The claim (included in your own socials post erroneously) has the effect of misinforming the electorate about important principles I have regarding the separation of church and state, inclusion of the LGBTQI+ community, the importance of women in leadership, and a woman's rights to choose - particularly around abortion. All of those principles are vastly different to the position held by the LDS church.

I emailed Michael West about his reference to “Mormon” being incorrect.

Speaking with my American family, I asked about the reasons for changing the church's name. They replied about the congregation being tired of being called Mormons.

I have been very clear with numerous people who emailed me expressing their concern that you are “a Mormon”.

My standard reply was: "Ben is not a Mormon. His church - Community of Christ - is a breakaway church from Latter Day Saints. It is a progressive church.”

- Those linked posts are re-posts of poetry I wrote over a decade ago. You would have known that if you asked me when I wrote them and they were first published.

Irrespective of when these poems were written, they were posted recently in Community of Christ Church Mobile Alabama Facebook page. This contests your claim that your connection to the Community of Christ church was “in the past”, as your supporters told many voters.

I received a copy of your claim in WhatsApp “*Imagine pretending to quote me but just quoting another Ben Smith from Alabama*”. So, I went to the Community of Christ Church Mobile Alabama Facebook page. I found the following 4 Ben Smith “poems”, all with different addresses.

13 February 2025

By Ben Smith

15 October 2024

By Ben Smith of Tootgarook, Victoria, Australia

June 12, 2022

By Ben Smith of Mt. Eliza, Victoria, Australia

Saturday, 26 February 2022 – Ben Smith of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

Are there 4 different Ben Smiths in Community of Christ Church who post their “poems” on Community of Christ Church Mobile Alabama Facebook page?

FYI – I have been informed that screenshots of these posts have been taken in case they get taken down, like your contributions to the Community of Christ I later received a copy of Smith’s claim in WhatsApp “*Imagine pretending to quote me but just quoting another Ben Smith from Alabama*”. So, I went to the Community of Christ Church Mobile Alabama Facebook page. I found a total of 4 Ben Smith “poems”, all with the different addresses including: Tootgarook, Victoria, Australia; Mt. Eliza, Victoria, Australia; Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. These posts contests Smith’s claim that his connection to the Community of Christ church was “in the past”, as many of his supporters told voters on pre-poll and election day.

Are there 4 different Ben Smiths in Community of Christ Church who post their “poems” on Community of Christ Church Mobile Alabama Facebook page?

*"A few weeks before pre-poll began, all digital evidence of Smith’s ministry with the Community of Christ was deleted from the Community of Christ website. This caused people to question Smith’s integrity."*

- I have zero control over what Community of Christ does with its website. I question the plural use of 'people' who questioned my integrity. Not once was I asked about this during the campaign.

Are you claiming that wiping Community of Christ website of all your posts a few weeks before pre-poll was a coincidence?

How many people does Hast need before he can say “people”. A quick search of letters to MP News shows several people questioning your integrity. Add to this the number of people who emailed me, it would have been correct for Hast to say: “several people”.

*"Throughout the five-month election campaign, Smith's top people talked up his chances of success, a not unreasonable tactic in this modern era of spin, but many of the claims were fantastic. For example, a WhatsApp message sent to volunteers stated that Smith was on track to win on first preference votes."*

- At no point did we make this assertion (that we would win on first preferences). The reference to 'votes needed' was always about the flow of all votes, including preferences. Published polling always cited 2CP polling.

Clearly people misunderstood the WhatsApp message that Broers sent to volunteers. (Appendix 24)

I was also gobsmacked after reading a comment that Pam Pitt made in the Community Independent Movement debrief “We won on the night - it was the postal votes that sank us”.

Irrespective of whether Broers' message referred to first preference or after full distribution of preferences, the point Hast made was Broers' claim was a gross exaggeration.

*"It was baloney. The full distribution of preferences showed he needed an extra 5,258 from almost 115,000 formal votes to “make history”."*

- This is, of course, using actual votes cast post-election to suggest we somehow were lying about our prospects prior to this time. Every team before a match says 'we can win this' and at half time says 'we're in this, only x points behind' and the results of the match are then determined afterwards.

Hast was correct, the pre match pep talk was baloney.

My additional concern here is UComms polling. I was told that the pollster used only your name. This seemed to me to be more about ‘campaigning’ than ‘polling’. I received emails from locals who complained about receiving a phone call from UComms. One person contacted me after he received 3 phone calls from UComms. He referred to UComms polling as “push-polling”

*"In the wash-up, Smith's Climate 200-driven campaign has attracted vigorous criticism. A grassroots movement became a top-down campaign that repeated mistakes made by both major and minor parties in the modern era."*

- I challenge you to cite one single source of 'vigorous criticism'. Very dishonest. I'd suggest holding the Liberal Party to their lowest primary vote since WWII

would have not been predicted by anyone, nor a doubling of the primary vote for the community independent.

The emails I received show 'vigorous criticism'. My report collates these unsolicited emails. I had hoped to give this feedback in person – because critical feedback is received better when there is a discussion.

My plan was to meet first with Gerard (I4F) and then Simon Holmes à Court when he is back from overseas. I had then planned to meet with you. My belief was that you are a good person who received poor campaign advice about financial transparency and deleting your posts from Community of Christ's website. I do not know where this advice came from - Climate 200 or elsewhere

It is a shame you do not want to engage with me because I believe this report will help the community independent movement.

Although it was never my intention to make my report public, the past 48 hours has made me reconsider. If I decide to put a copy on my website, I will invite you, I4F, Simon Holmes à Court and Climate 200 to 'fact check' the report.

Campaigns are not grassroots movements, and to suggest a grassroots movement can't have a leadership structure is to be ill-informed. This grassroots movement grew from 50 people to over 700 volunteers. I'd suggest if it were as bad as you claim it was, those people would not have joined.

After the failure of community independents to win extra seats in 2025, I had a text conversation with a leader in the community independent movement.

*"There's no doubt a large machine has been created around the community independents movement – where money has been prioritised over community. We need money to campaign, but not at the expense of what the movement is all about."*

*"What happened to the grassroots campaign? The kitchen table conversations? Integrity? Financial transparency? Of the 35 candidates listed by Climate 200 as beneficiaries of its fundraising, 19 disclosed their donations, with Smith among those who didn't."*

- The grassroots campaign informed the entire base and focus of the campaign. The KTC's informed that focus. It has grown up and moved on from previous campaigns.

I undertook most of the KTCs in Flinders in 2021 (because it is a research methodology that I have had in my qualitative tool kit for past 30 years). I can 100% assure you that these KTCs did not inform the focus of your campaign.

Financial transparency is a core tenet of community independent movement. Yet you made the decision not to be transparent.

Again, I suggest this piece is ill-informed and provides nothing but a one-sided perspective from one person.

I have no opinion about your campaign. I have spent most of the past 6 months nursing a dear friend with terminal cancer. However, Hast's piece is informed by my report. My report is NOT my opinion – it is a collation of hundreds of unsolicited emails, texts, screenshots, personal messages - sent to me by people who were critical of your campaign and character. I attach the report's table of contents.

My final comment refers to the following comment you made in a WhatsApp group:

*This is clearly informed from a disenchanted former 'supporter' of the movement who didn't get their way. Full of lies. No request for comment. Not worth the 'paper' it's written on. Imagine pretending to quote me but just quoting another Ben Smith from Alabama... Funny how on the very day 'Progressives of the MP' re-emerges, this article is published 🤔*

This comment reminds me of a tactic that Trump uses to deflect criticism – claim it is “fuel of lies” (i.e. fake news) and create a conspiracy theory about the timing of the article. It is also defamatory because I am identifiable.

You should apologise for this comment. Also please note: Administrators of WhatsApp groups can be held liable for defamatory content posted by others if they are aware of it and fail to remove it.