

Appendix 41: Russell's reply to Holmes à Court's email, 19 October 2025

Simon

I undertook this qualitative research project because we should consider feedback from those who believed mistakes were made in Flinders.

I first contacted you and Byron about my report in June. I genuinely believed you would both welcome the research, and I looked forward to a 'frank and fearless' discussion.

If the Community independent movement is to thrive, and I hope it does, people need to be able to offer constructive critical feedback without fear of retribution.

Please find attached my response to your claims. I have used the evidence from my report.

Kind regards, Sarah

1. the vast majority of the claims you've collected are simply wrong

Qualitative research is neither "right" nor "wrong". It merely documents people's views. The feedback was from members of the Progressives of the Peninsula and Independent 4 Flinders. These unsolicited messages (about 400 of them) were de-identified and analysed thematically.

People expressed concern that Smith's campaign was inconsistent with the values of the community independent movement. Their views are valid even if you disagree with them.

A limitation of this document is that people who were dissatisfied with Smith's campaign were more likely to contact me than those who were satisfied. Despite the potential for bias in this report, critical feedback is constructive and it is important that the leadership takes it on board for the future of the community independent movement to thrive.

Hast proof read my report (he is a professional editor) and two months later decided to write an article. He told me that he hoped his article would begin a constructive conversation. Instead, rather than engage with the feedback, efforts were made to remove the article from the Michael West Media website.

2. at no time did C200 mentor I4F

The chair of Independent 4 Flinders sent emails to potential candidates describing Climate 200 as their "*mentors*".

- On 22 August 2024, the I4F Chair told a possible applicant that Climate 200 had recommended delaying the candidate selection process. In this email, the Chair referred to Climate 200 as "*our mentors*" (see attached -1).
- On 27 September 2024, the I4F Chair told another possible applicant that the community group was being "*mentored*" by Climate 200 (see attached -2).

With two emails describing Climate 200 as "*mentors*", it is reasonable to conclude that the Chair of I4F organising team *felt* that Climate 200 was mentoring them. In addition, The Huddle Communities Ltd provided explicit mentoring to I4F. It has been alleged that Climate 200 funds The Huddle Communities Ltd. Does it?

3. C200 did not recommend that I4F use teal for their branding

In his capacity as a Climate 200 employee, Seán Marsh re-branded I4F in teal colours – the website, flyers and T-shirts. Climate 200 provided Sean’s services to I4F in addition to accelerator grant money.

4. we do not claim that we "don't get involved in community groups" — i think you're misquoting me

In my report, I quote you verbatim. “Climate 200 does not run campaigns. Climate 200 does not target seats or select candidates. Those responsibilities lie squarely with the communities themselves. *Climate 200 comes to these campaigns relatively late in the game after countless kitchen table conversations, after town halls and **after candidate selection.***” (National Press Club, 12 March, 2025)

According to emails from the Chair of I4F, Climate 200 was involved long *before* candidate selection.

5. ben was not a C200 pick. C200 had nothing to do with ben's selection. i learnt ben's identity from you.

No one has asserted that Climate 200 picked Ben. The only assertion (as per the emails Chair I4F sent to potential candidates) is that Climate 200 “*recommended delaying the candidate selection process*”.

Some members of I4F were concerned that the selection process had changed without members being informed. I4F members had agreed upon a rigorous selection process with experienced local people to be on the selection panel. Yet, **for some unexplained reason**, these experienced people were replaced with three members of the organising team.

Kate Lardner (The Huddle Communities Ltd) was the fourth member of the selection panel. She and Conal Feehely (Monique Ryan’s employee; co-founder and Director of ‘Mornington Peninsula Independents’) encouraged Smith to apply. It is not clear how Kate managed this clear conflict of interest.

6. despite your repeated requests for me to appear in flinders, i, and C200, kept away from the community during the critical formation phases

I can only recall inviting you to speak at one forum in September 2024 (see attached -3).

Given your visible presence during Smith’s campaign – at the launch and a speaking event in Mt Martha – some people were curious as to whether you visited other electorates with candidates supported by Climate 200.

7. no C200 employees were employed by ben smith's campaign at any time

Five people from outside the Flinders electorate ran Smith’s campaign: Emily Jones, Alex Broers, Maneesha Todd, Lucy Keller and Seán Marsh.

Marsh, a Climate 200 employee, asserts he was a volunteer. Emily Jones came via The Huddle. I have no idea about Alex Broers, Maneesha Todd and Lucy Keller – though some assert they came via Watershed. It has been alleged that Climate 200 funds Watershed. Does it?

8. C200, a crowdfunding group with 33,000 donors, most likely was the biggest donor to ben's campaign — but i'm only guessing as we are not privy to their finances

The lack of transparency about Smith's campaign donations is contrary to the values of the community independent movement. It also led many people to assume that Climate 200 was the main funder of Smith's campaign. Your email suggests they may be correct. We will find out tomorrow.

Although Smith claimed on several occasions that he was "*not a teal*", the lack of transparency about donations to his campaign enabled the Liberal Party to run an effective anti-teal campaign in Flinders. Those handing out Smith's how-to-vote cards reported hearing more negative remarks about Climate 200 than Smith's association with the Community of Christ.

9. you are misquoting the whatsapp message — it's normal to quote 2CP numbers in polling, the whatsapp message i've seen quoted definitely did not mention a primary vote

I attach Broers' WhatsApp message. There is evidence that Smith told at least one supporter that he was confident he would "win on first preferences. This supporter describes such confidence as "*delusional*". Do you want to talk with this supporter?

10. contrary to your claim, C200's polling in april 2025 named zoe mckenzie. the script:

I am wondering why you have raised this point about UComms polling. Hast's article did not mention it. However, I submitted a draft article to Pearls and Irritations last week – to show evidence for Hast's analysis. I asked the editor whether she shared it with you – she did not. I will withdraw the article to avoid further ad hominem attacks.

Evidence for my claim comes from a community leader who told me UComms phoned him three times. He said the poll included "highly suggestive" questions about Smith. Moreover, he stated that the only candidate's name mentioned during the poll was "Ben Smith". It may be worth you talking with this community leader.

11. Ben nearly won

According to my analysis of the full distribution of preferences, this is a false assertion.

12. Smith and his team ran a great campaign

I was disengaged from the campaign so I have no personal view. However, many members of Progressives of the Peninsula and I4F disagree with your assertion. In

fact, some assert that Smith's campaign has ruined the community independent movement in Flinders.

People described Smith's focus as "*beating the Liberals*" rather than "*doing politics differently*". They claimed Smith's campaign was "*using Liberal tactics – focusing on local issues that are not the responsibility of federal MP (something Hunt did so well)*". These local issues included starting a petition to restrict the use of jet skis in the bay, saving Arthurs Seat from a luge ride below the existing gondola, and increased funding for the Rosebud Hospital.

13. If the flinders community come together

Climate 200 played a significant role in fracturing the Flinders community. In 2022, Climate 200 financially supported O'Connor rather than the community endorsed candidate Boardman. This not only split the vote, it also divided our community. After the 2022 election, I worked hard to bring the two 'factions' together. You congratulated me for this (see attached). Yet you told Mike West, when trying to persuade him to remove the Hast article, that I am "*a narcissist who has blown up many organisations*".

A new group has formed – Independent 4 Morn Pen. I am not involved. However, I have noticed that letters to the local paper indicate members of this group have no interest in bringing the Flinders community together. So far, their agenda has been to attack the Liberals, particularly Zoe McKenzie. This is in opposition to the community independent movement's mantra of "being your best self".

14. Ben could win next time

In my view, Smith's reply to Hast's article on the Michael West Media website demonstrates clearly why Smith should never be considered a suitable candidate to represent a federal or state electorate. [Being open to all feedback is surely the minimum standard we should expect of anyone who aspires to be a community leader. Yet Smith claimed the article was "*full of lies*" (i.e. fake news) and then created a conspiracy theory about the timing of the article.]