

CHRISTINE RICHARDS

Losing to win

When 99-year-old environmental advocate Warwick Exton told a group of Frankston environmentalists to get off their bums and do something, he probably didn't mean stand for the Senate. But by the end of the day, that's what former Frankston mayor, Christine Richards, had agreed to do.

Whilst Ms Richards has no chance of winning, she is putting her name forward to give someone she believes will be an excellent Senate candidate a better chance.

It was a sunny Sunday afternoon in April when a group of 15 Frankston community leaders gathered to consider how governments could be made more responsive to the people that they represent. Senate candidate Susan Benedyka had been invited to share her experiences about successfully creating a system of political representation in the Victorian electorate of Indi that is more accountable to voters.

Christine Richards asked the group how many Victorian senators they could name. 'I was shocked. These were well-connected people who'd be advocating across governments for our region for decades. With one exception, no-one could name any. It spoke volumes about how little sitting Senators visit our region and listen to the people that they are supposed to be representing', said Ms Richards.

'And there was Susan, who had travelled three hours away from her home near Wangaratta to listen to and work with Frankston people. Here was a Senate candidate worth supporting.'

The group heard how nine years ago 440 people in the Victorian electorate of Indi (a huge electorate which extends from Kinglake in the south to Wodonga in the north) had wide-ranging discussions around kitchen tables, lounge rooms, and club rooms to compile their views into an action plan of political policies and priorities for their community. They became the Voices for Indi. When the sitting member — who enjoyed a whopping ten per cent margin — wouldn't read their report, they stood a candidate against her.

That candidate — Cathy McGowan — won. She and the parliamentarian who followed her in to office (Helen Haines) entrenched a model of parliamentary representation that most Australians dream about but never experience: a representative who is not locked into party voting lines but who instead takes her cue from her electorate by careful listening and consultation — consulting with her electorate on how they would like her to vote on significant pieces of legislation, budget priorities for their region and issues such as where more mobile phone towers should be built.

In the current Federal election, the Indi model has now been embraced to varying degrees by over 20 Teal candidates across Australia. Susan Benedyka wants to introduce this model into the Senate.

But as one individual, Ms Benedyka faces a voting system for the Senate with an inbuilt bias towards the major parties. In both funding their campaigns and attracting votes on the ballot paper, the bigger the grouping, the greater the advantage.

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The two major parties are likely to receive between \$3 and \$4 million dollars for their Senate campaigns. By contrast there are 26 groups standing in the Federal election — two thirds of them groups of two people that may be eligible for \$10,656. That gives the major parties overwhelmingly more spending money to get their message out.

The Senate ballot paper, too, favours the bigger parties. People are more likely to vote for a group rather than a person. Of course, that's partly because some groups have greater appeal to voters. But disincentives to vote for individuals must also have an effect. Voting is easier and less time consuming when you vote for a group. For a vote to be effective, you can number six groups above the line or twelve people below the line. In other words, a vote for an individual will require you to fill in double the boxes, and therefore require more time and care.

'Without a running candidate to stand with her, Susan would have been listed as an ungrouped individual in the last column of the ballot paper,' says Ms Richards. 'In the 2019 Federal election for Victorian Senators, the four candidate listed in the last column received only 2,595 of the 3,739,443 first preference votes successfully cast. That's why the overwhelming majority of people who stand do so in groups, with the majority of groups — this year two thirds — containing two people. For Susan, I'm that second person.'

'Many of the Teal candidates are unproved. Susan isn't. As a founding member at the forefront of creating the Indi model, she is now hoping to bring the Indi model directly to the Australian Senate. That's a revolution I'm going to put my name to,' says Ms Richards.

**To vote for Susan Benedyka and Christine Richards,
vote 1 for Group T above the line on the Senate ballot paper.**

Background on funding:

Senate candidates can be reimbursed for the costs of running their campaigns provided that they are eligible. And to be eligible, an individual candidate or group must obtain at least four percent of first preference votes. That might not sound like much, but in Victoria — where the eligible voting population now tips \$4.32 million people — in this election that could be as any at 172,800 votes. In the last Federal election, only three groups — The Liberal/Nationals, the Labor Party and the Greens — achieved four percent or more of the first preference vote. If they achieved the same number of votes in this election, they would be eligible for significant sums: the Liberal/Nationals nearly \$3.9 million, the ALP over \$3.3 million and the Greens \$1.134 million. That gives the major parties far more spending money to get their message out.

Read more on the Australian Electoral Commission website —
<https://www.aec.gov.au/Elections/candidates/>