



Easy winner, thanks to straight talking

The 1996 election is the one that gave us the Howard Government, as if we could forget. Less obviously, it also gave us Peter Andren. Andren used to be a teacher, then a journalist. Then, for a lot of years, he was a newsreader on NSW country television. You might remember him as the bloke who won a seat in Parliament by replacing a former minister in the Keating government. And he did it the hard way.

He did it as an independent.

In a field of eight, including candidates from the Labor, Liberal and National parties, the Greens and the Democrats, Andren was the only one who ran as an independent. That is, without the backing of a party organisation. And he won by topping the primary vote and sweeping up an overall 63 per cent mandate after preferences.

Eleven years later Andren, 60, is still in Parliament. How he's managed this is instructive. In 1996 the National Party candidate finished second to him. In 1998 Andren won (with a 72 per cent vote) in a field of nine, with Labor second. In 2001 Andren repeated victory against six opponents. In the 2004 election, he won for the fourth time, with the Liberal candidate the runner-up. In the last two elections he got an absolute majority of the primary vote.

You see the point. All three of the major parties keep running against him, plus the Greens and Democrats – and, on two occasions, One Nation. But all that changes is the musical chairs of which of the established parties comes in second. Now, for the election due later this year, Andren's seat of Calare, centred

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PETER ANDREN

west of Sydney around Bathurst, Orange and Lithgow, has been cut to pieces in a statewide redistribution of electoral boundaries.

But don't imagine Andren can't win again.

This week, with the usual theatrics of Parliament dominated by the trench warfare over Iraq between John Howard and Kevin Rudd, the previous week's "issue" of climate change slipped from the forefront of the political game-playing and out of the headlines. But not in the mind of the member for Calare.

On Tuesday night, on the adjournment debate, Peter Andren made the sort of speech that suggests why his attitude to public life resonates with voters and keeps him, as a dedicated independent not beholden to sectional interests, ahead of the party hacks – and will likely go on doing so for as long as Andren chooses to offer himself for election.

Some edited highlights:

"The politics of climate change have taken some fascinating turns lately. There has been a mad scramble by climate sceptics, but the premiers and the PM are still playing politics, all trying to claim the high ground and catch up with the public's growing understanding of the crisis ...

"[This understanding] is particularly inconvenient for any government facing an election, as Morris Iemma and John Howard are caught with their swimming trunks down and no water to swim in. Water, we're now told, is a public asset. A few months back it was available to the highest bidder as the states and the Commonwealth colluded to flog off the Snowy scheme, with its crucial role in water supply, environmental flow, irrigation requirements and clean hydro-electricity ...

"I will tell you about climate in this country.

"It is a climate of fear among scientists concerned about their careers if they're seen to be critical of the Government's energy priorities [which] are all about fossil fuels, including uranium ... Will the PM please explain which part of the nuclear cycle is clean, green and safe? So what is going on? A cosy climate of mates, nudges and winks – the talking up of nuclear, with the help of the fossil mafia and nuclear energy interests, the talking up of unproven 'clean coal', the stripping of solar research funding and the closing of energy research and development ..."

The voters hear him, if others don't.

Alan Ramsey