

Credibility in campaigning

In all elections, electors need to carefully evaluate the credibility and authenticity of each of the alternative candidates before casting their votes.

The election of a candidate involves the conferring of a great trust by the electorate, and places on the successful candidate moral responsibilities to the electorate – a responsibility to be the person and type of parliamentarian they have portrayed themselves to be; a responsibility to truly represent that electorate; and a responsibility to be a parliamentarian acting in the best interests of Tasmania and Tasmanians.

The first requirement of a candidate is therefore to be authentic – to present himself or herself to the electorate in a way which is transparent and truly representative of his or her political, connections, his or her ideology, his or her approach to the role of a Legislative Councilor, and his or her capacity to fulfil the role. It should be remembered that the Electoral Act 2004 makes it an offence to publish electoral material that is intended to, likely to or has the capacity to mislead or deceive any elector in recording his or her vote.

One of the areas where it seems to me there not infrequently occurs a lack of authenticity and a lack of credibility is in claiming to be truly independent. Typically, the term is technically able to be used by most candidates merely because they are independent of official party endorsement. However, a truly independent candidate who would be able to bring balance and objectivity to the role of a legislator must also be independent of party allegiance or influence, past or present, and not be a captive to an ideology which brings a predetermined position on matters prior to any detailed analysis of the evidence and careful deliberation.

Typically, the Labor Party stands candidates for Legislative Council seats, and yet Labor has chosen not to do so in Nelson. Can it be that there is one or more of the so-called independent candidates which Labor would find perfectly acceptable as a parliamentarian sympathetic to its position?

At least the Greens are authentic in offering a party-endorsed candidate, but it has been remarked upon by many that the Greens have not exactly taken on the Nelson electoral contest with energy and enthusiasm. Can it be that there is a realisation that it would be a first if a Greens party candidate was successfully elected to the Legislative Council, and that, more realistically there is one or more of the so-called independent candidates which the Greens would find perfectly acceptable as a parliamentarian sympathetic to its position?

Of course there is authenticity to the party endorsed candidates. What you see is what you get. But where the credibility of party-endorsed candidates dissipates is when they suggest that they can offer the electorate viable representation, as their opinions, positions, perspectives and conduct will always be dictated by their party organisation and by their innate bias. In any event, all electors of Nelson are also in either the Clark or Franklin electorates, and so are already represented in the House of Assembly by two Liberal members, two Labor members and one Greens member.

A capacity to be the voice of the electorate is claimed by all candidates to varying degrees. How is this credible when candidates are variously party-endorsed, or technically independent yet having known predilections which are so acceptable to parties that they see no need to waste resources running or supporting their own candidates, and in many cases have already declared their position on issues?

How can a candidate, for example, declare themselves to be unequivocally supportive of or

opposed to a cable-car and still claim to represent those in their electorate who are of a different view? This is especially so in circumstances where the successful candidate does not win more than 50% of the primary vote. Of course, it is not possible for a parliamentarian to be all things to all people, but those with a view different to that which their member ultimately takes in the parliament deserve to have had their ultimately unsuccessful viewpoint properly evaluated.

The other key area where there is a complete lack of credibility is with candidates seeking to create the impression – or in some cases, even declaring – that they have the solution to well-known problems, and that they will, as an elected member of the Legislative Council, be able to deliver such solutions.

It is a simple matter for a candidate to be able to point to problems of which we are all aware – such as the unacceptable quality of water at our beaches or increasingly frustrating traffic congestion. In some cases, it may even be suggested that so-called problems have been invented, or magnified to suit a candidate's agenda. It is however a matter of considerable audacity to claim that without the benefit of any specialist expertise, without detailed knowledge of costings, and without the benefit of expert reports and analysis, a simple, affordable solution is readily known to a candidate, and that this candidate when sitting in the Legislative Council would be able to deliver this simple solution to a complex problem. Such an approach not only lacks credibility, but insults the intelligence of electors and misunderstands the role of the Legislative Council.

It is also misleading for candidates to characterise other candidates as being part of political groupings when there is no evidence of that. One candidate has been reported, for example, as referring to all other candidates as being Green, pseudo-Green or pseudo-Labor, and making reference to a Labor-Green bloc. I know this not to be accurate in my case while it may be accurate or inaccurate in the case of others. I have, with authenticity, described myself as a moderate and as being open-minded and objective, and yet notwithstanding this, I have been grouped in with Greens, pseudo-Greens and pseudo-Labor when there is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that this is so.

Credibility is also strained when candidates claim to know and understand the electorate and being therefore able to reflect and represent community values and views, when the primary basis for this contention is a couple of weeks or a couple of months of door-knocking. A true and accurate knowledge and understanding of an electorate is gained by being immersed in it over a long period of time – in my case, through living in the electorate for 35 years. A few weeks of door-knocking develops a knowledge of the streets, not a knowledge of the electorate.

In conclusion, I contend that unlike some others, I have throughout this campaign presented myself and conducted myself in nothing but an authentic and credible fashion. I do not assert that I have simple answers to complex issues. What I do assert – and believe myself to be credible in doing so – is that I have the skills, experience, objectivity and open-mindedness necessary to be able to dispassionately review government policies and legislation, and to advocate for matters which broadly concern the Nelson community.