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— **Exclusive**

# David Pocock leaves the Climate 200 mothership

**Phillip Coorey** *Political editor*



Mar 19, 2025 – 8.00pm

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In 2019, ACT Labor senator Katy Gallagher spent just \$23,000 to ensure her re-election.

Gallagher, formerly the chief minister of a territory that habitually votes Labor at both levels of government, raised the money through cake stalls, raffles and small donations.

That all changed in 2022 when former Wallabies star David Pocock made a run for one of the two ACT Senate spots. Pocock did not adopt the teal branding of the community independents who wreaked havoc on the Liberal Party that year by taking six of its hitherto blue-ribbon lower house seats.

But, like them, he had the backing of Simon Holmes à Court's progressive fundraising juggernaut Climate 200, which contributed \$648,546 in cash and \$207,836 in-kind support towards Pocock's war chest of \$1.7 million.



David Pocock has sufficiently consolidated himself as a senator and will no longer receive money from Climate 200. **Rhett Wyman**

Because he and Gallagher – now the finance minister – were chasing the same progressive vote, Gallagher upped her campaign spend to about \$200,000, of which half was spent on mailing every ACT resident a letter from Julia Gillard backing her. A report by *The Canberra Times* after the election said ACT Labor spent \$1.24 million in total.

Gallagher won a full quota and kept her spot. Liberal incumbent Zed Seselja came second with 0.74 per cent of a quota, and Pocock was third with 0.64 per cent. Thanks to preferences from Greens and other independents, Pocock knocked off Seselja for the second spot, ending the last vestige of Liberal representation in the ACT.

In the territories, senators are elected every three years, and this year Pocock is lining up again – with one key difference. He has chosen to no longer receive backing from Climate 200, making him the first so-called teal to do so.

Pocock, who Labor believes will win a quota outright, will run a smaller campaign this time based on his record.

He believes Holmes à Court would be better off spending his money elsewhere – more so as this is the last time he can effectively buy seats before election spending is capped at \$800,000 for individuals under changes passed by the major parties last year.

Climate 200 is backing candidates in 35 seats, including those already held by teals,

“Momentum for more genuine representation is growing and there is a new wave of community-backed independents who have a real shot at winning a seat at the next election,” Pocock told *The Australian Financial Review* in a statement.

“After the major parties’ stitch-up deal on electoral reform earlier this year, this will be the last election where new independent candidates can compete before the system is skewed even further to the advantage of major parties.”

But his decision to leave the Climate 200 mothership does come amid a rising sensitivity in the teal and community independent movement about Holmes à Court’s high public profile becoming a liability.

Speaking strictly on condition of anonymity, one teal insider said Holmes à Court was being increasingly likened to a “progressive Clive Palmer”. That is, every time he speaks publicly, be it at the National Press Club last week, or as part of a current tour of target electorates to promote the film *No Safe Seat*, it fuels the perception that “the candidates are the puppets of these billionaires”.



ACT sparring partners: Katy Gallagher and David Pocock. **Alex Ellinghausen**

Unwarranted or not, perception matters in politics, especially at election time and especially when the Liberals and conservative proxy groups such as Advance are fighting back against the teals.

One community independent insider points to Holmes à Court's confrontation with Liberal senator Jane Hume outside a polling booth in Kooyong before the last election. More recently, there have been revelations about a digital newspaper, *Gazette News*, which is funded by Climate 200 donors and targets the same seats as the group does.

The Coalition has referred it to the Australian Electoral Commission, claiming it is peddling misinformation.

"I don't know a lot about *Gazette*," Holmes à Court told the press club last week. "There's no connection between Climate 200 and *Gazette*."

"I have met the founder of [*Gazette*, Anna Saulwick] before, I knew she was starting a business; [it] sounds like a really interesting development in media."

Says the insider: “Every time he sticks his head up, it creates negative media. It shouldn’t be about him, it should be about the candidates.”

Another teal source said backing from Holmes à Court was a double-edged sword. His profile in raising the issue of climate change helped their cause, not to mention the money he raised, but him being in the limelight made them a target for campaigns and push polling alleging they were under his command.

The sensitivity is not a new thing. But it is growing.

Last year, the *Financial Review*’s independent power panel chose Holmes à Court for its annual covert power list because of the upheaval he had caused to the established order. Before publication, he and lower house teal Allegra Spender made representations to the newspaper under the misapprehension that he was chosen because he controlled the teal MPs. This was never cited as a reason by anyone on the judging panel.

While Pocock is now free to run his own race, those who know him say being detached from Climate 200 is a bonus even if he has fewer resources at his disposal.

Meanwhile, Gallagher, who rebranded her campaign as “Team Katy”, is scratching around for the \$500,000 she estimates she’ll need this time. Which is not easy in a city where the only people with money are property developers, and they are banned from political donations.

For the finance minister, it’s a long way from the lamington drives of 2019.

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