

THE THIRD

A brief history of the Australian

ARON PAUL & LUKE MILLER

AUSTRALIANS are renowned for their love of sport, so it is no surprise that sporting analogies run thick and fast in our political sphere. One early comparison was made by Prime Minister Alfred Deakin, who, explaining the merger of his Deakinite liberals with the conservative forces to combat the Labor juggernaut, despaired that politics was like cricket: there could not be three teams on the pitch. With this manoeuvre, he established the century-old bipolar nature of Australian politics as a contest between Labor and non-Labor. Over the last 30 years the Australian Democrats have launched a sustained assault on the two-party system. But as Deakin realised, being the third bat in politics is a hard race against the odds.

One of the few academic studies of the Australian Democrats, by Japanese political scientist Hiroya Sugita, argued that the Democrats political philosophy aligned closely to the social liberals of the early 20th century. Then, thinkers like Hobhouse in *Liberalism* (1911) combined the individualist ethos with a progressive conception of the common good. Janine Haines, one of the Democrats electorally most successful leaders, once described herself as 'John Stuart Mill softened by Harriet Taylor'. John Stuart Mill was a founder of liberal thought and Taylor, his feminist wife. With a clearly defined set of goals and beliefs, it should be no surprise that Sugita decided the Australian Democrats, as social liberals, were the most ideologically coherent and consistent of the Australian political parties. By contrast, many Australian commentators remained stubbornly confused by the Democrats, as one might expect of spectators of a match in which a third band of players not only streaks across the field but actually starts to score goals. Commonly the Democrats have been cast as a

broad and ideologically inconsistent party, on the 'centre' on some issues, the 'left' on others and occasionally startling everyone by being 'right'. The Democrats however have never been pigeon-holed by these labels, priding themselves instead in their non-ideological character — one might say *anti*-ideological in the same sense that they have often tapped into anti-party sentiment more broadly with their insistence that not even party policy should override their consciences when it came to the vote. This has only added to the disdain of the political scientist and journalist — a group who love labels and teams, who like their 'sides' predictable and definite even when they are not.

“Over the last 30 years the Australian Democrats have launched a sustained assault on the two-party system.”

Despite having a strong social liberal philosophical base, well-formulated policies and a functioning party machinery, the Democrats have lacked a large and dependable voting base. In no small part this is because they are the 'thinking person's party'. This kind of party could never take support for granted in the same way that the Liberal or Labor parties can rely on about two-thirds of the electorate to vote for them no matter what. This is the irrationality of team sports. Many voters are born into parties in the same way they are into football teams. Gradually in the late 20th century this began to change, and for 25 years at least the Democrats were the principal beneficiaries of this loosening of party loyalties and voter identification.

TEAM

Democrats after 30 years

As the Democrats have never looked likely to gain a parliamentary majority, and have also consistently ruled out entering into coalition with a governing party, political commentators have been further baffled. The Democrats will never win the prize of unfettered power, and this is the source of the pejorative label 'fairies at the bottom of the garden'. If the Democrats do not want power, asks a commentariat enamoured with power, then what do they want and what is the third team even for?

It is a question all too many Democrats have asked themselves, but to which the answer should be remarkably clear. Of all the political parties, the Democrats have not seen or used the parliament as a means to an end, but as an end in itself.

Australia is a nation blessed with liberal democratic governing institutions, and Democrats are quintessential liberal democrats. Of all the political entities in Australia, the Democrats are the ones who consistently believe in the system itself. This is a theme which keeps emerging in studying the history of the party, and talking to its members and representatives — a love for the democratic institutions of this country and a desire to improve and nurture them. For 30 years they have laboured to make parliament work the way it should. For almost as long they have succeeded — and that is their story.



The party's 21st birthday (1998): Meg Lees (leader), Don Chipp, Colin Mason, Natasha Stott Despoja (deputy leader) (left to right).

Foundations

Conventional wisdom has it that Don Chipp founded the Democrats as a breakaway party from the Liberals in 1977. This is of course but a part of the story. The political and social forces that coalesced into 'Don's Party' had long been seeking a home and a champion that would return social liberalism to political ascendancy and give expression to its new concerns and ambitions.

In the 1970s the South Australian Liberals formally split over the issue of 'one vote, one value', with conservatives seeking to maintain their undemocratic stranglehold over the upper house. Liberal leader Steele Hall joined Robin Millhouse and Martin Cameron as MPs in a breakaway 'centre' party. In the 1974 federal election they won 8.2 per cent across South Australia. Steele Hall gained a quota in his own right to enter the Senate and in the 1975 state election Millhouse was re-elected to the lower house under the banner of the New Liberal Movement. The prospects for a 'centre party' seemed bright.

Around this time came the first merger talks with the Australia Party. The Australia Party had been founded on a national level under the auspices of Sydney businessman Gordon Barton, who burst onto the political scene in 1966 with an open letter in the *Sydney Morning Herald* denouncing the Vietnam War during LBJ's visit to Australia. 'People all over the world are tired of military solutions and power politics,' he declared, and the public response led ultimately to the establishment of the Australia Party — but electoral success was elusive.

To this point, the movements were still classically liberal and cadre parties based around parliamentarians and personalities, albeit with the 'common good' in mind. Laurie Hull, a defector from the ALP, injected a major dose of democracy into the Australia Party with the launch of the newsletter *Reform*. This aimed to galvanise debate and policy discussion among the rank-and-file membership, and in this respect was a precursor of the Democrats' *National Journal* where policies might not only be discussed but voted upon. By the mid-1970s a plethora of movements, parties and individuals clamoured for a way out of a two-party system that was lurching from crisis to crisis.

John Siddons, leader of the Australia Party and later a Democrats senator, took on board the principles of participatory democracy, and proudly declared the Australia Party the first in the world to campaign against

nuclear power. Thus the conglomeration of movements that would form the new party was not only liberal and democratic, but came also to have an internationalist concern for world peace and nuclear disarmament.

Many other leading figures of the early Democrats were a further testament to the remarkable continuities between the new party and the older forces that formed it. Jack Evans, founder of the Centre Line Party in Western Australia, went on to become a Democrats senator. He had been compelled to enter politics by issues of political integrity and accountability. The parties of the centre had already realised that they must unite when they anointed Don Chipp as their champion. Don Chipp's life has already been the subject of biography, and his charismatic personality and flair are well known. Here was an experienced member of parliament with ambition, charm and a recognisably social liberal outlook. Chipp was a former minister, a man of talent and ambition languishing in the Liberal Party, and on 27 March 1977 he rose in parliament to announce his resignation.

Though the words and phrases he employed were not extraordinary, it remains one of the great political speeches of Australian history. It was part of Chipp's skill to turn the ordinary into something tremendous. The two-party system had failed, he declared, with Labor in thrall to the unions and the Liberals to 'big business'. Small businesses, the individual worker, the ordinary Australian unconnected with 'vested interests' were Chipp's chosen constituents. It was an insider's disillusioned appeal to the outsiders who 'yearn for the emergence of a new political force, representing middle-of-the-road policies which would owe allegiance to no outside pressure group'. Chipp's appeal was in essence that of a social liberal, calling forth a vision of a country of free enterprise, justice and compassion governed by independent democratic institutions. The enemies of social liberalism were always conservatism on the 'right' and socialism on the 'left', those two tribes that had so successfully colonised Australia's political institutions. Don Chipp called on Australians to take back parliament and transform it from a place of 'cheap political point scoring' to a house filled with 'people' (not parties) who would 'identify the real and significant problems of the future, and ... take action now which will make the country a good, safe and sound place for future generations'.



March 1983: Jack Evans, Colin Mason, Michael Macklin, Don Chipp and Janine Haines (left to right).

Australia's next government?

A feeling of euphoria and boundless optimism swept through the liberal movements in 1977. The leaders and members of the Australia Party, New Liberal Movement and Centre Line Party called on Don Chipp to lead a new party and called a series of overflowing public meetings at town halls around the country. Invitations to the public meetings soon urged citizens to come and 'be a part of Australia's next government'. This was a time before the spin of 'under-promise and over-deliver' was established wisdom. The genuine feeling among his supporters was that Don Chipp could soon become prime minister.

Within two months the new party boasted between 5000 and 7000 members. The Australian Democrats also contested their first elections within months of their formation, returning Robin Millhouse to the South Australian lower house as the first Australian Democrat in an Australian parliament, and polling 18 per cent in the Victorian seat of Greensborough at a by-

The new party was not only liberal but also fiercely democratic.

election. All this occurred as Don Chipp continued his seven-month speaking tour of Australia. In November 1977, South Australian premier Don Dunstan appointed Janine Haines to fill the vacancy left by retiring Steele Hall, making her the first Democrats senator.

In December 1977 the prime minister, Malcolm Fraser, called an early election, in no small part to head off the threat posed to the Liberals by the new party. Thus within 10 months of Chipp's resignation speech, the Australian Democrats faced their first federal election. The new party was not only liberal but also fiercely democratic. This was the ultimate attraction to new members and outsiders marginalised by the machines of the two major parties. The Democrats' first national president, John Siddons, and a national executive were elected through postal ballot, establishing a tradition of participatory

democracy that would infuriate political journalists for decades to come.

The first Democrats policy was also voted upon. This was an indefinite stay on the mining and export of uranium. Thus the democratic and nuclear disarmament colours of the party were quickly established. In his campaign, Chipp made 'honesty, tolerance and

compassion' his party's theme. Of the issues he nominated as the primary challenges, no fewer than three out of five were clearly economic — unemployment, inflation and industrial relations. The others were uranium and 'social policy'.

Democrats polled well, debuting at over 9 per cent of the vote for the House and 11.3 per cent for the Senate. Chipp was elected comfortably to the Senate in Victoria with over 16 per cent of the vote. Colin Mason joined him in New South Wales, while Jack Evans and Gillfillan narrowly missed out on preferences, with 12 per cent and 11 per cent respectively. Democrats were far away from becoming Australia's next government, but they had broken through on the first attempt into the federal parliament, and anything might still be possible.

Keeping the bastards honest

Over the first parliamentary term, Don Chipp gradually modified his ambitions and charted a new course for the party commensurate with its power in the Senate. With only two senators (Janine Haines lost her seat in 1978 before winning it again '80), there was little time for parliamentary work or strategy. As Colin Mason recalls, 'We had to chase up media all the time ... Don and I had to get the Democrats name out there.' The business of building the party during this period came largely outside of parliament and in the media.

The unfettered and adversarial two-party system was at this time inherently unstable and repeatedly forced Australians to the ballot box. In 1980 the hard work of the two senators and the party delivered John Siddons, Janine Haines and Michael Macklin to the Senate — bringing the Democrats representation to five senators with the balance of power.

An 'ordinary week when both sides make pathetic attempts to score points' was anathema to Chipp. The heady days of the 70s when Chipp imagined his new political force sweeping into power with himself as prime minister gradually gave way to a new passion — to 'keep the bastards honest' at the very least, and to try to fundamentally change politics in the longer term. 'I'm in it only for one reason now — I can see three or four problems of gargantuan proportions looming: if our small force can do a little to try and keep these issues before the people, I'll feel my career has ended on a satisfactory note.'



Brokering better Budgets

The 1980/81 Budget was the first where Democrats held balance of power. It was their first crisis and transformed the party. Chipp was reluctant to block the budget, having already committed to not doing so. Other voices prevailed, however, because the budget was so unpopular. The Democrats publicly agonised over the budget so much that a young political journalist, Michelle Grattan, dubbed Don Chipp 'the agony man'. It was this public show however that captivated an audience, and put the Democrats at centre stage. The Labor Opposition would have liked the credit for blocking aspects of the budget, but in the end the curtain call went to the Democrats. John Howard was the treasurer with a budget deficit of \$4.3 billion, and it was his budget that Democrats tore apart. The largest measure to fail was a proposed increase of 2.5 per cent in the sales tax. The Democrats also voted down the re-introduction of higher education fees and a measure that would cut off dole payments to the spouses of strikers. Taxation, education and industrial relations were early fields of Democrats endeavour. The Democrats were widely attacked from predictable quarters for renegeing on their promise to pass the budget, but Chipp carried the public with his contrition. Exercising power was difficult, he assured the public. 'When people say it's been a good week for the Democrats, they don't know what kind of week it's been,' he declared. It demonstrated the power of the party in the Senate, but also highlighted its challenges as an honest broker between two sides.

Among those gargantuan issues with which the Democrats were haranguing the big parties were issues we recognise today with mounting urgency: the dangers of nuclear weapons and their proliferation, the destruction of the environment and the desperate need for sustainability, privacy concerns, human rights, and even imbalances in industrial relations.

In this way the Democrats were also fulfilling the desires of the Australia Party's Gordon Barton for a party that would be 'the conscience of parliament', reminding politicians before it was fashionable of the many inconvenient truths we still face today.

“ Moribund upper chambers were transformed into functioning houses of review.

Some of the Democrats' most enduring victories in the early 1980s were in the area of accountability and parliamentary procedures. In 1981 Democrats senators were instrumental in establishing the Scrutiny of Bills Committee. Moribund upper chambers were transformed into functioning houses of review.

When Lis Kirkby entered the New South Wales legislative council in 1981, what she encountered was typical — 'an old boys' club' where members 'were not expected to do anything other than rubber stamp whatever the government of the day had decided'. Liberal and Labor Party MPs viewed it 'as a part-time job'. She held balance of power in 1988, when she was joined by Democrat Richard Jones. If, on the other hand, the Opposition got its hands on the upper house it was, as Fraser demonstrated, open season to constitutional chaos and mindless obstruction. It was here that the Democrats liberal democratic philosophy served the party so well. Rather than voting on legislation along political or ideological lines, Democrats MPs were determined to avail themselves of the full resources of parliament to address each bill on its merits.

Not only were Democrats thus reinforcing the liberal values of a representative government, but they were also opening the door to greater public scrutiny and participation through the system of committees and inquiries. Chipp summed up the Democrats work in this respect as an assault on the hitherto unfettered power of the executive in parliament. The Democrats would

stand up where 'weak gutted backbenchers' had failed to exercise their duty in maintaining the supremacy and integrity of parliament, and of parliament's responsibility to the people between elections. This was the essentially democratic mission of the Democrats.

Keeping the government to its word was also a major theme of the Democrats in parliament. In November 1981 Chipp threatened to block government legislation to increase the oil levy in the Senate unless Treasurer John Howard delivered on promised tax cuts immediately. The delay, Chipp saw, was 'an attempt to build up reserves for 1983, the election year when we can expect to be showered with goodies'. Again in 1983 the Democrats held the new Labor government to its election promise for an independent ABC. The government acceded to Democrats amendments for a joint-consultative all-party committee to appoint members to the board of the ABC, and further amendments directing the ABC to maintain adequate staff levels to collect independent news.

In the 1983 election the Democrats' appeal was to the 'thinking voter'. Chipp returned to an enduring theme in the party's campaign — that the Liberal Party was 'uncontrolled' in their exercise of power, while Labor was 'extravagant' in their thrall to the unions. What were needed were more watchdogs in the Senate, a third team and an umpire to rein in Liberal and Labor excesses. 'It's not our resources that are failing us,' he declared. 'It's the two-party system.'





Senators and state parliamentarians (1990): Front row: Vicki Bourne, Elisabeth Kirkby, Jean Jenkins, Meg Lees, Janet Powell and Janine Haines; middle row: Paul McLean, Sid Spindler, Cheryl Kernot, Michael Macklin and Richard Jones; back row: Ian Gilfillan, John Coulter, Michael Elliott and Robert Bell.

The first environment party

October 1982 saw another Democrats landmark, with the introduction into the Senate by Colin Mason of legislation to prevent the destruction of World Heritage Areas. This was aimed squarely at Tasmania and the Franklin River, a symbol that would galvanise popular opinion and finally bring down two governments. Both federally and in Tasmania, where Norm Sanders represented the party, the Democrats were pivotal in the downfall of the Fraser and state Labor governments and prevented the destruction of the Franklin River.

Senator Mason's World Heritage Properties Protection Bill 1982 was also significant because it wrote international conventions into the laws of the land. While the Democrats in the 1980s were proud economic nationalists, in the area of the environment as with nuclear disarmament they were long Australia's most committed internationalists. The Democrats World Heritage Protection Bill passed the Senate in the dying days of the Fraser government, and its form provided the constitutional mechanism whereby the incoming Hawke government could override the Tasmanian state government to save the Franklin.

The Democrats were the vanguard of environmentalism in Australia. Environmental issues were also a new 'post-material' concern for social liberals, but a natural one given its centrality to the 'common good'. Far ahead of debates in the 21st century, Don Chipp perceived environmental protection and sustainability not as some fringe or indulgent concern, but as the most startlingly clear and urgent moral issue of our time.

1980s: environment victories

- The Rainforests Preservation Agreements Bill 1982, drafted by the Democrats, was the first legislative attempt to protect Australia's rainforests.
- The Democrats forced amendments in 1983 to the Income Tax Assessment Act to remove tax deductions for destroying native trees.
- Other major environmental legislation introduced into parliament by Democrats included the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Amendment (Prohibition of Mining or Drilling Activities) Bill 1985 and the Queensland Rainforests Conservation Bill 1984.

The party that put a woman first

By the mid-1980s the Democrats had consistently defied the naysayers with a steady vote and parliamentary representation where proportional representation voting systems existed. Don Chipp had become convinced that the party's role for the foreseeable future would be one of 'Senate watchdog'. Chipp's dream had been a parliament filled with independent-minded liberal democrats, but by 1986 Chipp had realised that the necessary 51 per cent of people were as yet incapable of voting beyond 'greed', 'selfishness' and 'fear'. 'We must await the millennium,' he declared. 'It could take a long time.' Nonetheless, with just a handful of his dream representatives, the Democrats had already transformed the Senate. But with Chipp resigning in 1986 at end of a long career in parliament, it would be his deputy, Janine Haines, who would take the party to new levels of electoral success. She would do this by blazing a trail not only by becoming the first woman to lead an Australian political party, but by making a dash for a seat in the House of Representatives, insisting that she would not resume her Senate seat should she lose.

“With just a handful of representatives, the Democrats had already transformed the Senate.”

It was Janine Haines' leadership that proved that the party was bigger than one person. Janet Powell replaced Don Chipp as senator for Victoria and explained the rise of women in the Democrats as the result of its democratic ethos. The entire membership selected candidates and party officials by secret postal ballot. And by 1986 almost half of Democrats members were women. As Powell explained, the Democrats as a new 'post-women's lib' party did not 'have to shake off a tradition of male domination' like the other parties and thus 'provided a framework for women to have a more important role'.

Haines had already established a reputation on social justice and women's issues. In 1983 Democrats had successfully moved amendments to strengthen the Sexual Discrimination Bill to prevent discrimination

against women in clubs. Haines also linked her interest in women's issues in her broader social justice agenda to 'bread and butter' economic issues that affected the everyday lives of women and their families.

Like Chipp, Haines was also something of a larrikin. Frowned upon as 'flippant' by the media, Haines' humour was a large part of her appeal as leader, cementing her status as an outsider assaulting the grey citadels of power. In terms of political strategy, Haines followed the trajectory established by Chipp. She explained that the Democrats had 'a sort of umpire's role ... our presence compels them to get things right'. There was certainly no shortage of Democrats legislative amendments and achievements in this period (see box below) and they were not afraid to reject bills.

The greatest legislative achievements of the Democrats in the period of Haines' leadership were over the Australia Card and tobacco advertising (see boxes on following page).

Developments in the 1980s

- In 1986 Democrats blocked the amalgamation of the ABC and SBS, and in 1988 blocked timed local calls by Telecom.
- Democrats fought to save the Daintree rainforest through amendments to the World Heritage Properties Conservation Act in 1986, aspects of which were eventually taken up by the ALP in 1988.
- Democrats also fought to prevent uranium mining at Kakadu through the Koongarra Project Area Repeal Bill 1986.
- The party's activists were at the forefront of the movement against joint American military bases in Australia, with Victorian Sid Spindler calling for an end to the bases and for a 'Pacific Zone of Peace' from which all nuclear warships and weapons should be excluded.
- From 1985 through to 1988, Democrats continued to campaign for a bill to have both houses of parliament approve overseas troop deployments, with the Defence Amendment (Overseas Troops) Bill 1985 coming twice before the parliament.

Tobacco advertising

The health and safety dangers of smoking were recognised by the Democrats before it was accepted by the other parties, and the party's policy called for a ban on tobacco print advertising. The Democrats were the only parliamentary party to refuse donations from the tobacco industry. It was a case of enacting the party's first principle — 'to be beholden to no groups or sectional interests'. Janet Powell became the first woman to have a private bill passed through the federal parliament when her Smoking and Tobacco Products Advertisement Prohibition Bill banned print tobacco advertising.

Blocking the Australia Card

The Australia Card was an attempt by the Hawke–Keating government to introduce a universal identity card. The card initially had the support of a large majority of electors, but Janine Haines and the party defied opinion and forged an extra-parliamentary coalition of community and civil liberties groups to fight the proposal. The party's Senate vote rose to 8.5 per cent and Democrats maintained their numbers and balance of power in the Senate, combining with the Opposition to block regulations that would give effect to the bill. The Democrats proposal for a strengthening of the tax file number was finally enacted.

On the economic and international relations front, the Democrats also won amendments in 1989 requiring annual reports to parliament on Australia's participation in the World Bank. Democrats supported Australia's involvement in international institutions, but were critical of big corporations using them to extend their power over democratic polities. Haines was critical of the trend among multinationals and large companies to merge in expensive takeover bids that produced nothing: 'Not a job, no economic development comes out of it.' The Democrats continued to scrutinise the links between the two major parties and big business and big unions, which received big handouts from the government, which were then 'recycled' in donations to their parties. During Haines' leadership, the Democrats also saw off two of the many challenges to their third-party status — from the Nuclear Disarmament Party and the breakaway Unite Australia Party. With the forces of the centre seeming to fragment, and two leadership contests, the media predicted the party was on the edge of the abyss. Instead, it was on the cusp of its most successful election yet.

Advocates for the marginalised

- In 1996 Senator Sid Spindler introduced a private member's bill to end discrimination on the basis of sexuality.
- In 1992 the Democrats were the only parliamentary party to oppose the Labor government's mandatory detention policy for refugees — a policy that laid the groundwork and made possible the outrages by the succeeding government.
- In 1997 the Democrats were the first parliamentary party to apologise to the Stolen Generations.

The 1990s: 'The real opposition'

Don Chipp did not think it was possible yet for the Democrats to remain true to their principles and win the votes required to enter the House of Representatives. Winning majorities, he declared, was incumbent upon not offending people, and people simply had a tendency to be offended by the truth. Janine Haines was going to try to be both truthful and victorious. In 1989 she selected the electorate of Kingston, and in the 1990 election resigned from the Senate in a blaze of glory. If she were to retire from politics, she would not go quietly. Her call to Australia was to 'Give a Damn. Vote Democrat'.

On election day Haines polled 26 per cent in Kingston, and over a million Australians voted for the Democrats. A breakthrough was just out of reach, but Haines' spectacular exit had also paid dividends, with a 12.6 per cent Senate vote nationally and 10.3 per cent in the House of Representatives. This was the 'green election' that nearly brought down the Hawke–Keating government. The environment was a top issue, but so too was a decade of largely unwanted economic reform in which both Labor and Liberal had lurched to the 'right', leaving the Democrats increasingly as the 'real opposition'.

Fresh from an electrifying election, members elected Janet Powell leader. It proved a baptism of fire, with Democrats under Powell providing a lone voice of opposition in parliament to the first Gulf War in August 1990. Democrats had consistently called for matters of war to be decided by



Federal parliamentary party (1995): Front row: Meg Lees, Cheryl Kernot (leader) and Vicki Bourne; back row: Robert Bell, John Woodley, John Coulter and Sid Spindler.

parliament, and the recall of the Senate, and ultimately the entire parliament, to debate the war was Powell's first major achievement.

South Australian senator John Coulter became the next leader as a devoted environmental champion. He had been drawn to politics by a desire to 'achieve from within the political process those things I had been trying to achieve from outside'.

The 1993 federal election was heavily polarised around the GST. The Democrats suffered their most disappointing result yet, with only 3.8 per cent for the lower house and 5.8 per cent for the Senate, winning two seats of those up for election. Seasoned political commentators were certain that the party was about to crash. Instead, the party was on the verge of a remarkable decade of electoral success and parliamentary achievement.

In 1993 Queensland senator Cheryl Kernot was elected leader. The following election was an earthquake in Australian politics, with Labor swept from office and former treasurer John Howard returned to government, now as prime minister. In 1996 the Democrats doubled their vote, to 10.8 per cent in the Senate and 5.3 per cent in the House, re-electing all five senators and thus maintaining seven seats.

Making a difference was not, however, purely in the realm of policy and legislation. The Democrats breathed new life into parliament, using it as a platform to launch and to support public campaigns within and beyond Australia's borders, from labelling genetically modified food to defending human rights in Tibet and East Timor.

Democrats opened up avenues of political participation to Australians who had previously been excluded by the major parties.

Senators Karin Sowada and Natasha Stott Despoja and MLA Roslyn Dundas all broke records as the youngest women elected to Australian parliaments. In 1998 Aden Ridgeway became only the second Indigenous Australian in parliament and was joined by West Australian gay rights activist Brian Greig. Senator Cheryl Kernot resigned as leader in 1997 to join Labor and Senator Meg Lees, who had been her deputy, was elected leader, taking the party to its record of nine senators in the 1998 election. The party was challenged for the 'last senate seat' by emerging minor parties such as the Greens on the 'left' and One Nation on the 'right' but outpolled them all in the Senate, with the slogan 'Vote Democrat to stop One Nation dividing Australia'. It was another election to be dominated by a government GST proposal and again the Democrats inserted themselves firmly into the main game, pledging to make the GST fair and remove it from food.

Throughout the 1990s the Democrats work was remarkably consistent with the social liberal foundations laid down in those early years. Where the two major parties were polarised and the Democrats took a centre position, such as over native title and industrial relations, the party, in balance of power, was able to make the most impact. It is significant that for the decade after 1996, Australians worked and prospered not under the Coalition's industrial relations system of choice, but that forged by the Democrats. For Senator Murray, this was 'our greatest achievement', bringing industrial relations 'back from an antagonistic right-wing agenda to a more centrist agenda'. The reality of this has been made stark since the Coalition's 2005 WorkChoices.

The balance-of-power party

Under both the Keating and Howard governments, the Democrats continued their 'balance of power' role whenever they could through the committee system, in the Prime Minister's office and on the floor of the Senate to 'make a difference'. Their greatest legislative achievements in the 1990s were undoubtedly:

- Native Title Act 1993;
- Workplace Relations Act 1996; and
- New Tax System 1999.

Balance of power negotiations are generally politically risky and these were no exception, attracting fierce opposition. The just-say-no approach might have been safer but this would have breached a fundamental, pragmatic tenet of the party — that parliament was not to be treated as a means to a political goal, but as a proper forum in which to debate and achieve the best possible outcome. Negotiated changes were soundly rooted in evidence brought to inquiries into each bill and cross trading would not be entertained. In each of these three instances the Democrats won many amendments and substantially transformed the legislation.



Engaging new technologies

- The Democrats have used new technologies and media to engage the people in politics.
- Senator Andrew Bartlett's blog (www.andrewbartlett.com/blog) is the first by a federal politician, and remains by far the most credible and comprehensive.
- Lyn Allison, famous for her Prius and electric motorbike, has launched herself onto YouTube (www.youtube.com/lynallison) in a direct appeal to young people.

The new century: changing politics

The millennium arrived — that once-distant time awaited by Don Chipp as a time when Australians might finally be ready to hear a new voice beyond the vested political interests he disdained. The late 1990s had been a ferment of new political activism based around globalisation and economic distribution in a post-Cold War world. The omens for a party of social liberals and internationalists were auspicious. Natasha Stott Despoja, who was elected leader earlier that year, urged Australians to 'change politics'. Her emphasis was on youth and young people, women's issues, the environment and human rights.

It is common political wisdom that the outrage of 11 September 2001 'changed everything'. In Australia the launch of a new war on terrorism arrived in tandem with the *Tampa* affair, in which the military was used to turn back asylum seekers. The Labor Party quickly capitulated to Howard's political strategy. Against this backdrop of insecurity and fear, Democrats faced a tremendous task to be heard and to win votes at a time when their opposition to war and support for human rights was offending the majority of the electorate.

The Democrats nonetheless held their ground and their vote in the 2001 election, returning four senators and but losing Senator Vicki Bourne — a founding member who, in her time as a senator, helped transform the Senate committee system — leaving eight. The following year was, like other periods in the party's history, a tumultuous one for leadership, and in 2002 Queensland senator Andrew Bartlett became leader following Senator Brian Greig's interim leadership.

Senator Bartlett led the Democrats into the 2004 election on a platform of social justice and accountability, dubbing the Senate team the 'lie detectors'. By this time the Greens were outpolling the Democrats in most states and the media were again convinced the party was finished. All four senators up for election lost their seats and the party's representation in the Senate was reduced to four.

Nonetheless, the Democrats continued to make a difference in parliament, with legislative and campaign victories. Many private bills were introduced, some echoing campaigns started in the 1970s, like those setting up a peace commission and requiring parliamentary approval to go to war. Inquiries were initiated including a series into children

in institutions, Australia's response to greenhouse and water, and student incomes. An Auditor General's performance audit was won into politicians' entitlements, local calls and low-cost Internet connections were won for people in remote areas, the discrimination in non-public service superannuation against same-sex couples was finally won, tax deductions were won for land conservation and much more.

In July 2005 the Senate switched over to government control by a margin of one and the leadership of the Democrats again changed hands, this time to Victorian senator Lyn Allison. The potential for balance of power and legislative wins dried up overnight, the Senate committee system was severely curtailed and major bills were routinely rushed through. Nonetheless, there were still major wins for the Democrats, including an inquiry into mental health that won substantial funding from governments around the country and another on stolen wages. RU486 was won with cross-party support, and complex stem cell legislation was drafted, taken over by a government senator and also won on a conscience vote. The much worse 2007 version of the Australia Card was recalled thanks to Democrats pressure. Climate change, water and Indigenous disadvantage have moved to centre stage, and nuclear power, uranium mining and enrichment — all core Democrats issues — have moved into mainstream and been taken on by the major parties.

Without a large social base that sustains major parties in times of crisis, the process of rebuilding the party's support is difficult. With the political landscape shifting dramatically from internationalism, pacifism and liberalism to xenophobia, war and authoritarianism, the first terms of the 21st century have been one of the party's most challenging and most important.

Without the balance of power, and with the conservative forces in the ascendant, the achievement of the Democrats in the new century has been to keep alive the fires of social liberalism — those values of 'honesty, tolerance, compassion'. While Australia and much of the world has experienced an unexpected lurch towards fundamentalism, the big issues identified by social liberals — the environment, war and peace, reconciliation, the interaction between economics and social cohesion, globalisation, privacy and human rights — have not gone away. Indeed, it is when these issues are politicised or marginalised that the need for the Democrats is greater than ever.

Women's rights

- Democrats leader Senator Lyn Allison initiated the RU486 debate that led to a landmark conscience vote on a woman's right to reproductive choice.
- Senator Natasha Stott Despoja introduced a bill to regulate pregnancy counselling services, so that women would know what kind of counselling advice they were dialling.
- The Democrats bill funding paid maternity leave for all working women remains on the parliamentary list.

South Australian MLC Sandra Kanck argues the Democrats have been 'the only ones who are really prepared to go out on a limb', tackling issues the major parties find too inconvenient. Robin Millhouse MHA and later Ian Gilfillan MLC were great champions of prostitution law reform in South Australia. Norm Kelly MLC and Helen Hodgson MLC played an important part in having abortion laws reformed in Western Australia.

Through their presence in parliament, Democrats have acted as the conscience of parliament. Speeches like that from Senator Andrew Bartlett against the gay marriage ban backed by Liberal and Labor in 2004 will condemn for all time the proponents of that bill. That is a type of accountability that cannot be legislated by any government, and shows the vital role of independent voices in parliament keeping alive the fires of social liberalism. As Chipp predicted, however, winning votes with the truth is a hard task. The Democrats have much unfinished business. In looking over their work, the themes are remarkable for their continuity in the long history of the party.

On nuclear disarmament and peace issues, the Democrats remain at the forefront — which is important at a time when there is again a concerted push from vested interests for a nuclear industry. In 2007 Lyn Allison introduced a bill that would prohibit the Australian defence force from using cluster bombs, which indiscriminately kill and maim innocent civilians in war zones like Lebanon. In South Australia, Democrats have pre-selected peace activist and former human shield Ruth Russell to take the place of Stott Despoja, reaffirming the party's activist and pacifist roots.

The forces that made the Democrats are also still alive and angry, but are fragmented once again. In a sense the political scene is not unlike that which greeted Chipp in 1977. A Liberal government jealous of its executive power. A Labor Party waiting in the wings to wield power in the same old way. A number of small parties on the centre and centre-left. Non-partisan networks like GetUp! and single-issue parties have adopted parts of the Democrats platform almost wholesale. The challenge for the Democrats today is the challenge they have faced repeatedly — to reunite and bring these disparate forces home. In a sense the Democrats have been victims of their own success. Having charted a course for a third party, they have shown the way to countless other individuals and parties to have a go.

Janet Powell reflected that this achievement was what made her most proud: 'We basically managed to unhook voters from their slavish adherence to the two-party system. By establishing a third viable option, we really shook up the two-party system.' The last words should go to Don Chipp. The Democrats' first leader was not above reflection from time to time. 'When I used to talk about "ordinary people out there",' he told a reporter in 1983, 'I was talking about ordinary people who cared about other people's problems, who were prepared to sacrifice themselves to help other people. I grossly

overestimated the number. The fact that they were there I've no doubt. I failed to marshal them. If I had, the Democrats would have trebled, quadrupled what they are today. I was virtually preaching the gospel of love, and that should be greater than the forces of fear.'

* * *

On course for a better Australia

The list of Democrats draft legislation in parliament still charts the course for a different Australia that could happen tomorrow:

- The bill that would give Australians a parliamentary charter of rights and freedoms
- The bill that would give equal marriage rights to all Australians
- The bill to repeal the 2001 excision of Australian territory from its migration zone and end the cruel temporary protection visa regime for refugees
- The bill to restore voting rights to prisoners
- The bill for a charter of political honesty
- The bill that would guarantee that no war is ever again entered into without the consent of parliament.



Federal parliamentary party (2007): Andrew Murray, Lyn Allison (leader), Natasha Stott Despoja and Andrew Bartlett (deputy leader).