



Australian Democrats: the passing of an era

Cathy Madden
Politics and Public Administration Section

Executive summary

- The Australian Democrats have been the longest surviving and most successful minor party in federal politics. The party was created as a ‘centre’ party.
- Two distinctive features of the party were: adherence to the principle of parliamentary democracy and the ability of parliamentary representatives to vote according to their conscience.
- The use of the proportional representation voting system for Senate elections allowed the party to gain greater electoral support for Senate seats. The Democrats won seats at each Senate election from 1977 to 2001.
- Support for the party mainly came from middle class, urban-based, educated and younger voters who were disillusioned with the major parties.
- The Democrats held the balance of power in the Senate either solely or with other minor parties or independents from July 1981 to 2004. They were able to influence the legislative agenda.
- The party led the way in promoting women to leadership positions.
- Many factors played a part in the decline of the Democrats. Many commentators point to the Democrats support in the passing of the Goods and Services Tax legislation in 1999 as a key factor. Other issues relate to the turnover of parliamentary leaders, not getting their message heard and the rise of the Australian Greens.
- From 1 July 2008 no Democrats are represented in the Federal Parliament.

Contents

Executive summary.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Origins.....	1
Australian Democrats.....	2
Party Features.....	3
Electoral support.....	4
Commonwealth elections.....	4
State and territory elections.....	5
Why did voters support the Australian Democrats?.....	6
Why only Senate success?.....	7
Parliamentary performance.....	8
Balance of power.....	9
Parliamentary procedure.....	12
Significant Senators.....	12
Decline.....	13
Goods and Services Tax.....	13
Leadership.....	14
Role.....	14
Recognition.....	14
Australian Greens.....	15
Achievements.....	15
Conclusion—do the Democrats have a future?.....	16
Appendix A:.....	18
Australian Democrats in the Federal Parliament 1977–2008.....	18
Appendix B:.....	19
Private Senators Bills introduced by selected Australian Democrats.....	19
Australian Democrats voting in Senate divisions 1999–2004.....	19
Appendix C:.....	20
Parliamentary leaders 1978–2008.....	20

Introduction

After 20 years, we are entitled to say with confidence that we are here to stay and, after 1996, we can say with equal confidence that our best is yet to come.¹

The Australian Democrats (Democrats) were the longest surviving and most successful minor party in federal politics. The Democrats appeared to gain a stable level of representation during the 1980s and 1990s. However, the 2004 election saw a decisive change in the Democrats fortunes when the party failed to win any Senate seats, an outcome repeated at the 2007 election. As a result the party has had no federal parliamentary representation since 1 July 2008. The era of the Democrats is significant as it marks a period in which the Senate played a crucial role in the parliamentary system, confirming its transformation from the 'house of the living dead' to a house of review.²

This paper provides an overview of the formation of the party, its level of electoral support and the party's upper house performance in the federal parliament. It outlines some of the factors that may explain why voters who had previously supported the Democrats became disenchanted with the party.³

Origins

The party was formed in May 1977. The Australian Democrat party had its genesis in two existing parties: the Australia Party (formerly known as the Liberal Reform Group) centred in Victoria and the New Liberal Movement based in South Australia. Discussions had occurred between the two parties about seeking an alliance if not amalgamation. The two groups found a common basis for a new political movement, in the widespread discontent with the two major parties following the constitutional crisis of 1975.⁴ In the former Liberal Government Minister, Don Chipp, the two groups found a leader and spokesman.

Don Chipp had entered the House of Representatives in 1960 as the Liberal member for Higinbotham (Vic), and was a minister in the Holt, Gorton, McMahon and interim Fraser governments. After his dumping from ministerial office following the 1975 election, a disillusioned Chipp resigned from the Liberal Party. In his resignation speech, he spoke about

-
1. Senator C. Kernot, Address to the twentieth anniversary National conference, Australian Democrats, Canberra, 17–19 January 1997, p. 10.
 2. L. Young, 'Red leather rules and the art of cross-benching: the Democrats and the budget process', in J. Warhurst (ed.), *Keeping the bastards honest: the Australian Democrats' first twenty years*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1997, p. 191.
 3. A detailed analysis of the Democrats can be found in J. Warhurst (ed.), *Keeping the bastards honest: the Australian Democrats' first twenty years*, op. cit.
 4. C. Forrell, *How we are governed*, 11th edition, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1994, p. 60.

his disenchantment with party politics as they were practised in Australia and the undue influence of pressure groups on the major parties:

... I wonder whether the ordinary voter is not becoming sick and tired of the vested interests which unduly influence present political parties and yearn for the emergence of a third political force, representing the middle of the road policies which would owe allegiance to no outside pressure group.⁵

Following a series of well attended and successful public meetings to build party support, Don Chipp was able to bring together disillusioned segments from the major parties and other groupings: the party was born.

Australian Democrats

Don Chipp's 1977 election campaign was centred on a return to the political virtues of 'honesty, tolerance and compassion'. He described the new party as an independent, incorruptible, middle-of-the-road 'watchdog' for the Senate. It was during the 1980 election campaign that Chipp voiced the famous catchcry of the Democrats—that they would 'keep the bastards honest'.⁶ The 'bastards' in this context were the major parties and, more significantly, the government of the day.

The Democrats was founded as a 'centre' party between the Liberal Party and the Labor Party. The party was presented as an alternative to the extremes of right and left, and a party not ruled by vested interests.⁷ Don Chipp articulated its ideology as 'no ideology' if it meant a rigid adherence to particular ideas or actions as was practiced by the major parties.⁸

The Australian Democrats were in the vanguard of environmentalism in Australia. From the early 1980s they were unequivocally opposed to the building of the Franklin Dam in Tasmania and they opposed the mining and export of uranium and the development of nuclear power plants in Australia.

While the Australian Democrats thus had very strong 'green' credentials they also encompassed a broad range of policies and issues. As well as the protection of the environment, the party stood for reconciliation with Indigenous people, homosexual law reform, gender equality and multiculturalism. The Democrats were also very supportive of

5. D. Chipp, House of Representatives, *Debates*, 24 March 1977, p. 557.

6. D. Chipp, press conference, 19 September 1980.

7. D. Chipp, 'Statement on the role of Australian Democrat Parliamentarians', in *Platform, principles and policies*, Australian Democrats, Melbourne, 1977.

8. 'Basic concepts of the Australian Democrats' in Australian Democrats, *Policy papers*, part 2, Australian Democrats, Melbourne, 1979

the public sector and of public education. On economic issues they supported more equitable distribution of wealth and a progressive taxation system.⁹

Party Features

The Democrats established a practice of participatory democracy unusual in Australian parties. The concept was inherited from the Australia Party and was reflected in the new party's constitution. Party policies were developed with the maximum participation of members, and determined by the direct and equal say of the membership by means of a voluntary postal vote. The leadership of the party was also decided by postal ballot. Party members could also remove their party leaders, a spill requiring only 100 signatures from members.

The Democrats found some aspects of direct democracy difficult. Although the party aimed to involve the whole membership in policy-making it was reported that in practice only ten to 20 per cent of the members participated in the decision-making process.¹⁰ This method of collective decision-making was criticised as being cumbersome and time-consuming. When quick action was required, the limitations of the system were evident. In 1993 a streamlined approach was adopted whereby members voted on the general principles and objectives of policy but the details were left to those with a specific interest in the issue. This method allowed the parliamentary representatives flexibility on how to address issues.

Another guiding principle for the party, conscience voting, was derived from the Liberal Movement. This meant that members of the party could vote according to their conscience when their views were in conflict with party policy. The representatives were not bound to uphold party policies and therefore not bound to vote as a bloc. A study of Senate divisions from the period August 1981 to December 1996 found eighty occasions when the Democrats did not vote as a bloc.¹¹ The possible negative impact of this practice was demonstrated in the split vote by the seven parliamentary representatives on the 1999 Goods and Services Tax legislation, which led to major internal divisions.¹² However, one significant constraint on their freedom to vote as they wished was the pledge the Democrats made not to block Supply. The Democrats had made the commitment not to block supply as a result of the 1975 Constitutional Crisis, which had been one of the factors leading to the formation of the party.

9. *ibid.*

10. J. Warhurst, 'Australian Democrats: from Chippocrats to Green Laborcrats?', *Current Affairs Bulletin*, December 1997/January 1998, p. 16.

11. H. Sugita, 'Parliamentary performance in the Senate', in Warhurst, *Keeping the bastards honest*, op. cit., p. 157.

12. M. Saunders, 'President calls for unity in Democrats', *The Australian*, 24 January 2000.

Electoral support

Commonwealth elections

Since contesting its first Commonwealth election in 1977, the party won a Senate seat in each Senate election until 2004. Due largely to the use of a proportional representation voting system in the Senate it is easier to win Senate seats than House of Representatives seats (discussed page 6). Although in the Senate the major party vote has been steadily eroded since the introduction of proportional representation, their average vote is still around 80 per cent.¹³ There are only thus a limited number of votes that the Democrats and other minor parties and independents can hope to attract. While the Democrats were able to elect senators at every Senate election between 1977 and 2001, on only one occasion did the party come close to winning a seat in the House of Representatives (Mayo, SA, 1998).

Table 1 shows the Democrats' level of electoral support from 1977 to 2007. It very clearly indicates that the party had much greater support in Senate elections. While the Democrats contested the majority of House of Representatives seats, it was only at the 1996 and 1998 elections that they fielded a candidate in all seats. The party's highest point of electoral support was achieved in 1990; their highest level of representation of nine Senate representatives followed the 1998 election. Their lowest vote share came at the 1993, 2004 and 2007 elections.

The Democrat's Senate vote peaked at 12.6 per cent at the 1990 election. Environmental politics was crucial to the outcome of the 1990 election and it was argued that concern for the environment might be linked to a weakening of ties to the major parties. Commentators also indicated that the support for the Democrats was largely a result of voter cynicism with the major parties, in particular the incumbent Hawke Labor government and its economic policies.¹⁴

The Democrats national vote collapsed at the 2004 election. The party faced a number of challenges, some brought about by leadership changes and grassroots and parliamentary members leaving the party. It was seen as the end of a longer-term trend of voting for minor parties in the Senate as the Government gained control of the Senate for the first time since 1981.¹⁵ The downward trend in their vote continued at the 2007 election when their national vote fell to 1.3 per cent.

13. M. Goot, 'In Parliament we trust: keeping the bastards honest', *Australian Quarterly*, Sept–Oct 1999, p. 24.

14. E. Papadakis, 'Minor parties, the environment and the new politics', in C. Bean, I McAllister and J. Warhurst (eds), *The greening of Australian politics: the 1990 federal election*, Melbourne, Longman Cheshire, 1990, p. 36.

15. M. Simms and J. Warhurst, 'Introduction and overview', in M Simms and J. Warhurst (eds), *Mortgage nation: the 2004 Australian election*, API Network, 2005, p. 7.

Table 1: Federal elections, 1977–2007

	House of Representatives	Senate	
	<i>Percentage of vote</i>	<i>Percentage of vote</i>	<i>Seats won</i>
1977	9.4	11.1	2
1980	6.6	9.3	3
1983*	5.0	9.6	5
1984	5.4	7.6	5
1987*	6.0	8.5	7
1990	11.3	12.6	5
1993	3.8	5.3	2
1996	6.8	10.8	5
1998	5.1	8.5	4
2001	5.4	7.2	4
2004	1.2	2.1	–
2007	0.7	1.3	–

* Note: election for full Senate after double dissolution

Source: Australian Electoral Commission

State and territory elections

The party had some success at State elections, in particular in contests for State upper houses. From 1977 to 2006 the Democrats not only gained seats in various Legislative Councils but also held the balance of power on a number of occasions. The party held the balance of power in the upper houses in New South Wales from 1988 to 1991, South Australia from 1979 for the following two decades, and in Western Australia for one term following the 1996 election. Unsurprisingly they were most successful in the heartland of South Australia. Their best result was in 1997 with 16.4 per cent in the Legislative Assembly and 16.7 per cent in the Legislative Council. The sole remaining Democrat representative in 2008, Sandra Kanck, is in the South Australian Legislative Council.

The Democrats also won a number of seats in state lower houses, in South Australia, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory. The party has never won any seats at Queensland or Victorian state elections.

Table 2: Democrat state and territory representation 1979–2008

State	House	Years	Representatives
NSW	Legislative Council	1981–1987	1
		1988–96	2
		1996–2007	1
South Australia	Legislative Council	1979–85	2
		1985–1993	2
		1993–2002	3
		2003–2006	3
		2006–2010	1
		House of Assembly	1977–82
Tasmania	House of Assembly	1980–82	1
Australian Capital Territory	Legislative Assembly	2001–04	1
Western Australia	Legislative Council	1996–2001	2

Source: D. Jaensch, *The politics of Australia*, 2nd ed, MacMillan, Melbourne, 1997, p. 312; relevant State electoral websites

Why did voters support the Australian Democrats?

The party did not attract a distinctive social or geographical base on which they could rely for electoral support.¹⁶ Ian McAllister of the Australian National University has said that typically about 50 per cent of the Democratic vote turned over at each election, thereby making it difficult to define a typical Democrat voter by characteristics such as socioeconomic status or age.¹⁷ However, it would appear that the Democrats appealed to a middle-class, predominately urban, educated, often younger voter. Janine Haines described her party's supporters as:

... people between the age of 25 and 40 who have children, aged parents; those on the way up the job ladder, who care about equality across the board for women, Aboriginals, migrants and who care about the environment in a much broader way than saving a dam here or a tree there ... Our supporters are people who can think in complexities—that's why we are a minority party.¹⁸

The initial strength of the Democrats has been partly attributed to the extent to which some voters were alienated from the major parties. It has been suggested that their durability indicated a desire of voters to have a group in the Senate to put a check on both major parties.¹⁹ The party was seen as 'third party insurance'.²⁰ Clive Bean, of the Australian

16. C. Bean, 'The Australian Democrats after twenty years: electoral performance and voting support' in Warhurst, *Keeping the bastards honest*, op. cit., p.77.

17. McAllister quoted in M. Steketee, 'They will be missed', *Weekend Australian*, 28 June 2008.

18. D. O'Reilly, 'Crash through or crash', *The Bulletin*, 29 November 1988, p. 48.

19. G. Barker, 'The politics of innocence', *Australian Financial Review*, 7 August 1996.

20. Senator Stott Despoja, 'Proud efforts to keep them honest', *Herald Sun*, 26 June 2008.

National University, through the Australian Electoral Studies Survey indicated that their support was seen more as a protest vote against the major parties than support for the Democrat policies themselves.²¹ Leadership was also an important factor in influencing voters as indicated by the strong personal support for leaders such as Don Chipp, Janine Haines and Cheryl Kernot. The party's lowest vote in 1993 corresponded with low national support for the leader, John Coulter.²²

Why only Senate success?

From the early years there were indications that the Democrats would never be more than a Senate party:

Each major party grouping has retained a solid electoral support of around 40 per cent on which the Democrats had made almost no impact; at present they give no indication that they will ever be able to expand their electoral base beyond the Senate.²³

As mentioned earlier, the principal reason why the Democrats won Senate seats, rather than national lower house seats, was to do with the different electoral systems in use for both Houses. To win a State Senate seat in a half-Senate election requires far fewer votes than in preferential voting elections used for House of Representatives seats—14.3 per cent of the vote, rather than 50 per cent (plus one vote). This is of great significance to the stronger minor parties.

Unlike the Nationals, the Democrats were not able to achieve a geographically-concentrated support base, resulting in the party not being able to win enough of the primary vote in any region to gain a seat in the House of Representatives. This was demonstrated in 1990 when party leader, Janine Haines, gambled on her high popularity to contest the seat of Kingston (SA). The attempt failed for although she polled 26 per cent of first preferences, she did not make the final count. The closest the Democrats came to winning a House of Representatives seat was in 1998 in the seat of Mayo, South Australia. Singer John Schumann ran against the then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer, and was in the final count, gaining a two-candidate preferred vote of 48.3 per cent after a first preference vote of 22.4 per cent.²⁴ To have a realistic chance of winning a House of Representatives seat, the Democrats' vote probably needed to be in excess of 30 per cent.

21. C. Bean, *op. cit.*, pp. 69–71.

22. I. Wilcox, 'Analysis puts party in its place', *Age*, 18 January 1997.

23. P. Weller, 'Political parties 1983: battle to control the agenda', *Current Affairs Bulletin*, vol. 60, no. 7, 1983, pp. 3–4.

24. Australian Electoral Commission, 1998 Federal Election, House of Representatives Results, http://www.aec.gov.au/Elections/federal_elections/1998/hor/divisions/fp_sa.htm, accessed on 20 August 2008

The preferential voting system has allowed the Democrats a level of influence through the flow of preferences. The Democrats' preferences were sought by both major parties but until the 1996 election the party had a policy of issuing two-sided how-to-vote cards indicating alternative preference flows to both the Coalition and Labor. Subsequently the party brokered deals, primarily with the Greens and Labor, for preference flows. By the 2001 election the party negotiated Senate preferences with the major parties, in particular Labor, in return for directing House of Representatives preferences their way.

The Democrat Senate vote was consistently stronger in some states (South Australia, Victoria and Queensland) than others (Tasmania and Western Australia). This has been reflected in the number of seats won at election for each state and in the choice of leaders: four from South Australia (Haines, Coulter, Lees, and Stott Despoja), three from Victoria (Chipp, Powell and Allison) and two from Queensland (Kernot and Bartlett). The following table indicates the level of support and Senate seats won at state and territory level in federal elections from 1977 to 2001.²⁵

Table 3: Senate elections 1977–2001

State/Territory	Average vote	Seats won
NSW	8.0	7
Vic	10.2	8
QLD	9.1	9
SA	11.3	10
WA	7.4	5
Tas	4.7	3
NT	4.2	0
ACT	11.5	0

Source: Australian Electoral Commission

Parliamentary performance

The first Democrat to sit in the federal Parliament was Janine Haines in December 1977. She had been nominated by the South Australian Parliament to fill the casual vacancy arising from Liberal Steele Hall's resignation.

Appendix A provides a listing of the 26 Democrat Senators since 1977. The Democrats prided themselves on their role in scrutinising every piece of legislation, moving amendments, introducing private senators' bills and initiating many committee inquiries through a strengthened committee system. Stanley Bach, in his study of the Australian Senate, concluded of the Democrats that:

25. Under the proportional representational system of voting 14.3 per cent is needed to win a State Senate seat but 33.3 per cent is required for a Territory Senate seat.

In some ways they have been the quintessential minor party: ideologically moderate, positioned in policy terms between the two political behemoths, particularly interested in issues of process as well as policy, and sometimes able to determine the outcomes by their choice of which of the major parties to support as well as their own amendments to government bills.²⁶

Appendix B provides some indicative data on the party's contribution to the work of the Senate through measures such as number of private members bills and voting in Senate divisions 1999 to 2004.

At its first election, Don Chipp acknowledged that the party would not be able to form a government but said its chief objective was to win one Senate seat in each state. He said, 'this would give us the balance of power, the balance of commonsense, the balance of wisdom and the balance of reason in the Senate'.²⁷

Balance of power

With five Senate places following the 1980 election the party achieved its goal of gaining the balance of power in the Senate. From July 1981 to 2004 the Democrats played a critical role in the parliamentary environment by holding or sharing with other minor parties or independents the balance of power in the Senate.²⁸

The Democrats held the balance of power with Senator Harradine (Ind, Tas.) following the 1980 election. From July 1983 to June 1993 the Democrats again held the balance of power in their own right when they were able to carry or defeat any question proposed by either the government or the opposition. The party again shared the balance of power with the independents and other minor parties following the 1993, 1996, 1998 and 2001 federal elections.

Table 4 provides a breakdown of party representation in the Senate from 1978 to 2008. For most of the years the Democrats shared the balance of power, the government of the day could carry any issue with the support of the Democrats. The Democrats thus were able to influence government agendas and press their own causes.

26. S. Bach, *Platypus and Parliament: the Australian Senate in theory and practice*, Department of the Senate, Canberra, 2003, p.184.

27. D. Chipp, Policy speech, Camberwell Town Hall, 23 November 1977.

28. Balance of power refers to the power held by minor parties or by independent parliamentarians when neither of the major parties controls the majority of votes in the house of parliament. Since 1984, 39 votes are required to pass a bill or motion if 76 Senators are voting.

Table 4: Party representation in the Senate 1977–2008

Year	ALP	LIB/NP	AD	Greens	Others*	Total
July 1978	26	35	2		1	64
July 1981	27	31	5		1	64
March 1983	30	28	5		1	64
July 1985	34	33	7		2	76
July 1987	32	34	7		3	76
July 1990	32	34	8	1	1	76
July 1993	30	36	7	2	1	76
July 1996	29	37	7	2	1	76
July 1999	29	35	9	1	2	76
July 2002	28	35	8	2	3	76
July 2005	28	39	4	4	1	76
July 2008	32	37	0	5	2	76

*Others includes Independents, Nuclear Disarmament, Family First, One Nation

Source: Parliamentary Library, *Parliamentary Handbook of the Commonwealth of Australia*, 31st edition, p. 420

The party was able and willing to discuss policy with both major parties, and in some instances to offer support for concessions. There were a number of significant examples of the ability of the Democrats to use their strategic position to great effect in the Senate. These included:

- helping to defeat the proposed increase of 2.5 per cent in sales tax, reintroduction of higher education fees and the abolition of dole payments to the spouses of strikers in the 1981–82 Budget
- helping to defeat the Hawke Government’s proposed Australia Card in 1986
- forcing substantial amendments to the Keating Government’s 1992–93 Budget, including more equitable changes in taxation and Medicare
- helping the Howard Government pass the Workplace Relations Bill 1996 with 171 jointly sponsored amendments, and
- supporting the Howard Government to pass the Goods and Services Tax (GST) legislation in 1999.

The Democrats used a variety of methods to influence government policy and outcomes. These included informal sounding out by government about a potential approach to an issue; formal negotiation and agreement on an approach to an issue, possibly including compromise of particular aspects of the issue; use of the formal processes of the Senate such as committees and debate on the floor of the chamber to effect an outcome or creating publicity

in order to utilise public opinion to influence the government’s action.²⁹ As Senator Nick Minchin observed in a Senate valedictory speech:

I think it can be said of the Democrats, frankly, that they have been, if you assess their record over the years, very responsible in the exercise of that great influence ... They have generally taken their balance of power role very seriously and have practised to great effect one of the great arts of politics: the art of compromise, which is required of us all ...³⁰

These negotiations were often politically risky, as was demonstrated by the compromise agreement reached to pass the Workplace Relations Bill 1996 and then later the GST, and at times attracted fierce opposition, principally from the Opposition and the Greens.

The Democrats were at times ridiculed for their stances and policies, accused of being on the fringe: former Labor minister Senator Peter Walsh described them as the ‘fairies at the bottom of the garden’ party.³¹ They were also often accused of being obstructive by the government of the day when they prided themselves on looking at each legislative measure on its merits and acting as the ‘watchdog’ to improve legislation. Prime Minister Howard accused them of obstructing the government’s mandate.³² In reality, though, very few Bills were rejected in the Senate because of Democrat opposition: for the eleven years 1990–2001 only 45 of the 2066 government Bills passed by both Houses were rejected by non-government parties and independents. In most of these divisions the Democrats voted with the Opposition to reject the Bills. On a few occasions the Opposition voted with the Government to reject a Bill: to vote down private members Bills introduced by the Democrats.

Table 5: Bills rejected in the Senate 1990–2001

Parliament	No. government bills passed by both Houses	No. government bills rejected by Senate or laid aside because of Senate amendments
36 th (1990–93)	599	4 (0.7%)
37 th (1993–96)	484	11 (2.2%)
38 th (1996–98)	406	13 (3.1%)
39 th (1998–2001)	577	17 (2.9%)

Source: Department of the Senate, *Business of the Senate*, 1990–2001

The Democrats continued to play a pivotal role in the Senate until the 2004 election, when the Howard Coalition Government won control of the Senate.

29. Senator C. Kernot, ‘Balancing acts—wielding the balance of power’, *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, vol. 56, June 1997, p. 33.

30. Senator N. Minchin, ‘Valedictory’, Senate, *Debates*, 25 June 2008, p. 3431.

31. Senate, *Debates*, 28 October 1987, p.1377; 25 November 1987, p. 2384.

32. M. Gordon, ‘Howard turns up the heat on Kernot’, *Weekend Australian*, 6 July 1996.

Parliamentary procedure

One of the objectives outlined in Don Chipp's policy launch in 1977 centred on restoring the Senate as a 'House of Review'.³³ The Democrats thereafter worked to reform Senate procedures, with the aim of achieving greater levels of equity, accountability and transparency. Some of their achievements included:

- the practice of electing an Opposition senator as deputy president of the Senate from August 1981
- strengthening the scrutiny function of the Senate committee system in the following ways:
 - being instrumental in establishing the Scrutiny of Bills Committee in 1981
 - increasing the number of references and legislation referred to committees
 - supporting changes to the committee structure in 1994, which led to six of the eight references committees being chaired by Opposition senators and two by Democrat senators
- in 1986 the Macklin motion introduced the cut-off for introducing bills into the Senate—any legislation received after a specified deadline was to be automatically adjourned until the next sitting of Parliament
- on the 20 June 2001 the Senate agreed to the Murray motion, which was aimed at ensuring accountability to the Senate for government contracts.

The significance of the Democrat's role has been later acknowledged by a Rudd Government spokesperson:

It is worth noting that the Democrat's contribution to the Senate and Australian politics was inextricably linked to the development of the role of the Senate; they went hand in hand. It was when the Democrats emerged as a third force in Australian politics and held the balance of power in the Senate that the role of the Senate and the role of the parliament changed.³⁴

Significant Senators

The party was able to attract a range of talented members from a diversity of backgrounds. The party led the way in promoting women to leadership positions, as well as contributing to a number of other significant political milestones:

33. D. Chipp, Platform, principles and policies, op. cit.

34. Senator C. Evans, Valedictory, Senate, *Debates*, 25 June 2008, p. 3427.

- in 1987 Janine Haines became the first female leader of a political party in Australia. Since then the party has been led by several women: Janet Powell (1990–91), Cheryl Kernot (1993–97), Meg Lees (1997–01), Natasha Stott Despoja (2001–02) and Lyn Allison (2004–08)
- on her appointment to fill a casual vacancy in 1996 Senator Stott Despoja (SA), aged 26, was the youngest female senator to sit in Parliament
- Brian Greig (WA) was the first openly gay member of Parliament
- the election in 1998 of Aden Ridgeway (NSW), later deputy leader to Senator Stott Despoja, who was only the second Indigenous representative in the Commonwealth Parliament.

Decline

The demise of the Democrats had been predicted on a number of occasions. As early as 1986 political scientist Max Teichmann questioned the direction and viability of the party following the retirement of Don Chipp.³⁵ Nevertheless, the party survived and at times flourished, until its failure to win any seats at the 2004 and 2007 Senate elections. When the remaining four Democrat Senators, Lyn Allison, Andrew Murray, Andrew Bartlett and Natasha Stott Despoja finished their terms on 30 June 2008, this marked the end of the Democrats in the Federal Parliament.

Why did this happen? Many factors have been put forward as playing a part in their decline. The GST deal, leadership difficulties, public disagreements between parliamentary representatives, resignations and defections, a battle for control between the parliamentarians and the party machine and the rise of the Greens all played a part. There is probably no one single cause but a combination of these interrelated factors.

Goods and Services Tax

Some party insiders and commentators pointed to the GST, and Senator Lees' decision to support its passage after winning concessions for food, as the primary factor in the decline of the party.³⁶ This decision resulted in a split in the parliamentary party vote and apparent conflict between the membership and their parliamentary representatives, calling into

35. M. Teichmann, 'Vale the Democrats', *Australian Society*, August 1986, p. 3.

36. L. Tingle, 'What killed Don's party', *Australian Financial Review*, 30 May 2008; M. Secombe, 'The politics of protest', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 February 2001; S. Maiden, 'House divided', *The Advertiser*, 3 March 2001; 'GST day still taxes Democrats', *The Advertiser*, 1 July 2002.

question the two guiding principles of participatory democracy and freedom of conscience.³⁷ The party president, Michael Macklin, had to call for unity and blamed the party structure for the discontent amongst grass root members.³⁸ The party unrest ultimately led to a leadership ballot. Although Lees was endorsed as leader in December 1999, dissatisfaction of members continued, resulting in another ballot in March 2001, this time won by Senator Stott Despoja.

Leadership

Leadership turnover is cited as another major factor. In the first fourteen years of the Democrats there were two leaders, in the subsequent seventeen years there were nine (see Appendix D). The defection of Cheryl Kernot to the Labor Party in 1997 left the party in a leadership vacuum and has been described as the flash point for the subsequent leadership issues.³⁹ The unusually public, and at times divisive, battle between Senator Lees and Senator Stott Despoja over leadership and the direction of the party led to destabilisation of the party. As Geoffrey Hawker of Macquarie University observed, 'leadership changes in the past in the Democrats have presaged sharp policy turns...What was seen as the radical environmentalism of Powell and Coulter, for example, was replaced by economic and industrial emphasis of the Kernot years, and then by the deal-making of Lees'.⁴⁰

Role

The aftermath of the GST deal and the changes of leaders highlighted the dilemma for the Democrats between being a Senate watchdog and being the policy-makers and policy leaders. Meg Lees, on becoming leader, had signalled a change in direction to one where the Democrats would seek to have a broader input into the legislative process.⁴¹ This dichotomy between the centre party policy 'to keep the bastards honest', and the drive to call for more left-wing policies and be an active 'partner' in government, produced tensions within the party and possibly led to voter disillusionment.⁴²

Recognition

Others point to the inability of the party to clearly articulate what it stood for in a more competitive political arena, and to get their message heard.⁴³ From the early days of

37. A. Guja, 'The pitfalls of participatory democracy: a study of the Australian Democrats' GST', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 40 (1), March 2005, pp. 71–85; C. Kerr, 'Personality rifts left the party doomed to fail', *Australian*, 26 June 2008.

38. M. Saunders, 'President calls for unity in Democrats', *Australian*, 24 January 2000.

39. P. van Onselen, 'The Kernot factor rang the death knell', *Age*, 1 July 2008.

40. G. Hawker, 'The Australian Democrats: dead in the water?', *AQ*, March–April 2001, p. 31.

41. J. Woodford, 'Lees rids herself of Kernot's style', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 December 1997.

42. M. Irving, 'The incredible shrinking Democrats', *West Australian*, 25 August 2007.

43. Senator Bartlett, National Interest, Radio National, 15 June 2008.

representation the Democrats argued that the media did not give them the same level of attention as the major parties. A Saulwick poll commissioned by the Democrats in 2004 confirmed the view that the Democrats had a serious ‘brand recognition’ problem.⁴⁴ Their work in the Senate, their policies and platform were not publicised. It was only at times of leadership tensions or party disagreements that the media paid attention.⁴⁵

Australian Greens

The party faced increased competition for seats due to the rise of the Australian Greens. As the Australian Greens nominated more candidates across the country, some voters seemingly abandoned the Democrats, preferring the single issue party’s environmental stance. At the 1996 election the Greens won one seat from the Democrats. At the last two federal elections the Greens increased their vote share, possibly at the expense of the Democrats. At the 2004 election the Greens won two seats, in Western Australia and Tasmania respectively. The party attracted a swing of 2.7 per cent for a vote of 7.7 per cent. They were able to build on this support at the 2007 election, winning three seats and a vote of 9.0 per cent.⁴⁶

Achievements

The achievements of the Democrats have been numerous and include: a role in keeping governments accountable (the crucial check on the government of the day), scrutinising and improving legislation, improving parliamentary procedure in the Senate, opening up the political arena to greater competition, party recognition of women and the practice of participatory democracy.⁴⁷ Senator Murray in his valedictory speech said:

I suspect history will judge the 26 [Democrat Senators] well and not just for remarkable policy and advocacy consistency and constancy but because, as parliamentarians and legislators, we have left a much bigger mark ... in the conventions and culture of the Senate, in legislation and not least in having so many of our causes eventually accepted as good policy, such as accountability, environmental and social justice fields.⁴⁸

Senator Allison remarked that the party had blazed a trail for other smaller parties and acknowledged the unusual feature of the party in recognising the value of enabling ordinary members to contribute to key decisions.⁴⁹

44. S. Lewis, ‘Democrats in denial over low profile poll’, *Australian*, 23 August 2004.

45. Senator L. Allison, Meet the Press, 22 June 2008.

46. S. Bennett, ‘The rise of the Australian Greens’, *Research paper*, no.8, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2008–09.

47. Australian Democrats, *30 years: the Australian Democrats*, Australian Democrats, Melbourne, July 2007.

48. Senator A. Murray, Senate, *Debates*, 24 June 2008, p. 3213.

49. Senator L. Allison, Senate, *Debates*, 25 June 2008, p. 3426.

The achievements of the Democrats have been recognised by others in the Parliament:

... their [Democrats] commitment to improving standards of public behaviour, (keeping the bastards honest) and improving the quality of parliamentary review of the administration while being a team player in the Senate has meant that they have played a generally constructive role in promoting changes to procedures to strengthen the scrutiny of legislation and to improve committee work.⁵⁰

A similar theme has been echoed by commentators who indicate regret at the passing of the Democrats and their role in improving Australian parliamentary politics.⁵¹

Conclusion—do the Democrats have a future?

Following its electoral decline in the 2001 Senate elections the Democrats faced many challenges. In particular, they suffered a membership slump and possible financial ruin after receiving reduced public funding due to the decline in their vote. By 2008 Senator Lyn Allison, the outgoing parliamentary leader, confirmed that the Democrats were in talks with fringe groups, such as the Climate Change Coalition in a bid for electoral survival. She indicated that despite the loss of support she believed a new centre-left party could rise from the ashes.⁵²

From July 2008 the Democrats have one remaining parliamentary representative in the South Australian Parliament⁵³. It has been argued that the success and longevity of the party was largely due to the parliamentary representatives: it was they who provided the identity; it was they who developed policy and communicated it to the electorate and they who provided a prop for the wider party organisation.⁵⁴ As political scientist Wayne Errington has pointed out it is very difficult to run a party organisation when you do not have the advantage of incumbency.⁵⁵

50. Senator the Hon. M. Beahan, 'Majorities and minorities: trends in the Australian senate', in *Papers on Parliament, Reinventing political institutions*, Department of the Senate, Canberra, March 1996, p. 88.

51. D. Jaensch, 'Democratic approach failed party politics', *The Advertiser*, 2 July 2008; M. Steketee, 'They will be missed', *Weekend Australian*, 28 June 2008.

52. S. Lewis, 'Democrats seek help to forge a new party', *The Advertiser*, 20 February 2008.

53. Ms Kanck resigned in January 2009. She was replaced in the South Australian Legislative Council by David Winderlich on 17 February 2009. On 7 October 2009 Mr Winderlich announced his resignation from the Australian Democrats and that he would sit as an Independent.

54. I. Ward, 'Party organisation and membership participation', in Warhurst, *Keeping the bastards honest*, op. cit., p. 129.

55. A. Gartrell, 'Democrats fade but the bastards remain', AAP newswire, 19 June 2008.

Despite this, some party members are maintaining a positive outlook with its longest-serving Senator, Natasha Stott Despoja, saying ‘I hope we can be rejuvenated and that one day you will have Democrats again in the houses of parliament, including the federal parliament’.⁵⁶

56. *ibid.*

Appendix A:

Australian Democrats in the Federal Parliament 1977–2008

Name	State	Period of service	Reason
Allison, Lyn	Vic.	1.7.1996–30.6.2008	Defeated
Bartlett, Andrew	QLD	30.10.1997*–30.6.2008	Defeated
Bell, Robert	Tas.	7.3.1990–30.6.1996	Defeated
Bourne, Vicki	NSW	1.7.1990–30.6.2002	Defeated
Cherry, John	QLD	31.7.2001*–30.6.2005	Defeated
Chipp, Don	Vic	1.7.1978–18.8.1986	Resigned
Coulter, John	SA	11.7.1987–20.11.1995	Resigned
Evans, John	WA	5.3.1983–30.6.1985	Defeated
Greig, Brian	WA	1.7.1999–30.6.2005	Defeated
Haines, Janine	SA	14.12.1977*–30.6.1978; 1.7.1981–1.3.1990	Term expired; Resigned
Jenkins, Jean	WA	11.7.1987–30.6.1990	Defeated
Kernot, Cheryl	QLD	1.7.1990–15.10.1997	Resigned
Lees, Meg	SA	4.4.1990*–30.6.2005	IND from July 2002; Australian Progressive Alliance from April 2003; Defeated
Macklin, Michael	QLD	1.7.1981–30.6.1990	Retired
McLean, Paul	NSW	11.7.1987–23.8.1991	Resigned
Mason, Colin	NSW	1.7.1978–5.6.1987	Retired
Murray, Andrew	WA	1.7.1996–30.6.2008	Term expired
Powell, Janet*	Vic.	26.8.1986–30.6.1993	IND from July 1992; Defeated
Ridgeway, Aden	NSW	1.7.1999–30.6.2005	Defeated
Sanders, Norman	Tas.	1.7.1985–1.3.1990	Resigned
Siddons, John	Vic.	1.7.1981–4.2.1983; 1.7.1985–5.6.1987	IND from Nov 1986; Unite Australia Party from March 1987; Defeated
Sowada, Karin	NSW	29.8.1991*–30.6.1993	Defeated
Spindler, Sid	Vic.	1.7.1990–30.6.1996	Retired
Stott Despoja, Natasha	SA	29.11.1995*–30.6.2008	Term expired
Vigor, David	SA	1.12.1984–5.6.1987	Unite Australia Party from June 1987; Defeated
Woodley, John	QLD	1.7.1993–27.7.2001	Resigned

*selected under section 15 of the Constitution

Source: Parliamentary Library, *Parliamentary Handbook of the Commonwealth of Australia*, 31st edition, Canberra, 2008

Appendix B:

Private Senators Bills introduced by selected Australian Democrats

Senator	No. bills introduced by senator as sole sponsor	No. bills in which senator was a co-sponsor	Total
Allison	38	7	45
Bartlett	33	6	39
Bourne	40	2	42
Chipp	16		16
Coulter	12		12
Evans#	15		15
Haines	13		13
Kernot	48		48
Lees	10		10
Macklin	79		79
Murray	20	6	26
Powell*	10		10
Stott Despoja	26	9	35

Source: Department of the Senate, *Business of the Senate*, 1977–2008

#The Income Tax Assessment Amendment Bill (no.5) 1984 introduced by Senator Evans became law, Act no. 115 of 1984.

*The Smoking and Tobacco Products Advertisements (Prohibition) Bill 1989 introduced by Senator Powell became law, Act no.181 of 1989.

Australian Democrats voting in Senate divisions 1999–2004

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Vote with the Government	28	13	10	12	16	13
Vote against the Government	79	40	37	68	85	67
Vote with the Opposition	56	21	12	28	48	22
Vote against the Opposition	51	32	35	52	53	48
Did not vote	10	3	2	–	–	–
Total divisions	117	56	49	80	101	80

Source: Department of the Senate, *Business of the Senate*, 1999–2004

Appendix C:

Parliamentary leaders 1978–2008

Name	Period of service
Senator D. Chipp	1.7.1978–18.8.1986
Senator J. Haines	18.8.1986–24.3.1990
Senator M. Macklin	24.3.1990–30.6.1990
Senator J. Powell	1.7.1990–19.8.1991
Senator J. Coulter	19.8.1991–2.10.1991
Senator J. Coulter	3.10.1991–30.4.1993
Senator C. Kernot	30.4.1993–15.10.1997
Senator M. Lees	15.10.1997–6.4.2001
Senator N. Stott Despoja	6.4.2001–21.8.2002
Senator B. Grieg (interim)	22.8.2002–5.10.2002
Senator A. Bartlett	5.10.2002–13.12.2004
Senator L. Allison	13.12.04–30.6.2008

© Copyright Commonwealth of Australia

This work is copyright. Except to the extent of uses permitted by the *Copyright Act 1968*, no person may reproduce or transmit any part of this work by any process without the prior written consent of the Parliamentary Librarian. This requirement does not apply to members of the Parliament of Australia acting in the course of their official duties.

This work has been prepared to support the work of the Australian Parliament using information available at the time of production. The views expressed do not reflect an official position of the Parliamentary Library, nor do they constitute professional legal opinion.

Feedback is welcome and may be provided to: web.library@aph.gov.au. Any concerns or complaints should be directed to the Parliamentary Librarian. Parliamentary Library staff are available to discuss the contents of publications with Senators and Members and their staff. To access this service, clients may contact the author or the Library's Central Entry Point for referral.
