

# LEFT *in the* CENTRE

*The Democrats have traditionally been regarded by the left as a "soft-option" centre party. Catherine Goonan argues that, on the contrary, they should be seen as the left's natural allies.*

**T**he Australian Democrats are often portrayed in the press and in the federal and state parliaments in which they have representation as the 'fairies at the bottom of the garden party' or as 'flakes', a fact which speaks volumes about their marginalisation from mainstream politics.

The emphasis given by them to social justice, the environment, education, women's issues and Aboriginal land rights has meant that the Democrats are often portrayed as politically 'soft', i.e. not dealing with 'hard' economic issues or hard, number-crunching politics.

When Don Chipp retired in 1986, the Democrats were portrayed by the media as having lost the political credibility that went with having a long-serving ex-minister as their leader. But the departure of Chipp, John Siddons from Victoria, and other liberal-right Democrats around Australia also meant that the party was able to become significantly more radical. Their platform and policies now place particular emphasis on social justice measures and the environment, and all policies, including those

on economic issues, are designed to work towards a politically and economically equal society within the existing political and social structures.

The radicalisation began in the early 'eighties. The party had historically attracted members who were disillusioned with the two big parties and became increasingly more attractive to people in the conservation movement. In 1985 there was a major schism in Victoria over their decision to direct preferences to the Labor Party in the state election. Over seventy percent of the membership voted to direct preferences and the remainder gradually left the party over the period of two years. The attrition was predominantly of the old-style Democrats who had joined when Chipp was leader. As the old guard moved out, the Democrats began to attract young conservationists who were willing to consider more radical policies. This, in turn, made the Democrats more attractive to younger people who would have traditionally joined the ALP but who were disillusioned with the direction Labor government had taken.

Victoria presents the clearest ex-

ample of a dramatic shift in the Democrats' direction, but the same process has occurred in each state, without the drama, and to a slightly lesser degree. Jean Jenkins, Democrat Senator for West Australia, is a good example of the type of middle class conservationist attracted to the Democrats who has become increasingly radical as she has become more aware of wider political issues.

Janine Haines is nowadays the most conservative of all the Democrat politicians. Yet, while she is out of line with mainstream Democrat ideology, she is the longest-serving Senator and the media and public respond well to her. Failure in her bid for election to the House of Representatives at the next election is the only likely reason for the Democrats to change leader in the foreseeable future.

One of the Democrats' main catchcries is the "politics of SHE: Sane, Humane and Ecological". The other is "Radical, not Left". Their closest overseas soul siblings would be the Green parties of Europe. Like the Greens, their membership is mostly tertiary educated and middle class. Their collective vision is of an en-



Photo: Dale Mann/Retropost

The new face of the Democrats: Senator Janet Powell leads the faithful at the 1987 election launch

environmentally sustainable society, where the population and decision-making is decentralised and people have equal access to both economic and political power. Federal intervention would mainly be directed towards the containment of corporate economic control. This, in turn, would allow the expansion of small business and co-operative enterprises.

They emphasise allowing people autonomy and ensuring them access to important information about issues which will affect themselves and the wider community. They do seem to have a developing understanding of the concept of ruling ideology and the agents which disseminate and reinforce it. Along with Ian Macphie, the Democrats were among the few in politics who publicly opposed the increasing concentration of media ownership. One of their main arguments was that it would increase the

marginalisation of small and economically powerless groups, groups whose voices are seldom heard. They perceive one of their main roles in parliament as presenting, in a national public forum, issues and opinions which are ostensibly 'marginal'.

Trying to present an 'alternative political agenda' is not an easy row to hoe. The media tends to portray such a group as either 'loony' or dangerous, or sometimes both.

So far there has been a tendency to portray the Democrats as do-gooders, but harmless. In actuality their ultimate aim is a massive restructuring of society, even if they don't have a fixed idea of the final form such a society would take.

Endeavouring to define Democrat ideology is a lot like nailing jelly to the proverbial wall. This is due partly to the fact that the party is still in a period

of rapid change. But, largely, it is due to the absence of a theoretical framework which allows groups to express their ideology coherently. A document which has found much favour among Democrats was a commissioned analysis of their policy platform by Trevor Blake of the Graduate School of Environmental Science, Monash University. From the mish-mash of policy, statements and manifestos, compiled on an *ad hoc* basis, Blake was able at least to pinpoint the values of a society the Australian Democrats reject. It might shed more light on the political motivation of the party's membership to quote part of the report.

The historical impact of dominant interpretations of economic viability, moral integrity, cultural integration and political stability is manifested, in part, in both repressive and social consequences and social and environmen-



tal dislocation: a decidedly unequal society in which much of the population is confused, anxious and lacks a clear sense of cultural identity, collective responsibility and political empowerment, in which the extrinsic rewards of money and material consumption offer diminishing solace to those whose basic material needs are met, where social individualism is paralleled in the fragmentation of families and communities and the absence of a social consensus regarding both the ends and organisation of economic and public activity, where the economic edifice built upon the expropriation of the original inhabitants, reckless exploitation of natural resources and market speculation is vulnerable to collapse of both its environmental base and internal impetus.

After years of being asked: where does the money come from? how would you implement this policy? - and not really having an answer to either question, the Democrats have begun to get their act together. They are in the process of establishing models and acquiring the administrative experience to enable them to put their policies into effect. Though they do not see themselves as being an alternative government until well into the next century, if at all, their ability to work up viable proposals sometimes has a practical outcome. The Victorian Democrats co-ordinated discussions between various welfare organisations and the Melbourne City Council to prepare a proposal to tackle youth homelessness. The proposal was accepted by the state government and is in the process of being implemented. They are the only political party with representatives in the federal parliament who openly push policies advocating some form of redistribution of wealth and who opposed the lowering of the top personal income tax rate. They are also the only party whose total membership is opposed to privatisation, and have had several meetings with unions whose memberships will be affected by such a move.

I find myself somewhat critical of the failure of the left in the union movement to analyse properly and use the Democrats' change in political direction. Much has been made by unions of the barrier posed to any sort of relationship with the Democrats because of their support for sections 45D and 45E of the Trade Practices Act. The last time the removal of these sections of the Act was before parliament was during Don Chipp's leadership. In October 1988, a meeting was organised between the leaderships of various leftwing Victorian unions and the Democrats' spokesperson on Industrial Relations, Senator Paul McLean, and Victorian state president Sid Spindler. The Democrats were informed by the unions that the ALP had made several approaches to the Democrats to gain their support for the removal of sections 45D and 45E if the Labor government brought the legislation before parliament. The Democrats then informed the unions that, over the past two years, no ap-

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proaches had been made by the Labor government on this issue.

It is my firm belief, though one not well received at that meeting, that the unions have been lied to by the federal government on this issue. I have no reason to doubt that Paul McLean was telling the truth as it was he who organised the amendment, voted on by the entire national membership, to remove from policy the opposition to secondary boycotts. The ballot came in recording a tied vote during November 1988, and has yet to be rebaloted. The more likely scenario is that the Labor government introduced the legislation to rescind sections 45D

and E when they knew it had no chance of being passed (a move to appease the unions) and have not moved to reintroduce the legislation now that it will quite probably get through.

The Democrats would be quite happy for the union movement to secondary boycott the uranium mining industry out of existence, and this is the union movement's main leverage with the Democrats. However, they are sincerely concerned about the impact on *small* businesses if 45D and E are removed. It's worth while emphasising the focus on small business here as there is little sympathy in the Democrats for the tax avoidance and socially and environmentally irresponsible tactics of bigger companies. If it is possible for the union movement to find some way to ensure that small businesses will not be sent to the wall if 45D and E are removed, then there is a better than even chance that the Democrats will vote for its removal.

The Democrats are not the political neophytes portrayed by the press. If the unions or the left seek their support on industrial legislation, they will want cast iron guarantees that small businesses will be protected. It is not up to the Democrats to work on this type of legislation alone. It is up to the union movement to approach the Democrats with a list of proposals. So far, the majority of overtures have come from the Democrats. They are a small, under-resourced party whose Senators each carry the load of an average of five portfolios, and they manage to do remarkably well with the few advisers and staff allocated to them. They do not have the money to employ professional advisers and the politicians and their over-stretched staff do not have the time to cover all areas in detail. At present the Democrats are the only voice in federal parliament pushing social justice strategies. Democrat Senators have lost count of the times that left Labor MPs have approached them after debates saying "I wish we could say that". Caucus decisions have muzzled Labor's socialist left in parlia-



ment, but the Democrats are saying it for them.

They are extremely angry about the broadening gulf between rich and poor, and the decline in living standards of low income earners and those on fixed incomes. They seem to hold this point of view without the realisation that it is because of the marginalisation of the left in government policy which has aided such phenomena.

Over the past year the Democrats have come out publicly:

- \*against Hoyts (on the grounds that their employment restructuring is dangerous in the long term and motivated by the ideology of the New Right);

- \*against wage rises based solely on productivity rises (on the grounds that low income earners needed income rises no matter what occurred);

- \*against the two-tier wage structure (on the grounds that weaker unions would be severely disadvantaged);

- \*supporting public transport unions and pushing for greater use of the interstate rail network (on the grounds of environmental protection; they are more than willing to promote subsidies to rail and other public transport users);

- \*negotiating with unions and industry to ensure that unions with a membership of three thousand, rather than the one thousand proposed by government, were not forced to amalgamate under the Industrial Relations Act. (This last on the grounds that many smaller unions had been looking for appropriate bedfellows for years or were even then in the process of de-amalgamating because the amalgamations proved unworkable.)

By no stretch of the imagination could the Democrats' industrial policies be classed as union-bashing, but their view of the union movement is not wholly positive. They regard the unions as pushing a too-narrow set of interests and as focussing too much on the immediate interests of their workers within an industry, rather than considering the immediate and

long-term interests of the larger society. This view has been sustained by some unions endeavouring to protect workers' jobs in industries which are environmentally damaging. Furthermore, they see the movement as being male-dominated, patriarchal and paternalistic, with entrenched interests which prevent the rise of

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women and which do not just neglect the interests of women workers but, in fact, actively play down their importance.

The greatest hurdle remaining to a good relationship between the Democrats and the left is the issue of compulsory unionism - a concept which the Democrats find philosophically untenable. They do allow that it is unfair that workers who pay no union dues benefit from the organisation and negotiation of unions for improvement in working conditions and pay increases and so propose a 'fee for service' payment. It has to be said that this is a solution which is grounded more on optimism than reality.

It is important to understand the significance its liberal origins still hold in key areas of the party. In much the same way that US citizens hold the First Amendment dear, so do the Democrats regard it as a fundamental right to have freedom of choice. Enshrined in their constitution is the requirement that when, in parliament, a Democrat politician's conscience conflicts with party policy, she/he *must* vote according to her or his conscience. So far, however, this has had no real effect on the Democrats' voting record in the Senate, which is one of one hundred percent consistency on matters of party policy.

The Accord and *Australia Reconstructed* are favourably viewed

by the Democrats largely because of the values of consensus inherent in each and because of the stability each has brought to Australia's industrial relations. *Australia Reconstructed* has a special appeal as it offers models of economic and industrial flexibility which the Democrats perceive as being vital to achieve a radically new society. The Democrats have a great deal of trouble understanding the difference between 'militant' and 'radical' unions, and have little idea of the way in which unions work on a day-to-day basis. They seem to be under the impression that the Accord brought an absolutely new era in the way unions negotiated with management.

Democrat policies are full of contradictions in a number of areas, something made clear in the report by Trevor Blake. They express clear concerns about neo-corporations, and the spectre of 'Big Government, Big Business and Big Unions', while welcoming the stability this brings. When the chips are down, however, they are more positively disposed to unions than corporations, largely because they perceive unions as playing only a small part in the problem of environmental rape and misuse of resources.

At present, there is a strong tendency for the Democrats and the left to look at each other in terms of their respective media stereotypes. For many on the left, the Democrats are a 'middle class' party, a 'bunch of liberal do-gooders', not *really* of the left. For many in the Democrats, the left still summons up images of the state ownership of everything, of male union bureaucrats and stalinist *apparatchiks*. It may well be that the Democrats are at odds with much traditional left thinking. Yet a good deal of their criticism is the same criticism which has animated the left itself in recent years. It is high time for the left to catch up with the new face of the Democrats.

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formerly worked for the Australian Democrats in Melbourne.