



PROFILE

Janet Powell

It is probably safe to say Janet Powell is not yet a household name. The woman elected leader of the Australian Democrats back in May is described by her party faithful as "lacking leadership qualities", "a very quiet person", "down-to-earth, but without razzamatazz".

It is generally agreed that Powell, a Victorian Senator, is "no dummy": a hard worker who knows her issues. But doubts are surfacing about whether she has what it takes to be an effective leader in the "leadership mould" generally promoted in Australian political life.

If aggression, marketable image and flair are the primary requirements, Powell faces an uphill battle for credibility. Inside the Democrats the feelings prevail that Janine Haines is a hard act to follow. Powell was not the obvious successor after Haines failed to gain the coveted House of Representatives seat of Kingston. Powell's leadership victory was due more to a lack of organised opposition than to popularity.

Janet Powell was born into a wheat and sheep farming family in isolated Nhill, Victoria. "We lived on a fairly basic property. We grew our own food and my mother worked alongside my father on the farm."

Powell's first recollection of politics was her father's strenuous attempts to prevent the local school closing down.

Powell's own political aspirations lay dormant for two decades, mainly spent acquiring education, then taking it back to her hometown as a teacher where she married and began a family. During the teachers' strikes of the 70s, Powell's ire was roused by the lousy pay and inequality of her profession. "All teachers were severely underpaid, especially women. I knew men who had failed at university but were getting paid more."

A trip to the United States with her teacher husband introduced them to life on the edge of a black ghetto and this further fuelled her desire to press for social change. "I felt what we had in Australia was much more egalitarian and worth fighting for."

When she came home things moved quickly. It was 1975 - the time of the sacking of the Labor go. emment - and soon, like many Australians,



Powell was motivated into the political arena. In 1977 she became a founding member of the Australian Democrats, committed to a party that encouraged participative democracy. "As a mother with four small kids living in an isolated community it allowed me to have a say. I could have an input into policy without having to attend meetings in the city. That sort of setup was very attractive, and remains very attractive, especially for women."

From 1977 she held party positions at branch, state and federal levels, including state president (first woman to hold this office) and deputy national president. She entered parliament in September

1986 to fill Don Chipp's casual vacancy and was elected Senator for Victoria (six-year term) in July 1987. Between 1986 and 1990 she has been spokesperson on Primary Industry, Communications, Social Security, Administrative Services, Consumer Affairs, Community Services and Health.

Powell has made her mark in a few areas - she was the first woman to have a Private Member's Bill passed, resulting in a tobacco advertising ban in Victoria. But her major focus has been women, and she is proud to claim the Democrats as the only Australian party to fairly represent the electorate - four of the party's eight Senators are women.

The most encouraging sign for the Democrats was the March election result which increased their share of the vote from 12% to 16% overall, gained them one new Senate seat (two new Senators) and left seven seats within a few percentage points of victory. Powell is determined to grasp that advantage for the next federal election by winning another five Senate seats and a "handful of lower house seats".

But she admits there's a lot of work to do. The key issue for the Democrats is gaining credibility on economic policy. Powell is bitter at Labor and Liberal's treatment of the Democrats' economic policy before the election. "They costed it as if we were going to introduce all the changes in the first year". Since then, a lot of work has been done to tighten up those costings in the "sustainable economic proposals", which she claims will produce a potential \$3 billion surplus by introducing a wealth tax and closing tax avoidance loopholes to hit the corporate sector and upper bracket income earners.

The Democrats want a national rail system, are opposed to wholesale privatisation and deregulation - "we'd treat it on a case-by-case basis". Powell says the sale of 30% of the Commonwealth Bank as "absolutely the first step towards large-scale deregulation".

She claims to be in fighting form for the next three years. "We've come of age. We've earned our stripes as a legitimate voice."

Clare Curran.