Janine Haines

Janine Haines is engaged in the biggest gamble of her career. At stake is her personal political future and the survival of the Australian Democrats.

At the next federal election, the woman generally described as the 'public face' of the Democrats steps aside from the comparative safety of the Senate to stand for the South Australian seat of Kingston. Winning the first House of Representative seat for the Democrats is the only way forward, she believes. But it means facing up to sacrificing the party. "If I lose, I'm out, there's no next time."

For not only must Janine Haines make a successful bid for Kingston but the seven existing Democrat seats in the Senate must be retained to keep party status.

And she has chosen to make a move for a voice in the House of Representatives at a time when her party is already under pressure from an unprecedented surge of public support for independent environmental stands demonstrated in the recent Tasmanian election. It is a pressure that threatens a real danger, not just to the future of the Democrats but, at least according to Haines, for the whole Australian environment movement.

As she freely admits the threat, her frustration is evident; frustration at the years of often fruitless effort spent getting environmental issues on the political agenda when, now that those issues are high in the public eye, they are being credited to the rapidly rising Green Independents.

Though agreeing the fault lies largely with her party's seriously inadequate public profile, she is at a loss to provide a solution. Instead, she would identify a culprit: in her opinion the incestuous political media. Challenged recently in Tasmania by a reporter on the party's inability to achieve political results, she told him to ask his colleagues the same question. "I can't hold a gun to the journos' heads," is her testy comment.

Sadly lacking through the Democrat profile may be, the same cannot be said for Haines. Whether she represents the true face of the party, though, is a matter of some debate.

Her presentation of the Democrat stand on those issues is not always supported within the ranks. She is said by some to be too conservative and a constant source of tension, though her ability to get the message across seems unchallenged. Those who oppose her conservative stance on some issues cannot argue her ability to command respect inside the inner sanctum of the party room, and in the Senate, where she is much admired for the ability to think on her feet and get to the guts of an issue.

For more than a decade she has remained steadfast in her stands on women's issues, the environment, nuclear power, and social issues affecting the sick, the old and the underprivileged. She has raged against the hypocrisy of political life and the inability of the Australian public to understand the political system.

A former senior maths and English teacher, Haines became the first Democrat in the Senate and the first woman leader of an Australian party in parliament. She has learned her job well. Her critics would say too well - arguing that she has become sleek in style, in contrast with the original rough-hewn, but honest, Democrat image.

The ability to get her point across does not always provoke admiration among those, some of them close colleagues, who have experienced the sharper side of the Haines personality.

"Flies off the handle easily", "verbally lashes out", "allows personal views to override what is best for her and the party", "petulant", "other Democrats often take on an appeasing role to manage her", are just some of the remarks offered.

Haines does not deny the tendency to dominate and hold her own in the Senate. "in a very loud voice", but personally admits to being very tired of political gameplaying. "I'm an enormously shy person. I really don't like people pointing at me in supermarkets." She has always attributed much of her political success to solid family back-up support, from daughters Melanie, 18, and Bronwyn, 20, and Ian, husband of 22 years. His unfailing support is much the same as most politicians' wives, she claims, but most politicians would never think to acknowledge it.

The Haines media persona over the years has provided a kaleidoscope of images ranging from 'prissy' and 'schoolmarmish' to 'feminist' and even 'bimbo'; all descriptions she finds amusing. "It's wonderful that no one can pigeon-hole me. I'm not abandoning the complexity of my personality to fit some black and white image. "Complexity, that's what life's all about."

Right now, though, life for Janine Haines and for the Democrats is about surviving the next political test. What seems obvious, and is supported by Haines, is the need to broaden the party image.

Sources close to her are hedging their bets, believing the battle for Kingston could go either way. One thing seems clear: for better or worse, a lot depends on the commitment of Janine Haines to take the Democrats into the next decade.

Clare Curran.