

Analysis



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The Australian Democrats have made a unique contribution to Australian political life over the past 30 years. Among the many contributions five stand out for me:

- The first is longevity. No minor party has made such a parliamentary contribution over 30 years. The Democrats have now surpassed the Democratic Labor Party in this regard.
- The second is balance of power. There is no equivalent to the role the Democrats have played in the Senate for more than 25 years balancing the two major parties and improving their legislation by moving it away from the extremes.
- The third is the Democrats' substantial contributions to many policy areas, including the environment, equal opportunity, education, war and peace, and government honesty and transparency.
- The fourth is internal party democracy. No other party has done more to empower its members through participatory democracy in policy development and leadership selection.
- The fifth is through giving party leadership positions to many women. The record is remarkable in an environment in which men dominate the leadership positions in the major parties.

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The resurrection of the Senate's reputation as a parliamentary chamber of review and as an institutional check on the power of cabinet and the prime minister was a major legacy of the emergence of the Australian Democrats and its ability to win sufficient upper-house seats to hold the balance of power (sometimes in conjunction with other minor party and/or independent senators) in elections up until 2004. By formulating an approach designed to utilise the review function assumed to be performed by upper houses in Westminster parliaments but refusing to use the Senate's constitutional powers that had been used in 1975, the Democrats did much to enhance the role of the political debate in the Senate.

With the assistance of Democrats senators, the upper chamber also became a place where ideas could be floated that might have an impact on policy further down the track. In the early 1980s, for instance, Australian Democrats senators moved a bill to have the Commonwealth use constitutional powers to protect world-heritage-designated properties from development at the hands of the states. After its election to office in 1983, the Hawke government used this bill to prevent the inundation of the Franklin River. Interestingly, the Democrats' performance in the Senate highlighted the capacity the upper house has to be a meaningful player in the national debate to other political groups who would, in time, form parties with the intention of winning Senate seats. This has contributed to the notion that the Democrats have been under siege not so much from the major parties but from a host of other minor parties who have also been able to win upper-house representation while the total number of Democrats seats has declined over time.

It remains to be seen if this decline will continue, particularly in the light of how the governing parties have approached the policy debate since winning its upper-house majority. Unlike the mitigating influence the Democrats had on the government's enthusiasm for the GST, the pursuit of quite radical industrial relations policies lacked a moderating counter-argument to make them more acceptable to the electorate. Governments might not have liked it, but the check-and-balance role played by the Democrats in the Senate did have the benefit of creating policies with a wider base of social support.