

SENATE INSIGHT



SENATOR LYN ALLISON
LEADER OF THE AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS
PARLIAMENTARY NEWSLETTER

MAY/JUNE 2006

Hypocrisy and lack of accountability in government

has reached new heights in the six months since our last *Senate Insight*.

The **AWB** inquiry exposed ministers as preferring to be kept in the dark than act on corruption or the flouting of UN sanctions and Harry Evans, fearless Clerk of the Senate, says the Senate can no longer scrutinise the actions of the executive of government.

Harry Evans loses his job in 3 years and isn't allowed to reapply thanks to legislation supported by the ALP in 1999, singling out this position as non-renewable and short term.

On terror and nukes, Ministers threatened to send back immigrants and refugees who don't share Australian values but declined to name the values or say how this arrangement will work.

Now Mr Howard wants to turn back the boats of refugees from West Papua or, if they land, dob them in to the Indonesian government. He has agreed to sell yellowcake to China – that other authoritarian and repressive regime that terrorises Tibetans and Falun Gong practitioners and exports nuclear weapons technology to Iran, Pakistan, North Korea and Libya!

More ministerial absurdity - we called for the Environment Minister

to be sacked for stopping a \$220 million wind farm on the remotest possibility that the orange bellied parrot might be affected, even though it has never been seen at the Bald Hills site and he knocked back funding for three turbines at Denmark, WA, developed by the community after long consultation and objected to by less than 3% of locals.

The same minister got on a horse recently to demonstrate his support for keeping cattle in the fragile high country saying, without a grain of truth, that the mounted cattle musterers were the living heritage of the Man from Snowy River. Now the government plans to sell its 13% share in that massive public endeavour, the Snowy Hydro Scheme, losing opportunities to influence the environmental health of the Snowy and the Murray.

Tony Abbott, the Minister in charge of a \$35.7 billion health budget, rides a bike to raise cash for diabetes research but throws \$51 million at unnecessary and unhelpful counselling designed to dissuade women from having abortions!

In deference to the Minister's wish to keep children in the dark, the Liberals kyboshed an inquiry into sex education and why we have such high rates of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection.

Is the country in a mess? Has the Howard Government lost the plot? We think so.

Bring back balance

It seems to us that a balance of power party is still needed to bring back fairness and balance and the Democrats are up to the task. We won't, for the sake of political expediency, compromise on our core values and principles. But we are getting fed up with the constant graveyard stories about us in the press.

We are not going to lay down and die like our critics say we should. The Democrats have done a lot for Australia and we plan to fight harder and more determinedly to keep contributing to an Australia that is fair, sustainable and prosperous.

I hope you agree and that you find *Senate Insight* useful. We have provided online links to many documents but can send out hard copies if you prefer.

Senator Lyn Allison
Leader, Australian Democrats

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SITTING WRAP UP

Since the last *Senate Insight*, the Senate sat for just 2 weeks at the end of 2005 and 3 so far in 2006. In those 5 weeks some of the most detrimental legislation we have seen has been rushed through. Although we opposed much of this agenda, we also tried to put back fairness and balance with our amendments. You can read our speeches on these bills at www.democrats.org.au.

Work Choices

Work Choices was given a week of debate and finally guillotined. The Government's 98 pages of amendments arrived just before they were to be voted on. They were barely read. *Work Choices* supposedly deregulates IR but the legislation was 687 pages long and the regulations 428 pages.

Our 97 amendments - supported by ACTU, HREOC and academics - were voted down by Government and Senator Joyce again failed to deliver on his rhetoric. We say legislation was overly complex, punitive, one-sided and interventionist.

Welfare to Work

Welfare to Work was also guillotined in one day. Our amendments tried to stop people with disabilities and sole parents from having their incomes cut.

Anti-Terrorism

Anti-Terrorism was guillotined through the Senate in one day. Our amendments to insert safeguards to protect fundamental legal principles such as freedom of speech, the right not to be detained

without charge and the protection of legal professional privilege were all defeated.

Voluntary student unionism

Voluntary student unionism was given 2 hours debate. Family First, Senator Fielding, voted with the Government, removing irreversibly funding for critical services such as childcare and counselling.

Shared Parental Responsibility

Shared Parental Responsibility went through without our amendments on protecting children, including ensuring the definition of 'meaningful relationship' excludes those that expose children to abuse, neglect or family violence, were all voted down.

Other significant bills include imposing the **nuclear waste dump** on the Northern Territory, and the mean-spirited removal of **backdating for the carers' allowance**, both of which we opposed.

The Democrats now put up **standard amendments** to all relevant bills on accountability for advertising expenditure, appointment to government positions based on merit and removal of discrimination against same sex couples.

Democrats introduced **private members' bills** on transparent pregnancy counselling and a ban on junk food advertising.

Transparent pregnancy counselling

Just days after the RU486 bill passed, the Government announced a \$51 million pregnancy counselling package. However, counselling is not currently subject

to any laws that prohibit misleading or deceptive advertising and the majority of advertised services are run by Right to Life or church organisations whose principal but unstated objective is to coerce women into continuing their pregnancies. These services claim to provide information on all three pregnancy options but, according to women who call them, they refuse to refer for terminations and falsely claim abortion causes breast cancer, infertility and marriage break-up! This causes enormous distress to women, particularly those who have already decided on abortion.

Senator Stott Despoja's has tabled a private members Bill that would make pregnancy counselling organisations subject to similar misleading and deceptive advertising laws as those organisations engaged in trade or commerce.

Go to www.democrats.org.au/campaigns/pregnancy_counselling to view the Bill and find out more about our campaign, including our **petition** calling for regulation of pregnancy counselling.

A ban on junk food advertising

A ban on junk food advertising during children's television time has now been recommended by the Australian Medical Association to deal with an alarming increase in obesity and high fat and sugar food intake that appears determined more by McDonalds and Hungry Jacks ads than any notion of sensible, balanced diets. But Minister Abbott says this would interfere with parents' rights and responsibilities.



OPINION

Howard's 10 years Senator Lyn Allison

Holding the office of Prime Minister for a decade is definitely a big achievement, but being in power for a long time does not in itself mean that the reign has been for the good of all Australians. Over the past 10 years Australia's values and culture have changed and many others think for the worse. This change has shored up the Coalition's hold on office through the successful use of propaganda. Read the full opinion piece at www.democrats.org.au/campaigns/the_howard_years/.

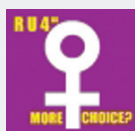
Oil Crisis Senator Lyn Allison

The latest research shows that oil peaking presents the world with a risk management problem of global proportions because there is now an energy security-planning vacuum in Australia and many other countries. Read the full opinion piece at www.democrats.org.au.

Tax-Free Thresholds Senator Andrew Murray

Australia's income tax-free threshold is \$6,000 and is unchanged since 2000. It is not indexed and is therefore constantly losing real value. If it had been indexed since 2000 it would now be well over \$7,000. Had the 1980 personal threshold of \$4,041 kept pace with earnings, it would now be over \$14,000. People cannot live on \$6,000 a year. Australia's welfare floor is \$12,500, calculated as the minimum income required for basic subsistence. There is no justification for income taxing someone earning so little. Read the full speech at www.andrewmurray.org.au.

DEMOCRATS WINS



RU486

It took ten years to remove the ministerial veto on the abortion pill – RU486 or mifepristone – but we finally did it in February after an inquiry, a long and at times emotive debate in which most MPs spoke and a conscience vote was taken.

People wrote saying they were pleased that women would now have a safe, less invasive alternative to surgical abortion but they were also impressed by the collaborative and cross party effort of women in delivering this change. And it was to large degree a gender issue. Only 46% of male Senators voted for the bill compared with 90% of women.

This suggests two things. Firstly, some men still see it as their responsibility to control women's reproductive decisions and, secondly, only when there is more equal representation of women in the parliament, will the interests of Australian women be properly served.

Senator Allison initiated the change and was pleased to be one of the four co-sponsors of the legislation that was passed. She and her colleagues were given the Women's Electoral Lobby 'Edna Award' for advancing the status of women in the political sphere.



Mental Health

The Democrats-initiated and chaired inquiry into mental health services tabled its highly praised report in April and we hope it will influence the decision-making of state and federal health ministers ahead of their June meeting.

The report is online at www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/mentalhealth.

National Parks Inquiry

Senator Bartlett chairs one of the few inquiries agreed to by Government - examining the resources available to meet the objectives of Australia's national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas.

See www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/ecita_ctte/nationalparks/index.htm for more.



Caption: Senator Bartlett inspecting a waterway.

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ACTION



Multiculturalism

In response to Cronulla riots and intolerance coming from some politicians, we have set up a campaign encouraging governments and community leaders to be more active in highlighting the benefits of multiculturalism. We say this would help combat extremism and misunderstanding and ensure that newly arrived migrants and refugees are given better settlement support.

A strong democracy thrives on diversity - diversity of ideas and cultures, built around the essential values which have made Australian society so strong.

Our "Strength in Diversity" postcards can be ordered via the website. You can sign up too to our consultative group at www.andrewbartlett.com/issues-multicultural-campaign.htm.

A DEMOCRATS FUTURE



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www.democrats.org.au

Make Australia Better and Fairer

Leaflets inviting the public to help us make Australia better and fairer are available for distribution.

Take a look at our publications at www.democrats.org.au and call or email if you can help distribute these leaflets in your community.

Telephone: (03) 9416 1880
Email: daniel.barnes@aph.gov.au

DEMOCRATS

10 BUDGET PRIORITIES

The 2006 budget had some surprises - big tax breaks for all but those on the lowest incomes and huge superannuation concessions, particularly for the wealthy. Predictably, equity and the big nation-building measures needed to sustain a healthy society and economy in the long term were missing. The next generation will be left to deal with a trade deficit of more than \$450 billion, big increases in household debt, a shrinking manufacturing base, the demands of an ageing population, climate change, water shortages and lack of investment in infrastructure.

While we welcome middle income earners, particularly families benefiting from tax cuts, 2 million people will still live below the poverty line and continue to pay income taxes. No effort has been made to close tax loopholes and concessions, lift tax free thresholds or to index tax rates.

Defence and security now receives \$2 billion a year more than education! Interstate road will receive eight times more than rail and there was very little for the ABC, for alternative fuels or for the environment. Not once did the Treasurer mention greenhouse in his speech.

There are extra family daycare places offered but nothing to narrow the growing gap between the cost of childcare and childcare benefits. Mental health spending had already been announced and apart from health checks for the over 45's, there was little else in health.

2006 Budget: Our 10 top priorities for the next generation

We say those priorities should be:

1. Early childhood development, child health and well-being
2. Climate change
3. Oil and transport
4. Water
5. Education and training
6. Mental health
7. Indigenous inequality
8. Infrastructure – rail, public transport and broadband
9. Research and Development, and
10. Tax reform for low to middle income earners.

You can read our budget response at www.democrats.org.au.

Overall, this was a reactive budget, with one-off handouts designed to win votes and a handy surplus of \$10 billion to take to the next election rather than any sort of plan for a sustainable future.

The Australian economy has delivered high levels of growth, real income rises, more jobs and low interest rates for most of the last decade but our current account deficit, declining manufacturing base, rising fuel costs and ageing population are signs that our current prosperity is not likely to be sustained without a shift in Government priorities and major investment in infrastructure, education and training.