

# **The Internal Organisation of the Australian Democrats: Lessons for Participatory Parties**

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Generally regarded as a party embracing participatory ideals, the Australian Democrats were founded upon the premise that members be given the opportunity “for a greater say in the decisions that affect them” (Chipp 1977). The membership was to be the driving force behind the party: formulating policies, selecting office bearers, pre-selecting parliamentary candidates and determining the leadership. Twenty-seven years on, democratic participation continues to be the focus of the party’s internal organisation, despite numerous instances of infighting and displays of internal disorganisation. The Democrats have managed to survive in the competitive climate of Australian electoral politics, dominated by the major parties – but at what cost for internal democracy? Has the party been able to uphold its participatory ideals? Alternatively, has the pressure of electoral competition necessitated a shift in the party’s internal organisation away from membership participation to professionalism and hierarchical control?

This paper presents the results of a study conducted throughout 2003, evaluating the internal organisation of the Democrats with reference to the broader debate concerning the desirability and efficacy of intra-party democracy. I analyse the extent to which the formal organisation of the party is conducive to membership participation and the consequent operation of participatory mechanisms when exposed to the pressures of a competitive electoral environment, with emphasis on the Democrats’ policy development process and a brief study of the 1998-1999 GST negotiations. Throughout the paper, I draw a number of significant lessons of relevance to all participatory parties. As the study will illustrate, the challenge for such parties lies in successfully coordinating the right of the membership to participate in meaningful and engaging political decision-making with the position of the parliamentary party, which effectively controls decision-making processes in everyday party practice.

## Background to the Study

In contrast to the party's electoral support and campaign performance, the internal organisation and participatory processes of the Australian Democrats have received little attention from the Australian political science community. A number of exceptions exist, notably Johns 2000, Sugita 1995, Ward 1997, Warhurst 1997, and Warhurst & Tate 1998. Only Johns (2000) and Warhurst and Tate (1998) evaluate the operation of intra-party democracy, however with some limitations. Premised upon criteria derived from the *Commonwealth Electoral Act* pertaining to a fair electoral system, Johns' study focuses on the formal processes of the party (Johns 2000, 414), rather than extending an analysis to the Democrats' everyday working mode. Warhurst and Tate present an introductory evaluation of direct democracy in the Australia Party and the Democrats; nevertheless, the scope of the paper is confined to direct democracy in the period 1977-1987 and leadership selection 1977-1997.

Building upon the existing research, I chose to undertake a qualitative study of the Australian Democrats, based on the systematic analysis of party documents, including the National Constitution, Rules and Regulations and the *National Journal*. Official party sources were augmented by in-depth interviews with six current and former senators, several party members and former officials. Interview material was not used as the primary data source for gauging the views of the membership due to the difficulty of obtaining access and a geographically representative sample. Rather, the data for a qualitative analysis of membership participation within the Democrats was obtained by examining members' letters and discussion in the party's *National Journal* over the past 27 years, which presents comment on issues of significance raised by members from around Australia.

A qualitative approach was chosen for a number of reasons. Primarily, it enabled an examination of the individual experience of political participation and behaviour in an internally democratic party, and the subjective meaning attached by individuals to

those experiences (Devine 1995, 138). In particular, this included the significance accorded to intra-party democracy and its compatibility with electoral success, which differed markedly between Democrat members and between Senators. The nature of the data collected also favoured a qualitative analysis. Secrecy surrounding the internal operation of political parties, the limited availability of official documents and access to the membership present a significant bar to long-term, systematic quantitative analyses.

### **Internal Party Democracy: a Theoretical Overview**

Although numerous studies of intra-party democracy have been conducted over the last two centuries, political scientists have largely regarded democracy within political parties to be either undesirable or an unachievable ideal. Until the 1970s, political parties were generally analysed within the dominant conception of democracy – that of a competitive party system (or elite democracy). The competitive model assumes the primacy of the electoral system as a guarantee of democratic decision-making, in which parties compete to offer voters a clear set of meaningful choices at the ballot box<sup>1</sup>.

From the 1970s, democratic theories such as participatory and deliberative democracy emerged, paralleled by the creation of political parties that embraced democratic principles within their organisations - indicating a shift in democratic thinking away from aggregating the preferences of the masses, to securing opportunities for more direct citizen participation within parties. Participatory democracy aims to share decision-making equally among all members of a group (Gould 1988, 85). However, it has been criticised as suffering severe organisational constraints, based on an inverse relationship between the quality of the participation and the number of participants (Barber 1984, 151; Sartori 1987, 113). Deliberative democracy attempts to overcome this criticism by allowing for a reduced number of representative participants to engage in debate and discussion to arrive at decisions

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion of the competitive model of democracy, see Dahl (1967, 245, 248), Schattschneider (1942, 60) and Schumpeter (1942, 269).

(Fishkin 1991; 1995). Participatory and deliberative principles are not necessarily inconsistent with a competitive party system - competitive elections form an integral part of the democratic process, but policies presented to electors should be formulated according to deliberative decision making principles (Teorell 1999, 372, 377).

Nevertheless, a fundamental criticism of intra-party democracy concerns the efficiency of the party organisation. Internal party democracy is not necessarily undesirable, but rather impossible to pragmatically achieve in competition for votes (Wilson 1962, 347). To the competitive theorist, the efficiency and degree of cohesion with which the party can recruit political elites and contest government is paramount. The quick release of coherent policies and the selection and training of candidates who bring electoral success requires a hierarchical party organisation, to maintain the unity of the party position so electors may have a clear choice between parties (Schumpeter 1942)<sup>2</sup>. Further, Michels (1962) proposes that democracy within political parties is unsustainable: the division of labour required within a party produces an elite with superior political knowledge, skills and autonomous interests, which inevitably governs the party. However, organisation can differ between parties, and will depend upon the rationale and aspirations of the party, its structure and the political system within which it exists. Consequently, there are differing degrees to which a party structure may be described as oligarchic (Koelble 1989, 213).

Another criticism of the implementation of intra-party democracy relates to the control and unequal influence seemingly democratic processes may give to sections of the community. This can occur within parties, as democratic structures may be compromised by unequal access to political resources that can be used to influence political decisions and distort preferences. It is also argued that intra-party democracy gives parties the impossible task of satisfying two masters – voters and members. Consequently, democracy is jeopardised, as the preferences of members would prevail

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<sup>2</sup> However, the requirement of a clear electoral choice may be satisfied if a party possesses a coherent or defining ideology, notwithstanding differences of opinion within the party (Budge 1996, 131-2).

at the expense of realising the will of the electorate (McKenzie 1982, 194-8). Therefore, to secure the integrity of preference articulation and aggregation, political parties must ensure that internally democratic structures and processes are open to all, and cannot be dominated by one particular group. I now turn to consider the internal organisation of the Australian Democrats in light of the debate on the desirability and efficacy of intra-party democracy.

### **The Application of Democratic Principles: the Formal Organisation of the Democrats**

The democratic structure and participatory ethos of the Australian Democrats and its predecessor the Australia Party, have generally been accepted by political commentators (Stock 1994, Sugita 1995, Warhurst 1997, Warhurst & Tate 1998). Heavily emphasised in party documents, the Democrats' commitment to internal democracy is codified within the Party Objectives, Standard Practices and Constitution, vesting the formal 'ownership' of the party in the membership, which determines party policy, selects parliamentary candidates, office bearers and party leaders by postal ballot.

Members may participate at several levels, reflecting the geographic division of the party into branch (local), divisional (State) and national organisations. However, the degree of meaningful participation a member can make below a national level is dependent upon place of residence – many branches and even State divisions tend to be organised on an ad hoc basis, with some regions far more active than others (Ward 1997, 116). As the Democrats are primarily organised on a 'national basis' (Ward 1997, 118), the most accessible form of participation open to members is the voluntary postal ballot. To complement the national postal ballots, the discussion of political matters between members and the dissemination of information occurs via two avenues: at branch meetings, and in the party's *National Journal*, circulated to all members.

The structure of the party reflects an attempt to decentralise power firstly through reducing formal political decision-making to an individual level through the

voluntary postal ballot, and secondly by creating a system of “checks and balances” (Stott Despoja 2003) between the party membership, executive and parliamentary party. The party Constitution establishes a National Executive, elected biannually by the membership. The Executive performs an organisational and administrative role, coordinating the day-to-day operation of the party. Although the Executive does not generally determine the policy direction of the party, it is regarded as representative of the views of the membership if emergency policy decisions are required. The composition of the National Executive has caused some concern: representation is divided equally amongst the States, and whilst this ensures equality in geographic representation, it does not take into account variations in the size of membership between States.

Due to its place in Australian politics, the parliamentary wing of the Democrats has the potential to exert the greatest degree of political power. However, parliamentarians remain formally accountable to the membership in several ways. Each parliamentarian is pre-selected by members as a candidate every election. If members do not like the actions of a particular senator, they may choose not to endorse their candidature at the next election. However, given the length of the Senate term, this is a particularly weak mode of accountability as opportunities to vote are limited.

Parliamentarians are notionally held in check by the possibility of disciplinary action brought by the National Executive on behalf of the membership for actions deemed to be against the ‘party’s interests’. Disciplining the parliamentary party has not been an easy task for the executive, as Stott Despoja (2003) comments: “ultimately, it’s a governing body to which we’re accountable, but because we have so much power in the parliamentary wing sense, it’s possible for us to ignore them - but that shouldn’t be allowed”. The ineffectiveness of the party’s disciplinary mechanisms is exemplified by the recent resignation of former leader Senator Lees from the Democrats. Lees did not accept actions brought against her by the National Executive’s disciplinary body,

the National Compliance Committee, and chose to exit the party rather than comply with its orders (*The Australian* 27-28 July).

### *The policy development process*

The formulation of party policy takes place under the broad constitutional objective that “policies shall be formulated with the maximum participation of members and shall finally be determined by the direct and equal say of the membership by a voluntary postal vote” (Constitution, s 9.1). Ballots to adopt or change policy can be initiated by decision of the National Executive or a State Division, petition by five Branches or fifty members. Policy drafts and suggestions may come from any member, but are more commonly formulated by working groups and national conference workshops, led by a handful of dedicated members, and influenced quite heavily by parliamentarians (Cherry 2003). Draft policies are published, debated and balloted in the *National Journal*.

As the only means of reliably reaching all members, the demands placed upon the journal in facilitating a system of participatory democracy are often too great. Political decision-making through the journal has been described as “extremely cumbersome” (*National Journal* December 1996, 4). In the early days of the party, it was not unusual for members’ to be confronted by four lengthy policy ballots each month, as one member exclaimed: “I am exhausted having just voted 76 times on the Environment policy” (*National Journal* 6/78, 17). Members have expressed concern that the space given to policy responses (150-250 words) is not substantial enough, which “mitigates against maximum participation of branches and the public in the proposal, criticism or adequate discussion of policy proposals” (*National Journal* 7/77, 35). Printing and postage costs have also been a concern for a party with limited financial resources, as has the voluntary effort needed to produce such a publication. Whilst the publication continues to be the centerpiece of participatory democracy within the party, stylistic changes have reflected increased professionalism within the broader party. Policy

ballots remain, but are packaged as more simplified supplements. The volume of members' letters has been reduced, replaced with general interest articles and reports from Senators and party officials.

*The role of branches in policy development*

Branches are intended to play a complementary role to the national ballots and journal, providing a forum for members to discuss and debate policies in detail, to gather information on policy issues and obtain advice from outside groups with similar objectives to the party. Ideally these discussion groups were designed to be between 5-10 people, and branches were intended to have the same areas of responsibility and to work in "parallel rather than in hierarchy", providing members with the opportunity to gather information to make an "informed personal postal vote" (*National Journal* 1/77, 4; 2/77, 8).

However, branch activities rarely centre upon the discussion of upcoming policy ballots. The connection between policy discussion through branches and the formal voting process is in reality quite tenuous. As one member noted, "there is no real encouragement to discuss national policies in the party organisation, simply because this can be so easily bypassed" (*National Journal* October 1985, 15). Hence, whilst branches were designed to provide a deliberative forum for the discussion of policies and party matters, the extent to which they fulfill this role is uncertain. The views of members expressed in the *National Journal* (4/80, 19) indicated that the subject of branch meetings tended to be fundraising and social activities, rather than policy debate.

*Low membership participation*

Members of the Australian Democrats enjoy a level of formal power and participation far greater than any major party in Australian politics. Opportunities for participation are facilitated by the small size of the party<sup>3</sup>, but are not reflected in the level of participation that actually occurs. Although many members participate at election time (for example by staffing polling booths), participation in party ballots and organisational matters is much lower:

**Table 1: Average percentage of membership voting in ballots 1990-2002**

	%
Leadership ballots	46
National Executive ballots	21
Policy ballots	12
Constitutional ballots	13

(Source: Australian Democrats 2003, 21)

Although the above figures only cover the previous decade, low levels of participation have been a significant problem throughout the party's history, reflected in the reduction of the minimum voting threshold for a valid policy ballot from 10% to 3% of members (*National Journal* March 1990).

Given that participatory democracy holds such a prominent place in the Democrats' ethos, it is somewhat perplexing that participation levels are so low. The most common reasons given by members as to why they do not participate in ballots include: "forgot, too busy, didn't understand the issues, and didn't know the candidates" (Australian Democrats 2003, 22). This reflects a lack of knowledge amongst members, or disjoint between members' interests, capabilities and those areas of policy that are being balloted.

<sup>3</sup> Membership estimates have ranged between 2000 and 6000. See Ward (1997, 113-114).

Structural barriers to participation include the way in which policy and political decisions are made. Postal ballots are time consuming and potentially confusing. As Senator Cherry (2003) commented: “you have 30 questions on a single policy. No information on what those options are about, and you’re expected to vote on it”. Lack of information sharing within the party means that most members will not be informed when they need to vote on an issue, or their interests will not be adequately matched with policy development opportunities. To mitigate the effects of an uneducated membership, cooperation between branches and members has always been encouraged, particularly in forming policy discussion groups (*National Journal* 1/77).

A culture of apathy exists within the party, caused to an extent by the policy development process. Often policies put to the membership are an accurate reflection of the members’ views, and hence many members will not feel the need to vote for policies they believe are correct, as the ratification of these policy drafts, like their formulation, is left to ‘someone else’ (Stott Despoja 2003). However, a more fundamental problem concerns the meaningfulness of membership participation. Postal ballots, whilst emphasising individual participation, may also isolate members as the process of democratic decision-making is simply reduced to ticking boxes in a constant barrage of referenda. Even when a policy is arrived at through this process, it is rarely applicable to specific debate in the legislative arena, as the Democrats typically respond to rather than control the legislative agenda. As Senator Greig (2003) explained:

“Members join or like the Democrats because they can actually involve themselves in the policy process, and some of them devote extraordinary amounts of time and energy to doing that...For the most part, that’s not relevant for what we do in parliament, because the particular thing for which they have a precise passion doesn’t come up”.

For members who invest time in policy development, a great deal of frustration is experienced by those who never see

their policies balloted, or at the very least presented in an altered form. As one member lamented, “the reality is the great majority of policy proposals I make at present appear to disappear into a ‘black hole’...it is clear that the current system is highly democratic in theory – in practice, it is almost impossible for members to have any certainty that their policy proposals will ever be balloted” (*National Journal* February 1986).

Low membership participation throughout the party’s history has necessitated a dialogue of membership rights and responsibilities. Although the party’s small size aids participation and organisation, the resource base is ultimately quite small and often lacking. Consequently, the responsibility of members in a participatory party is heavily emphasised. Party literature stresses that participatory democracy is a two way process: if members want to have extensive rights with respect to electing office bearers and creating policy, they must be prepared to support this process by contributing ideas and time of their own.

#### *Possibility of minority control*

Given that the level of membership participation in the Democrats and the threshold required for party ballots to be accepted are both quite low, there is a concern that a small number of members can gain control of the policy process. Although Stott Despoja accepts that it is a theoretical possibility, she argues that once a group is identified as controlling a policy ballot, the membership will instinctively get involved to vote against the policy if they do not agree with it, described as a “natural rectifying instinct” (2003). However, this argument rests on the assumption that the membership can identify such ‘controlling groups’. Given the documented apathy of Democrat members concerning policy decisions, this scenario seems unlikely. Others regard minority control as more of a concern, but the real difficulty lies at the point of drafting rather than ratification:

“Because we’re desperate for people to get involved, if five people turn up for an issue they’ll end up writing the policy...Once you control the first draft, it’s very, very hard to unscramble it...I’ve seen that happen several times in our party – that a couple of people obsessed with a particular policy end up in charge of something and it ends up going off the rails” (Cherry 2003).

The drafting of policy is extremely significant because, as noted above, most members will vote ‘yes’ for policies, and in most cases will accept the policy package in its entirety (Cherry 2003).

The problem of minority control extends beyond policy to candidate and leadership selection. Like the major parties, the Democrats are not immune to the theoretical possibility of branch stacking, particularly when a vote of the membership can spill and determine leadership positions:

“It’s going to cost a bit more, but there’s certainly going to be branch stacking or division stacking...You can go round the streets door-knocking and you can get 200 members...it is just a nonsense to have the ability to destabilise the party to that extent” (Lees 2003).

In addition to the danger of a minority of members running a disingenuous agenda, difficulties arise when a small number of members run a positive agenda but are not given the necessary infrastructure or support from the party (Greig 2003). Low membership participation in postal ballots means that many policies in which members have invested considerable time will not be accepted as party policy, particularly regarding issues where specialist knowledge is required, for example science and technology policies (*National Journal* September 1984).

An analysis of the formal organisation of the Democrats reveals that the effective operation of participatory democracy is hindered by low membership participation, the possibility of minority control and the method of decision making, which can be menial, inefficient and unrewarding. What are the consequences when the Democrats’ participatory mechanisms are exposed

to the pressures of competitive electoral politics?

### **Participatory Democracy in Practice: The Goods and Services Tax**

The GST negotiations of 1998-1999 present an excellent opportunity to examine the Democrats' policy process in action, against the backdrop of the 1998 Federal Election in which the GST was a primary issue<sup>4</sup>. Initiated by the executive arm of the party, the taxation policy followed the Democrats formal policy development process. After 18 months of internal discussions, consultation and indicative balloting, designed to provide information to members so they could make an informed vote the issue of taxation was formally balloted (*National Journal* July 1999, 3-4). The ballot was written in general terms and contained 18 broad principles on which members were to vote. Although the draft policy did not specifically mention the 'GST', it did contain a proposal for "tax to be levied on the provision of services as well as on the production of goods" (*National Journal* June 1998). The taxation policy was approved by the membership, however with only a narrow majority supporting a tax on goods and services (*Sydney Morning Herald* 16 October 1998)<sup>5</sup>.

The timing of the GST ballot was problematic, coinciding with the start of the 1998 federal election campaign. Consequently, a strategic decision was made by the National Executive to release the party's taxation policy to the public before an official announcement was made to the membership. However, the decision to subvert the standard process by publicly releasing the Democrats' taxation position before releasing the results of the policy ballot to members may have alienated and angered many of the party's rank and file, creating the impression that the taxation policy was being hijacked by the parliamentary wing.

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<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the GST issue in the context of the 1998 federal election, see Simms & Warhurst 2000, Bean & McAllister 2000; 1999.

<sup>5</sup> No voting figures were published in the *National Journal*, beyond a statement that the policy has been accepted by the membership.

After the election, in which the Democrats returned holding the Senate balance of power, the party began the process of negotiating a GST package with the Government. The specifics of the package were formulated by the parliamentary party, driven by the leader and economic spokesperson Senator Murray (*Weekend Australian*, 22 May 1999, *The Age*, 29 May 1999). Negotiating with the Government forced the Democrats to make a number of concessions to reach a final compromise – most notably, the Democrats’ election promise of ‘no GST on food’ had to be scaled back to include only basic foods (*The Advertiser*, 21 April 1999). The Howard-Lees deal had the narrow support of the Democrats’ National Executive, by a 9-8 vote (Cherry 2003). However, there was fundamental disagreement amongst the Senators as to whether the final GST package was consistent with the party’s balloted policy. Although the legislation was passed in the Senate, both Senators Bartlett and Stott Despoja crossed the floor to vote against the bill.

The GST negotiations were criticised in two main respects. The first was dissatisfaction with the way in which the policy had been balloted. The ballot paper was regarded as unnecessarily complicated and confusing. The fact that the words ‘goods and services tax’ did not appear in the ballot was considered misleading (Greig 2003). Consequently, the democratic validity of the ballot was questioned, with the reality that only 4 or 5% of members had voted, and was then only passed by a “slim majority” (Greig 2003)<sup>6</sup>. The degree of discretion exercised by the parliamentary party (particularly by the leader) in the implementation of the taxation ballot came under sustained attack from within the party. At issue was the argument that members should have been consulted as to the form of the negotiated GST package. This dissatisfaction was reflected in members’ letters to the *National Journal* following the ballot, a petition to spill the leadership in July 1999, and ultimately unsuccessful motions put forward attempting to return certain aspects of the GST to a ballot of the members (*National*

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<sup>6</sup> No voting figures were officially published in the *National Journal*.

*Journal* October 1999). Even today, the GST remains a very sensitive subject within the party due to the lasting tensions and dissension the legislation caused.

*The primacy of the parliamentary party*

The GST negotiations highlight a significant tension within the party over the primacy of parliamentarians in the everyday operation of the Democrats. The parliamentary party is the focus of media attention and has staff and financial resources often superior to the organisational arms of the party (Abjorensen 1991, Warhurst 1997, 12, Ward 1997, 123-4). It is common practice for members of the National Executive and the party organisation to also be present on Senators' staff (Cherry 2003). The pragmatic argument for this practice rests on sharing knowledge and resources between various arms of the party, hence creating a more efficient process of decision making (Cherry 2003). However, the practice has the potential to undermine the fundamental separation of power between the party organisation and parliamentary wing, thus creating the potential for an oligarchy to develop across these two arms of the party<sup>7</sup>.

The parliamentary party must apply the policies, objectives and principles of the party to legislation at hand. However, due to the party's balance of power position in the Senate, in the majority of cases the party has no policies that are directly applicable to legislative debate. Consequently, although Democrat senators are formally "guided by a very strict set of policies" (Stott Despoja 2003), the reality is that in everyday matters parliamentarians exercise a great deal of discretion in applying party policy - referring not to detailed policies, but rather the "principles of the party" (Stott Despoja 2003), "underlying philosophies" (Greig 2003) and the "vibe" of the party membership (Cherry 2003).

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<sup>7</sup> Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, it should be noted that the role of staff in parliamentary negotiations is potentially very influential.

Considering this discretion, a great deal of faith is placed in Democrat parliamentarians to adhere to the participatory ethos of the party, and consult or refer to the views of the membership (Stott Despoja 2003). This level of consultation is not always possible, considering the pressures of time and the workload of Senators, not to mention the organisational impediments to ascertaining the view of the membership by means additional to the current postal ballot. The impracticality of such a process would have been impossible to circumvent, particularly in a process of negotiation such as the GST, which comprised a series of stages each of which would have necessitated a separate ballot of members (Lees 2003).

*Tensions between representing the membership and representing the electorate*

The Democrats were founded on two seemingly contradictory principles. The first, participatory democracy, bestows formal powers upon the membership to initiate, formulate and ratify party policy. However, this principle coexists with a commitment to the individual conscience of parliamentarians, who have a constitutionally protected right to depart from party policy and vote according to their conscience or duty to the electorate if they so wish (Constitution, s 11.3). The paradox is resolved in part by the requirement of transparency - the parliamentarian is required to submit his/her reasons for voting contrary to party policy to the party executive.

Although these principles have the potential to conflict, they do so very rarely in practice. Over the last five years, conscience votes have only been invoked in five instances: over the republic model, tax reform, Internet gambling and elements of the euthanasia and stem cell debates (Australian Democrats 2003, 42). The primary reason for this statistical unity is the lack of balloted policy on issues debated in parliament. It has been suggested that the failure to distinguish between split votes (where there is no balloted policy) and voting against party policy was a factor that exaggerated members' perception that parliamentarians voted against party policy (Australian Democrats

2003, 42). This indicates insufficient understanding within the membership of the work of the parliamentary party, in particular, the extent to which party policy is applicable in the legislative arena, and may be remedied by emphasising the degree to which Senators' legislative positions reflect the broader objectives of the party (Australian Democrats 2003, 42).

Another difficulty lies in the perceived ideological difference between the party membership and the party's voter base. Although it has been documented that Democrat voters perceive the party to be further left in the political spectrum than voters in general (for example see Bean 1997, 81-2), the relationship between voters and members has not previously been addressed. At the last federal election, despite the fact that 36% of Democrat voters gave their second preference to the Coalition (AEC 2002), Senator Cherry (2003) doubts that 5% of Democrat members would do the same. On the ideological spectrum, Democrat members are regarded by parliamentarians as "centre to centre-left", concerned with social and environmental issues, in contrast to voters, who are "centre to centre right" (Greig 2003).

It would appear that maximising electoral success is not easily compatible with internally democratic processes, if the views of the membership are substantially different from that of voters. As Green (2002) argues, "to tie the hands of senators with rigid policy positions determined by members can in the end only destroy support in the electorate". Despite the early rhetoric within the party that membership supremacy is a positive virtue, the direct electoral benefit of intra-party democracy is questionable: "the perception that a Democrat Senator is, or might be putting a few thousand members before millions of voters switches voters right off" (Murray 2002). It is somewhat ironic that a party that expounded intra-party democracy in policy development as a safeguard against vested interests now faces a similar charge of being hijacked by an unrepresentative membership.

*Personalities, factions and leadership*

The Democrats are not immune from the factional politics inherent in other Australian political parties, particularly when personal ambition and uncollegial behaviour cannot be controlled by the party's disciplinary mechanisms (Warhurst 1997, 12-3). Departed former leader Lees criticised the party for becoming a "personality club", based upon "a faction, or a group that's formed around a personality, who basically have come to a way of thinking that unless you get everything then it's not worth it" (Lees 2003). For a small party with limited resources that relies heavily on personal contacts, personality differences cause problems in the efficient day-to-day operation of the party, particularly in the parliamentary party, hindering working relationships between senators (Cherry 2003).

Comments from senators indicated that any factions or tendencies in the party are currently built around personality lines. However, these differences of personality also reflect the way in which the party should be run and in turn, how it interacts with the government:

"Yes it was personality, but it was also a different approach to things as well. Meg and Natasha do have a slightly different approach to things. The National Executive reps, who tended to support Natasha's line tended to be people who felt that party room should be much more strident in its opposition to government positions and much more governed by the rigid application of detailed party policy" (Cherry 2003).

It is difficult to determine if factions within the party, whether based on policy or personality, extend beyond the parliamentary party in any structured way. In the aftermath of the GST deal, it was evident that the party membership divided in their support of Lees and her agreement with the Howard Government. Whilst the West Australian, Victorian and Queensland State Divisions formally endorsed the GST deal, NSW voted against it, indicating some formalised factionalism at the divisional level

(*Australian Associated Press* 30 May 1999). Whether these factions extended beyond State executives is unclear - as at the same meeting at which the Victorian Council approved the GST deal, a membership petition was circulating to oppose it (*The Australian* 7 June 1999). It is more probable that factions form around active and notable individuals within the party who are able to mobilise members around an issue or personality, rather than within pre-determined institutional groupings such as branches or divisions. The NSW and SA oppositional groups were led by well know party figures: former leader John Coulter in SA and Divisional Executive member David Harcourt-Norton in NSW, who both gained significant media publicity in opposition to Lees' deal (*Courier Mail* 25 May 1999, *Sydney Morning Herald* 25 June 1999).

The Democrats cannot escape the emphasis on personality when it comes to the parliamentary leader. The profile of the leader has always been critical, particularly in terms of electoral recognition, as "a lot of people perceive the Democrats through the leader" (Greig 2003, also see Bean 1997). The leader holds the primary role in the party room, chairing meetings and providing general direction and guidance (Cherry 2003). The presence of a leader also has the ability to influence National Executive, which is particularly true of Cheryl Kernot, who had "a control over National Executive which was inspired by her presence but also her ability to talk them round, that no leader has had" (Stott Despoja 2003). Depending on the style and personality of the leader, he or she has a significant amount of power within the party, which at face value seems inconsistent with the principles of a democratic party organisation.

However, that power is kept in check by the constitutional requirement that the membership elect the leader, and the right given to members to spill leadership positions by petition and ballot. Whilst this does conform to democratic principles, it creates a significant amount of tension in the everyday operation of the party, particularly if the members' choice is not necessarily that of the party room. The system of membership election creates a source of great electoral instability, considering the

Democrats' high leadership turnover (Murray 2002a).

Strong personalities within the Democrats create something of a paradox. High profile leaders are necessary for electoral success, and have been attributed to raising membership figures, particularly in 2001 after Stott Despoja became leader (Australian Democrats 2002). However, the popularity of leaders may cause significant tensions in the party room, as was demonstrated by Stott Despoja's subsequent resignation in 2002. Further, if members align on particular issues based on personality, there is a risk that internally democratic procedures could be abused, as the Democrats' policy process relies upon rational debate to make policy decisions, not upon allegiance to a particular senator.

### **Conclusion: the Australian Democrats' Experience - Lessons for Participatory Parties**

The main challenge the Democrats and other participatory parties face is to reconcile the pressures of a competitive electoral system with the principles of internal democracy, evident in the need to establish an efficient, responsive and professional party with coherent policy positions and political objectives, without creating hierarchies of leadership and control.

#### *Efficiency, cohesion and electoral office*

By encouraging a diversity of opinion, democratic procedures inevitably produce internal dissent and debate within political parties. The Democrats have certainly not been immune to the development of factions or tendencies based upon policy, philosophy and personality within the party, creating numerous instances of infighting that have plagued the party's electoral aspirations. Democratic ballots have also proved to be cumbersome, particularly when the pressures of decision making in the legislative arena require a quick and coherent policy response from the party. Consequently, either the party has often had to subvert the process by making emergency policy decisions

through the National Executive, or in the numerous cases in which there is no previously balloted policy, by relying on Democrat parliamentarians to apply the principles of the party to legislation at hand. Although these avenues are theoretically democratic as both the parliamentary party and National Executive are elected by the membership, on several occasions (notably the GST), the representative quality of these bodies has been questioned, as has the level of discretion in political decision-making that they exercise.

### *Revisiting Michels' Iron Law*

As Michels argued, democracy within political parties is unsustainable in the long term as the division of labour within a political party inevitably produces a governing elite. Several factors make the Democrats particularly susceptible to this fate. The Democrats' unique balance of power position in the Senate has created a strong emphasis on the parliamentary party, who effectively embody the Democrats' electoral persona. The reactive nature of the Democrats' position and the reality that the parliamentary agenda rarely coincides with balloted policy means that the parliamentary party has an enormous amount of discretion in making political decisions, bound only by the broad principles of the party.

However, as Koelble (1989) has noted, there are different degrees of oligarchy within political parties, and the separation of powers in the Democrats provides a valuable mechanism by which to minimise the formation of such hierarchies. Although the separation can be subverted, particularly through the manipulation of numbers on National Executive, the frequency of elections means that in practice, any influence that may have been exercised is merely transient. On one hand this has protected democracy within the party, on the other it has led to claims that the executive is obstructionist and unrepresentative, albeit often by disgruntled senators. The complaints are not so much the problem, as is the Democrats' ability to handle them meaningfully and without

jeopardising the party's electoral performance. Despite hindering the ability of the party to present a coherent political image to the electorate, the development of factions, whether around policy or personality, helps to mitigate the development of oligarchies within the party. Even though there may be elites within the Democrats, as long as they are competing for the approval of the membership, intra-party democracy is secure.

### *Membership participation*

By establishing a system of voluntary postal ballots as the cornerstone of participation, the Democrats heavily emphasise the sanctity of individual political decision-making. Whilst this ensures that the maximum possible number of members is targeted for participation, the Democrats' system of postal referenda falls well short of the ideals set forth by deliberative democrats, as it is not supported by the level of discussion, debate and information dissemination that is required to make informed political decisions. The *National Journal* is the primary means by which discussion takes place at a national level, but as demonstrated, the discussion and publication of information in the Journal is severely limited by available space and time.

The formation of policy groups within branches was originally designed to complement the postal ballot, providing a forum for more informed and substantial discussion of policy matters. However, this has been limited by two main factors: the lack of requisite knowledge of policy areas by members, and the overstretched agenda of branch meetings. Due to the party's small size, the inverse relationship between the size of the group participating and the quality of that participation (Sartori 1987, 113) has not the Democrats' foremost problem. Rather, the meaningfulness and quality of the active members' participation is compromised by the additional workload incurred to compensate for non-active members. As the Democrats have realised, participatory democracy takes time and effort, and although theorists acknowledge the rights of members to participate, little attention has been directed to their responsibility to do so.

It may be that a small active membership is a symptom of the problem - low levels of participation indicate that formal balloting is neither a particularly meaningful nor stimulating method of political participation.

Despite low membership participation, internal democracy may still be vindicated if the active members participating are representative of the wider membership. Whilst theoretically plausible, the argument is challenged by empirical evidence presented in the Democrats' case study that a minority can control the policy making process, by formally organising to pursue a particular agenda. Despite claims that if this occurred, there would be a natural rectifying tendency amongst the membership to mitigate it, the degree of membership apathy suggests otherwise. Particularly evident in the GST negotiations -dissatisfaction with the process of the ballot was not voiced until after the ballot had been counted, and despite the controversial nature of the subject matter, only 5% of the membership actually voted.

A number of implications for participatory parties can be drawn from this study. Of particular salience is the need to encourage active membership participation, through modes of decision-making that are engaging and suited to the needs and abilities of the membership. Although the dislocation between the parliamentary party and membership cannot be overcome with respect to everyday political decisions, communication must be facilitated between these two arms of the party, particularly with respect to broader policy objectives. Finally, many of the pressures of a competitive electoral system are inevitable, for example, the timing and quick response required during election periods. Given the Democrats' undertaking to provide for a relatively high level of membership participation, their survival will depend largely upon the party's ability to accept and manage these pressures with transparency, efficiency and in acknowledgement of the expectations of its members.

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