

“Always Year Ahead”

Senator Meg Lees’ address to the Australian Democrats’ National Conference, Brisbane, 20 January 2001.

Thank you to our President Michael Macklin, and welcome everyone to the 2001 Australian Democrats’ National Conference.

Firstly, on behalf of us all I wish to thank Caroline Bonner for her welcome on behalf of the Indigenous owners of the land on which we meet today. It is appropriate in many ways that we are meeting here across the road from Musgrave Park, an important meeting place for the Indigenous peoples of this area for many, many years.

It’s no secret that 2001 will be an election year in a number of states – as well as federally – so 2001 is going to be a busy year. As you know the WA election has already been called and so we have only our WA Senators with us this weekend – other members are back in the west working hard on our campaign. We wish them well and hope we will see an increase in our Upper House numbers as a result of their hard work.

I’ll start the year with a big thank you to all members who have made it to our annual conference. This is an important event on the Democrat calendar and it’s you, the members, who will make this conference the springboard into a successful year. It is you the members who are the backbone of this party.

I’d also like to add an extra thank you to all our candidates, campaign managers and volunteers for their hard work and successes in by-elections and local government elections across the country during this last year. Congratulations to all those involved. In all the hard uphill grind of politics we sometimes forget that we are indeed making progress and getting stronger.

I extend particular thanks and a special welcome to our guests including our guest speakers and presenters, and the participants in the corporate partnership program.

As I said, 2001 is going to be a very important year for us all and I think it’s important that if we want to know where we’re going, we have to know where we’ve come from. So, at the outset, I’d like to share a brief review of the year at the Federal level from the Democrats’ perspective.

In a broad sense, I can’t help but feel that the past year has been a year of wasted opportunities for Australia and I am confident many Australians feel the same. The responsibility for these wasted opportunities lies with the Government – and the Labor Opposition.

At the end of the year, we saw the Coalition and Labor combine to pass the grossly unfair schools funding bill without amendments that could have, at least, ensured no loss of income to the public system.

The relentless attacks on the ABC have continued and Australia's universities are well beyond crisis point in funding terms.

Both Liberal and Labor now support the private health insurance rebate despite a blow-out in the cost of the scheme and it being clear that the \$2 to \$2.5 billion annual cost has delivered little if any benefit at all to Australia's public health system and no benefit at all to those most urgently in need of better health care.

The Coalition Government has worked tirelessly to ensure there was no outcome at the latest round of global negotiations to tackle climate change in the Hague. This is despite a widespread and growing concern at the community level at what are the demonstrable effects of global warming.

And, despite hundreds of thousands of Australians, of all political persuasions and from all walks of life, coming out onto the streets of our cities and towns to campaign for reconciliation, we still wait for an apology from our Government. An apology on behalf of us all for the injustices of the past. If Premiers can make such an apology, why can't a Prime Minister? It is just obstinacy.

During 2000 the two older parties cooperated to pass legislation enabling governments to send in Australia's troops against Australian citizens.

The Coalition and the ALP also combined to water down native title rights of Aboriginal people in Queensland.

This is a sorry record of achievement and I point out to you all that these injustices and inequities were visited upon Australia by the ALP voting **in collusion** with the Government. There is a great and deepening gulf between ALP rhetoric and ALP action.

However, despite these disappointments and the difficulties, the Democrats have made some substantial gains over the past year and I would like to briefly recap on some of those.

After all, getting Democrat policies enshrined in legislation is what we are all here for.

During the year 2000 the Democrats have had wins across a diverse range of areas. We negotiated significant tax concessions for Australia's artists, we won grants for cleaner fuels, we ensured that genetically modified food is labelled appropriately and we won extra funding for Radio Australia. We also negotiated rent relief for caravan park residents and we forced the restoration of \$656 million per annum to the public hospital system.

The Democrats worked hard to ensure Australia's peace-keeping effort in East Timor was properly funded and enjoyed wide public support. We forced through 'right-to-

know' legislation ensuring that consumers are aware of both mobile phone emissions and whether eggs on the supermarket shelves are from battery hens or not. The Democrats also initiated and secured the most far-reaching inquiry into Australia's tertiary education sector. This inquiry will be conducted during this year. Without the Democrats' work in the Parliament, I can assure you, it would never have happened.

Incidentally, the work of Democrat Senators on Senate Committees deserves mention. Much of it goes unnoticed but its depth and substance does an immense amount for our political capacity.

The Australian Democrats initiated and chaired the Greenhouse Inquiry during the year. The resultant report represents a substantial contribution to a better understanding of many of the complex issues involved in climate change.

We also secured the Treasurer's support for a proper inquiry into the taxation of charities with a view to extending the capacity of the charitable sector to continue its vital work.

The Democrats also secured an Auditor-General's Review of Parliamentarians' entitlements and we achieved exemptions for family farm assets when means-testing for the Common Youth Allowance.

The Democrats' work in negotiating and securing the passage of the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Bill, for which some uncharitable sections of the green movement criticised us, bore fruit when the legislation was used to prevent the environmentally damaging Naturelink Cableway project in a World Heritage Area.

Pressure from the Democrats, and many others, helped the restoration of flows to the Snowy River, and the announcement by the Government of a package to start the process of restoring degraded lands due to salinity is a testament to Democrat perseverance and foresight.

I well remember that the Democrats were the first party to draw repeated attention to the plight of the Murray-Darling Basin and when we did, we were derided by the two older parties. This is yet another example of how the Democrats have always been years ahead on vital issues.

As a result of our work, Australia has, this year and for the first time, moved to provide taxation benefits for donations of private land to conservation trusts for protection in perpetuity. We have also secured commitments from the Government to expand these incentives and we are now pursuing extra initiatives through the Prime Minister's Community Business Partnership Program as recommended by the CSIRO.

The May Federal budget delivered a number of funding initiatives that the Democrats had lobbied and pressured the Government hard to deliver.

It is sometimes disappointing when the Democrats are not given credit for our ideas but the important thing is that our policies are put into practice. Australia's long-term future is far more important than a few press column inches for a few politicians and I am very happy to be able to list the following as Democrat achievements.

- A funding boost for rural health and getting professionals into rural centres;
- easing the assets test on Youth Allowance for farming families which I have already mentioned;
- compensation for public hospitals when negotiating new salary packaging arrangements;
- delivery of the greenhouse gas abatement program;
- additional funding for legal aid centres;
- development aid for East Timor;
- funding for childhood nutrition programs and
- higher education infrastructure support.

Among the Government's plans we could not accept were Minister Reith's attempts to further erode the rights of Australian workers. We also rejected Queensland, Western Australian and Northern Territory native title regimes. These regimes would have seen, yet again, further erosion of what few rights Aboriginal peoples have to access their lands or say in how they are used.

The year 2000 has seen the final return of lands to the Wik peoples after their historic High Court win 3 years ago. The Democrats are proud of our unwavering support for the Wik peoples' struggle.

Members have also been active participants in what have been a series of tremendously moving walks for reconciliation across the country over the past 12 months.

So you can see that 2000 was another busy year for us. It's true that we didn't win every battle but we won some important ones and much remains to be done. It's times like these, when we look back on what we have achieved, that I'm reminded of the observation made by a respondent in one of our focus groups, when we were researching the community's response to us. She said, "I wouldn't like to think of Australia without the Democrats", I'm sure we all agree. That's why we're here this weekend at the start of our 24th year as a political party.

In reviewing the year from the Democrat perspective I also need to briefly touch on tax reform.

The lead-up to the introduction of the GST was the subject of a major - and quite frankly, dishonest and, in some cases, quite despicable - scare-mongering campaign by the Labor Party. There were all sorts of predictions that the sky would fall in. They seemed to actually wish the worst on Australia and Australians. Well, July 1 came and went with barely a whimper.

The price impact of the GST has been pretty much just as predicted. When we endorsed the Australian Consumers Association view that the Democrats' win of making basic food groceries GST free would reduce the average supermarket bill by 3 per cent. I have to say we were wrong.

In fact the first major grocery price survey since the GST took effect, conducted by Choice Magazine, showed a **4 per cent** fall in grocery prices.

The Democrats' other assertion that the GST would provide windfall gains to the States has also come to pass. Revenue forecasts already show that GST revenue is about \$2 billion ahead of projections. The Prime Minister himself last month indicated that even this is likely to be a significant underestimate.

That means that the States will have extra revenue to pour into services that we, as Democrats, care about, like public hospitals, public schools, salinity programs, aged care and high quality police forces. They will also have the revenue to reduce job-crippling taxes that we don't like, such as payroll tax and bank account debits tax.

The Democrats have consistently supported fair tax measures that secure a robust tax stream and close down tax evasion loopholes.

In addition, the tax reform package has also seen the \$1 billion greenhouse gas abatement package, which is now delivered in full in the budget, with good outcomes ahead for the environment.

The modest increase in prices has meant a real increase in the value of social security payments. In other words – those on pensions and benefits have more disposable income than they did before the GST was introduced.

In short, tax reform has basically played out pretty much as we predicted it would, with good sound social, environmental and economic outcomes for Australia.

The challenge for the Democrats is now to move to keep improving our tax system, cracking down on tax rorts like trusts and wholesale negative gearing, pursuing more relief for low income earners, pursuing better environmental tax objectives and reducing the compliance burden.

Now to those areas where we campaigned hard throughout 2000 but were not successful - usually because of the collusion between Liberal and Labor. In some instances, our lack of success was due purely to the intransigence of the Government alone where conservatism triumphed over liberalism.

I assure members we shall not give up on the following important issues:

- removal of mandatory sentencing;
- extending IVF to women regardless of marital status;
- abolishing the schools funding formula which, thanks to Liberal and Labor, takes money out of our public schools and gives it to the richest private schools;
- the deportation of Konrad Kalejs for Nazi war crimes;
- stopping wholesale land-clearing in Queensland;
- preventing inhumane detention and treatment of refugees;

- diverting the wasteful private health insurance rebate directly to the public and private health systems;
- the protection and strengthening of the ABC and SBS;
- native forests being poured into incinerators for electricity generation;
- Australia's disdainful rebuff of United Nations Human Rights Committees;
- much stronger accountability measures for parliament, the government and our electoral system and
- improvements in Telstra's community service obligations - to name just some.

All of these offer us campaigning opportunities as we move into this election year in the same way we have worked diligently on all of them in the year just past.

Time doesn't permit me to recap on the tremendous work done by our MPs at the State level but I would like to place on the record the sincere appreciation of all members of our party for their efforts, and the efforts of their divisions in supporting them.

And before I move on, I do want to make special mention of my colleagues. My deputy Natasha, Lyn, Vicki, the two Andrews, Aden, Brian and John. Simply, I am very proud to lead such a group of dedicated, hardworking and highly committed women and men and I thank them and pay them tribute publicly for their loyalty, their immense and relentless hard work, and their friendship in what is the hothouse and prickly atmosphere of politics in Canberra.

I would also like to pay tribute to my personal staff for their loyalty and their devotion to the cause – for the hours and hours above and beyond the call of duty, for the endless and mind numbing travel and for the equally endless nights away from family and friends. Thanks to you all - and I warn them all - there's a lot more to come this year!

So, that was last year. Where to now – in 2001 – this election year?

Our aim, as Democrats, is as always to bring progressive thinking, compassion and foresight to the conduct of Australia's national affairs – to take us into the new millennium.

The Democrats are intent on bringing about changes that will deliver positive benefits to Australia's social, economic, and environmental life. These principles have guided Democrat policy and practice since our inception.

The indisputable fact is that since our formation nearly 24 years ago, the Democrats have been years ahead of the other parties on many important issues. On so many occasions, eventually, our ideas get taken up and are accepted in the mainstream of Australian public life.

The Democrats' agenda for the coming year will continue to reflect that progressive agenda we have pursued since our formation.

We shall continue to pursue our human rights agenda.
We shall continue to pursue our environmental agenda.

We shall continue to pursue our education agenda.

We shall continue to pursue political honesty and accountability and we shall continue to ensure that economic progress is always balanced by social and environmental imperatives as well.

For some years, the Democrats have likened this balance to a three-legged stool. Once again, the older parties have finally caught on and caught up – and their rhetoric now refers to the “triple bottom line”. Once again – the Democrats were years ahead.

Whether it be reaching out to re-embrace the United Nations committee system and treaties in relation to women and indigenous people OR whether it be removing ongoing and systemic discrimination against disabled people or gay and lesbian people, there is much to be done in the area of human rights.

The year 2001 will also be marked by the Democrats fighting even harder for the humane treatment of refugees who, more often than not, are seeking shelter from horrendous situations in their home countries. They arrive here seeking shelter for themselves and their children only to be detained in appalling conditions such as we have seen exposed at Woomera recently.

The Democrats’ human rights agenda will include the total abolition of mandatory sentencing regimes, and protection of basic income support for those reliant on our social security system.

We shall continue to fight for the right of politicians, in all Australian Parliaments to be allowed by their parties to vote according to their own consciences with regard to voluntary euthanasia. The Australian people expect, at a minimum, this must be a matter of conscience for their elected representatives.

The Democrats’ education and innovation agenda over the coming year will seek to restore confidence and vibrancy to our education system. Primary, secondary and tertiary education should be available to all regardless of socio-economic status, racial or ethnic origin, age, health, or place of residence.

As a society we must foster individual initiative, creativity, flexibility and openness to new experiences. As well, we must foster tolerance, justice, compassion and a sense of social and environmental responsibility.

Education and training are life-long processes and far too important to the future of our nation to be sloganised, underfunded or treated as an option for those who are independently wealthy.

Much was said towards the end of last year about political honesty and accountability. Much of it arose out of the Shepherdson inquiry into vote rorting in Queensland but quickly spread to a number of States.

The Democrats' record with regard to political honesty and accountability reform is unmatched - and a significant threat to the two older parties. As the vote rorting scandals widened and intensified, the Democrats were caught in the crossfire. And make no mistake, ladies and gentlemen, this was no accident - there are many who seek to bring us down.

And I believe that, more than ever before, the electorate stands ready for the adoption of many of the reforms the Democrats have been suggesting for many years.

The Party's submission, submitted by Queensland Senator Andrew Bartlett, to the Federal Electoral Affairs Committee called for greater transparency of donations and for more internal democracy within political parties.

These reforms, which would bring our political parties into line with those in other countries, build on the ground-breaking work of another Queensland Democrat, Senator Michael Macklin in the 1980s, in developing a more open, accountable, honest and fair electoral system.

Once again the Democrats have shown ourselves to be years ahead of the other political parties. Indeed, had the other parties in Australia practised the internal democracy that the Democrats practise, they would not be in the mess that they are in now.

We shall vigorously continue to pursue truth in political advertising as well as improvements in the use of the electoral roll. We shall also explore ways that the Electoral Commission may be able to play an appropriate role in pre-selection processes.

We shall also continue to seek reform in the areas of - government advertising for party political purposes, 'jobs for the boys', a non-partisan and independent check on politicians entitlements and government agencies' use of FOI. At present we do not have good community access to information which affects our everyday lives.

Since the formation of our party, a cornerstone of our agenda has been our commitment to the environment. The coming year will also see us continue to pursue this Democrat core agenda.

As a nation, we simply cannot leave it to the next generation or generations. **We** must confront the cost of climate change, the costs of salinity and the poor health of many of our rivers. **We** must accept the cost of protecting our old forests and we must find the money to stop the bulldozers presently destroying Queensland's native vegetation. **We** must invest in better protection of our World Heritage icons and our National Parks.

The Democrats must also play our part in contributing to, and then capitalising on, the economic benefits that can and will come from research into, and development of, environmentally friendly technologies.

We shall also be furthering our discussions with Australian business to seek common and agreed solutions - solutions that are fair, make sense economically and that boost

Australian business and national performance. To do this, we will have to address, together with business: industry and trade policy, superannuation, research and development, native title legislation and issues, greenhouse and energy, training and employment, industrial relations and the issues of foreign ownership and investment.

These are some - but not all - of the key Democrats agenda items for the coming year.

It seemed towards the latter half of last year, the political agenda in Australia was dominated by scandals about the misuse of politicians entitlements, the telecard affair, electoral roting and even who drove which MPs' car.

These issues are important, not so much for the damage that is done to individual careers and political reputations but for the general issues they raise. You will note that when these issues do emerge, the Democrat response is not to rush off in pursuit of a political scalp. Our response is to identify the general issue and argue for action to be taken to address it in the short term and also in the future. Transparency, accountability and responsibility are the only way to improve ethics and standards.

When it comes to the conduct of our national affairs, we all must do better.

I remind us all again that the year 2001 is 'the year of the election'. We shall, of course, have a federal election. The WA election is under way, and we can expect state elections in South Australia, Queensland and, possibly, Tasmania. Elections will also be held in the ACT and Northern Territory.

Published polls at both the national and state level currently provide us with some comfort. But that is not enough. We simply have to do the work to harvest the positive sentiment and support that we know exists out there in the electorate. I am personally convinced that if we do so we shall achieve some of our best results ever at these coming elections.

The election results this year will be yet another step forward, and another step down the long road to one day achieving government in States, Territories and the national Parliament. We are a young party – our time will come.

This, 'the year of the election', means we must highlight where the Democrats have been and where we wish Australia to go. In other words we have to remind ourselves why we are Democrats - what it means to be Australia's third political force and why we believe what we believe.

We then have to re-present this to the Australian people and remind them all, with passion and vigour, what it is we have been fighting for and what we shall continue to fight for.

More than ever there is a need for us to remind the rest of Australia that a vote for the Democrats is a vote for a party that has always thought beyond the horizon of the next election. The Democrats have always thought and worked for Australia's best mid and long term interests.

The Democrats are **“Always Years Ahead.”**

- Since 1977 the Democrats have been the only party to unequivocally support independence for East Timor.
- Since 1977, the year of our formation, we have been the only party to have unequivocally supported native title - this was long before the Mabo decision.
- In 1982 the Democrats introduced Australia's first World Heritage legislation.
- In 1984 we forced changes that secured Aboriginal control of Uluru.
- In 1986 we elected the first woman leader of an Australian political party.
- In 1987 the Democrats were the only party to support access to tertiary education for all - not just those who could afford it.
- In 1991 the Democrats brought about the first public register of political donations.
- In 1992 we amended workplace law to ban dismissal on the grounds of sexuality, age or mental and physical disability.
- In 1999 we secured the largest single package in Australia's history - nearly \$1 billion - to tackle climate change.

A vote for the Democrats is a vote for a decent, just, equitable and sustainable Australia.

It is a vote for good ideas, it is a vote for passion, it is a vote for reason and the sort of logic that looks beyond the electoral cycle and who is going to get a Ministerial office suite. It is a vote for a better environment, for responsible economics, and a more content society.

That is the difference between the Democrats and the others.

The Australian Democrats have always been "...Years Ahead." We shall always be "... Years Ahead".

We must be.

Australia deserves no less.

Thank you.