

# **30th anniversary of the founding of the Australian Democrats in Queensland**

**Professor Michael Macklin\***

Friday 14<sup>th</sup> June 2007

A week being a long time in politics and thirty years being an eternity, it is rather delicious tonight to propose a toast to all those critics who wrote us off in 1977. Malcolm Mackerras in *The Australian* on the 10 May of that year said of the party "...it has no roots at all in Queensland... There is no significant politician of any party in Queensland who is likely to join this party." What he didn't count on was the enthusiasm of a small but determined group of Queenslanders.

When the party was officially launched in Melbourne on May 15th 1977, I was the only Queensland member on day one solely by virtue of the fact that I was organising Don Chipp's Queensland meeting. I was made a member of the National Steering Committee and Chairman of the Queensland Steering Committee with powers to co-opt – not that there was anyone around to co-opt.

Thirty years ago tonight, Don Chipp spoke to an overflow meeting of two thousand plus enthusiastic citizens at the City Hall. Such was the size of the crowd that the doors had to be closed twenty minutes early and loud speakers hastily put up so that those who could not get in were able to listen in the packed King George Square outside. The following weekend on the 21 June, in the then Dendy Theatre in the Valley, we met to officially form the Queensland Division of the Party and established a statewide organisation with a branch in every federal electorate.

This was the only state Division of the party established without the sponsorship of either the New Liberal Movement or the Australia Party. We started from scratch as it were – and given our lack of funds that is an apt description. Ten weeks later we were into our first state and federal election campaigns. In between, a kitchen cabinet met every week in our dining room to plan publicity. All those attending put money in a bowl and this paid for the party for the next week. We had no big backers, no slush funds, no paid workers - nothing but our ideals.

The next thirty years have been ones of relentless slog. The cost in dollars has easily been exceeded by the cost of human wear and tear, home and family disruptions, interminable bloody meetings, policy debates and more ballots than a Swiss canton. However, the party has achieved beyond our most sanguine dreams. 1977 in Queensland was not the time to be arguing for nuclear disarmament while the Cold War continued to build momentum. 1977 in Queensland was not the time to argue for environmental sanity with a bounty available for every tree that was chopped down and historic

buildings disappeared literally overnight. 1977 in Queensland was not the time to campaign to change the laws against gays when love between same sex couples was an offence punishable with the same severity as murder - but we did campaign on these policies because they were right.

Warming to the unpopularity of such causes, we then threw ourselves into arguing that Indigenous Australians have an inalienable right to the land stolen from them during European occupation; that donations to political parties had to be made public – for which we were condemned not only by every other party but also by every major newspaper in the country – that world heritage values should be incorporated into domestic law; that smoking advertising should be banned; that the rights of the East Timorese to self-determination should not be cast aside so Australia could make a dollar from their oil, that prisoners be given the right to vote and that no Australian should have to pay to get a proper primary, secondary or tertiary education.

Thirty years on, it seems almost inconceivable that most Australians were opposed to such policies. Our task was to take them from the fringes of the political wilderness into the mainstream and this we did and did superbly. Tonight we can all be immensely proud that the Australian Democrats have been able to be part of an historic seismic shift in Australian politics. Never again will a political party defend secret donations; never again will a major political party treat women as second class citizens; never again will environmental causes be seen as the preserve of nutters as we fought to prevent a dam in Tasmania, save a sand island from mining in Queensland and prevent the largest of our rainforests disappearing into suburbia.

We are all aware that there is more work to be done - the growing tide of intolerance in our own society; the violation of human rights as an acceptable policy stance, the new discrimination visited on the poor, the idea that the future of our children depends on the size of their parent's bank balance rather than their innate talent, the willingness to claim that dollars today make up for pollution tomorrow – all these issues need their champion so that our future can be in a tolerant, just and humane society.

After thirty years, it is fair to ask “Can other groups continue with our agenda building?” and the reasonable answer has to be “Yes”; but the next question is “Will they?” and the answer is likely to be “Probably not”. The simple reason for this is that they are not based on the same group of people as the Australian Democrats draw their strength - it is hard to see current alternatives politicising the social justice people from the churches, the scout people, the Rotary people, the Meal-on-Wheels people, the Clean up Australia people, the school committee members - for this is where the Australian Democrats came from.

Yes, they are highly educated; yes, they are middle class; yes they liked to help and yes, they go off to work and earned a living and mow the lawn. They are not the radicals but they are the one's who turn up to do the painting of the local kindergarten and serve on the tuckshop committee. They are the reformers embedded in our society.

It is important to remember that there are probably less than 1% of Australians in political parties. These few Australians do the hard work to provide our nation with the candidates for elections; attend the barbecues, the branch meetings, the divisional meetings, and the national meetings; purchase the raffle prize with our own money and then buy the tickets in the hope of winning back that which they had already donated. They stand on the polling booths from 8am until 6pm and finally a few of their number go into Parliament in the hope that their collective efforts will make Australia a better place for all in our community and in the world.

While we believe that everyone has a duty to devote some of their time and energies to the democratic life of this country, obviously an overwhelming majority of Australians don't and so it is important never to apologise for what we do. In this context the words of the Chief Justice of Australia, Murray Gleeson, in his Boyer Lectures on Federation are worth remembering and worth repeating. He said

*Politics is what makes representative democracy work. People who regard political behaviour as essentially distasteful or unworthy overlook the fact that it is only through political organisation, advocacy and, where necessary, conflict, that we can hope to have a government that represents and gives effect to the will of the people."*

Government for the people is only possible if people get involved in governing. Complaining over a beer or writing spirited articles in newspapers will not maintain democracy; only hard yakka will.

For all our problems, Australian Democrats members are not amongst those who simply watch in apathy or resort to force or fear or sloganeering or hid behind simple answers. We have taken seriously our personal responsibilities to find solutions for the problems of our society. We have contributed many such solutions that are now a permanent part of our political life.

We embraced politics because we wanted to work for the noblest of causes - the future of our entire community - and while politics and politicians are constantly reviled, we understood that it is those in politics who finally bring about the changes that are needed and that the cynic never saved a life from despair, a wilderness from destruction or a system from corruption.

It is worthwhile to contemplate the answer to the question of "What is success in politics? I have always found the simple answer of Emerson to resonate strongly with what I, as an Australian Democrat, hold dear. Success is

*To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch or a redeemed social condition. To know one life has breathed easier because you have lived. That is to have succeeded.*

Moreton Island unmined and the Daintree rainforest unlogged - because of us; political donations are now public - because of us; the first woman led a political party - because of us; Uluru, a symbol of our land controlled by Indigenous Australians - because of us.

Those early meetings were humbling experiences since we all knew that the people who had taken the time and trouble to attend were not there to see Don Chipp. They came because they believe that politics didn't have to be about being all right or all wrong. They came because they believe that Australia's governments could be better than they were. They came because they believed that Australia was worth the effort.

Our community is still worth the effort and no matter what happens in the years ahead, we will always be proud of the Australian Democrats thirty-year contribution to our country's future.

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\* Prior to establishing the Australian Democrats in Queensland, Professor Michael Macklin was an academic at the University of Queensland. He won a Senate seat for the party at the 1980 election and served consecutively as Parliamentary Whip, Deputy Leader and Leader of the party in the Senate. He was a member of a wide range of key Parliamentary Committees including Electoral Reform, Standing Orders, Privileges, Legislative Procedures, National AIDS Strategy, Human Embryo Research and on the Statutory Committees having oversight of the National Crime Authority, Australian Security Intelligence Organisation and Company Law. His party work also includes being Queensland Divisional President, Queensland National Executive Representative and a two-year stint as National President. Upon retiring from the Senate in 1990, he oversaw the highly successful UQ Capital Campaign for the restoration of the old Customs House in Brisbane that raised \$7.5 million in 11 months. In 1994, Professor Macklin moved to the private sector as the inaugural CEO of Hall Chadwick Education, a consultancy that he grew to the largest of its kind in Australia. In June 2002, he accepted the post of Executive Dean of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of New England for a five-year term and from which he retired at the end of last year. Professor Macklin has been a director of a number of public and private companies and not-for-profit and government organisations including the Queensland Land and Resources Tribunal, the National Native Claims Tribunal and the Senate Bibliographical Committee. He is a Fellow of the Australian Institute of Management and author of numerous papers, academic articles and both fiction and non-fiction books on a wide range of subjects. He is married with three children and his wife, Jennie is a founding member of the party.