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**VALE THE AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS:
ORGANISATIONAL FAILURE AND ELECTORAL DECLINE:**

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Abstract

This paper examines the decline of the Australian Democrats as a parliamentary party in Australian national politics following its failure to win seats in both the 2004 and 2007 half-Senate elections. The paper argues that the party's decision to support the Howard government's GST after the 1998 election was the catalyst for the decline, but that the effect of this dispute manifested itself primarily within the party's organisation. The paper argues that the peculiarities of the party's rules allowed the GST controversy to reverberate over a long period and dovetail with leadership rivalry within the parliamentary wing. It argues that the party's organisational arrangements, designed to empower the membership, exacerbated its difficulties in dealing with this matter. It was the sense of leadership crisis that emanated from organisational dysfunctionality, rather than the GST itself, that contributed to the party's poor showing in the 2004 and 2007 elections.

The failure of the Australian Democrats to win any seats in the 2007 half-Senate election has meant that, in combination with its failure to win any seats in the 2004 half-Senate contest (see Mackerras 2005), the party will cease to have a parliamentary presence with the installation of new senators on 1 July 2008 – the first time it will not be represented in the Senate since 1978. The 2007 half Senate election thus stands as a very important moment in the history of the Australian party system, for the party's second electoral failure may well be the harbinger of the terminal decline of the Australian Democrats – a party whose significant role in the Senate was reflected in the influence it wielded over a number of controversial pieces of legislation ranging from indigenous affairs through to taxation policy, industrial relations laws, the rejection of a national identity card and the passage of major electoral reforms in 1983 (Bach 2003:183-188, Rydon 1985).

The Australian Democrats party was also important to the Australian party system for the model it provided as something of an alternative to the way the major political parties – The Australian Labor Party (ALP), the Liberal party and the National party – are organised and how they conduct their internal affairs. For all the references they make to being committed to internal democracy, the major political parties have hierarchical structures in which oligarchic tendencies can be identified both within the organisational structure and in the relationship of the parliamentary party to the extra-parliamentary party (see Michels 1962; Jaensch 1989:103-124). The Australian Democrats sought to provide an alternative by instituting a structure based on rules that aimed to protect its parliamentary wing from the dictates of caucusing (especially the disciplined form practiced by the ALP), but also aimed to empower the party's ordinary or mass membership to determine crucial aspects of the party's operation including the formation of a policy platform and in choosing the parliamentary leader (see Warhurst 1997:10-13; Gauja 2005; Chipp 2004).

These matters are important because, as this paper will argue, they were at the centre of the dynamics that contributed to the decline of the Australian Democrats. As such, they are interesting not only for what they contribute to an understanding of the fate of the party but what they also indicate about the ability of the party's organisational arrangements to deal with major stresses such as disputes over policy and/or instability in the parliamentary leadership. This paper argues that the capacity for the party's mass membership to impact so directly on policy and initiate challenges to the parliamentary leadership and then vote directly for the leader made major contributions to the party's decline. This all occurred against the back-drop of the general controversy over the introduction of the Liberal-National coalition government's new tax policy after the 1998 election to which a new Goods and Services Tax (GST) was central. At one level, the party's complicity in the imposition of the GST was the catalyst for decline, but, as this paper will show, it is interesting to note that the adverse impact of the GST debate did not immediately impact on the party's electoral fortunes in the first instance. Rather, the paper will argue that the adverse effect of the party's GST decision manifested itself primarily as a dispute between the party's parliamentary wing and its mass membership that the party organisation proved incapable of resolving, and thus the matter became a long-running leadership crisis. It was this aspect of the party's behaviour that was the catalyst for the disastrous election results in 2004 and 2007.

Rise and fall: the electoral pattern

At one level, the decline of the Australian Democrats can be simply accounted for by referring to the sudden and quite dramatic decline in the party's electoral support in the 2004 and 2007 federal elections. Table 1 tracks the electoral record of the Australian Democrats for Senate electoral contests (the only contests in which the party was able to win seats compared with House of Representatives contests where the party came close to winning seats on three occasions but never actually secured a seat) from 1977 to 2007. The data includes national and state results, with the percentage of the primary vote won by the Australian Democrat ticket in each state accompanied by the number of seats won. The table draws attention to a number of important aspects of the Australian Democrats' electoral record. As the data on national performance shows, the party's national vote since 1977 has been subject to increases and falls throughout the period since the party's first contest in 1977, with the party's best performance in terms of both vote won and seats won occurring in the 1990 half-Senate election. Apart from the 1990 high point, and the disastrous decline in the vote occurring in the 2004 contest, two other national results deserve attention. The major decline in the party's performance in the 1993 election – the contest that immediately followed the 1990 high point – and the subsequent recovery in 1996 is the first important shift to note. As will be argued later, the decline in 1993 occurred amidst serious internal division over the way the party should respond to the perception that 'green politics' was having a major influence on electoral behaviour and on the policy debate. The dynamics between the 1990 and 1993 elections were quite similar to those between the 2001 and 2004 elections.

The pattern of the national Senate vote for the party from 1998 is the second important feature, with the table clearly indicating a major failure in the party's vote in 2004 and 2007 that was worse than the poor performance in 1993 in that the party failed to win any seats. The really significant feature of this table, however, is that it indicates that the down-turn in the party's electoral performance occurs between the 2001 and 2004 contests, rather than the 1998 and 2001 elections. The significance of this lies in the timing of the two major context-setting political events of the period including the party's collusion with the Howard-led Liberal-National coalition government to expedite the GST, and a series of changes to the party's parliamentary leadership. The GST was introduced after the 1998 election but before the 2001 election. The Australian Democrat vote fell between 1998 and 2001, but not by a significant amount (certainly not the previously achieved nadir of 1993) and, as already noted, the party succeeded in winning four seats – in sum, a fairly strong result. The collapse in voter support for the party clearly occurs between the 2001 and 2004 elections, with the 2007 election confirming the de-alignment of Australian Democrat support that had occurred at the 2004 contest. This pattern alone indicates that the search for reasons for the party's demise has to focus on the period between 2001 and 2004, rather than between 1998 and 2001.

The disaggregation of the party's national voting performance by states provides additional insights to the structure of the party's vote, including clear indication of the importance of two states in particular to the party's electoral and representational well being. The state-based Senate results show that South Australia and, to a lesser extent, Queensland had been crucial states for the party. In South Australia the Australian Democrat vote had been consistently high with the party ticket achieving a primary

vote in excess of the quota in 1990 and 1996, and achieving two quota in the 1987 full Senate election. On those occasions where the ticket didn't achieve a quota the primary vote was so close to quota that only a small leakage of preferences or surplus would be needed to secure a seat. This was particularly important in the 1993 election where South Australia was one of the states to return an Australian Democrat senator with 9.8 percent despite the overall decline in the party's national vote to 5.3 percent. By contrast, the party's vote in South Australia collapsed between 2001 and 2004 at a higher rate than the decline in the party's national vote. These data draw attention to the need for close examination of the health of the party in its key state in order to account for its overall decline.

After South Australia with its total of 10 successes in Senate contests between 1977 and 2007, Queensland with 9 successful outcomes was the Australian Democrats' second best state. The dynamics behind this representational success rate differs somewhat from the South Australian pattern; whereas the Australian Democrat success in South Australia was based on strong primary votes, the primary vote in Queensland tended to be comparatively lower. Australian Democrat success in Queensland depended in no small way on the primary vote for the ALP Senate ticket being so low as to return less than 2.5 quota in half-Senate elections, and for the Labor Group Ticket Vote (GTV) to direct preferences to the Australian Democrats (see Farrell and McAllister 2006:129). The persistence of this pattern allowed the Australian Democrats to win the third 'left-of-centre' seat in every half-Senate election from 1977 to 2001 (see Mackerras 1995,244-5; Bowler and Denmark 1993). A not dissimilar dynamic was also at work in NSW and Victoria, although here the Labor primary vote tended to be higher with the prospect of Labor securing a third seat increasing as a result. It was the consistency of this pattern whereby Australian Democrat success in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria would occur as a result of declining support for the ALP that led analysts to see Senate contests as a battle between left-of-centre parties for the third of the three seats this bloc could expect to win, and to include the Australian Democrats as part of the 'left-of-centre' (Economou 2006; Stone 1998).

The states of Western Australia and Tasmania, meanwhile, have been difficult for the Australian Democrats primarily because of the emergence of green-oriented minor parties such as the Nuclear Disarmament Party (NDP), the West Australian Greens (WAG) and the Greens as competitors. The Democrats lost the single Tasmanian seat it held in 1993 as the Tasmanian Greens emerged as the main left-of-centre competitor with Labor. In Western Australia, however, the battle to secure the third left-of-centre seat, made possible by consistently weak primary votes for the ALP, were close affairs in which success was shared between the Democrats and, first the NDP and then, later, the WAG. The success of the green-oriented minor parties in Tasmania and Western Australia drew attention to the potential these emerging minor parties had to pose a competitive challenge to the Australian Democrats (see Miragliotta 2006)

The instances in which the Australian Democrats and, indeed, the other minor parties were able to win Senate seats without achieving a quota themselves depended on a decline in the primary vote for the ALP and a flow of ALP surplus. The rise of the various green parties in particular began to open up scope for these parties and the ALP to enter in to dialogue about cross-direction of preferences particularly after

1983 when the Hawke government's electoral reforms for the Senate introduced above-the-line voting and party-determined direction of preferences under the GTV system (Farrell and McAllister 2006:129). The problem for the Australian Democrats was that its party rules forbade it from directing preferences to either of the major parties, and this excluded it from being able to negotiate favourable GTV outcomes especially with the ALP. While this in itself doesn't account for the party's electoral decline, it did make the party more vulnerable to failure with a declining primary vote. Without favourable preference flows from the major party GTVs, the Democrats could not emulate the feat of the NDP in NSW in 1987 or Family First in Victoria in 2004 when they won Senate seats with a primary vote of less than 2 percent (Economou 2006). By 2004 this was precisely the level of primary vote to which the Australian Democrats' electoral support had fallen across all states.

Source of strain? Party organisation

It is generally agreed that the Australian Democrats party was part of a centrist tendency in the Australian party system that included previous minor parties such as the Australia Party and the Liberal Movement (see Warhurst 2006:145-146; Kernot 1998:292-3; Sugita 1995). The onset of the 1975 Constitutional Crisis as an entrenched battle between the major parties for power that eschewed concerns for constitutional conventions (see Emy 1978) revived interest in centrist or anti-major party parties. The decision of the then Liberal prime minister, Malcolm Fraser, to leave rival Don Chipp out of the post-1975 Coalition ministry made another important contribution to the emergence of the Australian Democrats as the former Liberal MHR for Hotham resigned to reappear in time for the 1977 election as the leading identity for the newly formed Australian Democrats (Tilby-Stock 2006:260; Chipp and Larkin 1978:183-188)).

The party that Chipp headed first as its charismatic front man presiding over the formation of the party and then, later, as its parliamentary leader, was organised along federal lines but with a set of rules and an organisation structure that attempted to put organisational form to the anti-major party rationale that underpinned its reason for being. Like most of Australia's political parties, the Australian Democrats would be organised federally with the party constitution providing for state executives and a federal executive to take care of the functions usually assigned to secretariats. Where the innovation came in was in regard to the attempt to integrate the party's strong normative commitment to internal party democracy in to its organisational structure. The empowerment of the party's mass membership took two important functional forms – first, by allowing the membership to determine party policy and, second, by allowing the membership to determine the leadership of the party's parliamentary wing.

Admittedly the provision of the power to conduct and participate in plebiscites on party policy to the mass membership had limited significance given that the party's constitution also guaranteed parliamentary Democrats the right to vote in parliament according to their conscience. In practical terms, the policy-formulation process at the mass membership level tended to be more an exercise in on-going plebiscites over a range of policy matters few of which generated substantial internal division – the controversy over the GST, however, being a notable exception. The power to determine the parliamentary leadership of the party was of much greater consequence

given the regularity with which leadership tensions and crises were to arise during the party's history. Here two sets of rules were particularly important; first, under section 11.6.1 of the party constitution the ordinary membership could petition the party to request a spill of leadership positions subject to the satisfaction of certain procedural criteria (the most basic being that the petition had been signed by at least 100 bona fide members); second, under section 11.6.3, a ballot of the membership to determine the leadership would be conducted if the petition allowed under section 11.6.1 were to be legitimate, with the incumbent leaders holding their positions until the conclusion and declaration of the ballot (<http://www.demoracts.org.au/about/inex.htm>). The power to instigate a leadership challenge and then determine the outcome thus lay in the hands of the party's branch membership, although leadership challenges could also be instigated by the parliamentary wing.

The propensity for the Australian Democrats to become embroiled in one leadership controversy after another reinforces the importance of these rules to the party's fate (see Macklin 1996). The party's leadership record – who was leader, how long they held the position and under what circumstances they departed the leadership – is contained in Table 2 although the table does not convey the sometimes highly dramatic nature with which some of these leadership transitions were precipitated. The transition from Janine Haines to Janet Powell, for instance, was necessitated following Haines' unsuccessful attempt to win election to a lower house seat. The Janet Powell leadership terminated amidst controversy arising from a sexual affair she was allegedly having with another Democrat senator, the late Sid Spindler, and the Cheryl Kernot leadership terminated after her defection to the Australian Labor Party amidst allegations of a sexual affair this time with Labor's Gareth Evans (*The Age* 5 July 2002).

In comparison with the Powell and Kernot departures, the power struggle between Meg Lees (leader from 1997 to 2001 – a period that covered the negotiation with the Howard government over the GST) and Natasha Stott-Despoja (leader from 2001 to 2002, and covering the 2001 federal election) appeared to be a straightforward case of serious personal rivalry, but, as will be argued below, the consequences were to prove quite dire. Interestingly, Table 2 points to an instance where, unlike the other leadership controversies emanating from poor political judgement and sexual scandal and from which the party sustained only minimal electoral damage, a not dissimilar leadership battle over a policy difference impacted upon the Democrats' electoral standing between the 1990 and 1993 contests. The early warning for the Democrats occurred in the 1993 election where the result indicated a clearly adverse voter reaction to the party's leadership problems. The leadership instability involving Janette Powell was reported in the press as the result of on a sudden break-out of high morality in the parliamentary wing with reports of division over an alleged extra-marital affair between Powell and Victorian senator Sid Spindler. The real reason for tension, however, lay in a struggle for control of the party amidst controversies over policy.

The period between 1987 and 1993 was one in which 'green' politics began to carve out a place for itself in the policy debate particularly with regards to nature conservation, and in the party system where nascent green political parties were emerging (see Papadakis 1993; Hutton 1987). The evolution of green party politics was also intimately linked with the anti-nuclear and peace and disarmament

movements that found expression in the formation of the Nuclear Disarmament Party (NDP) (Quigley 1986). By 1990 political parties with the word 'green' in their nomenclature had emerged, and there was a perception that 'green politics' had had a dramatic impact on the federal election of that year (Bean et.al. 1990). Interestingly, the party that had benefited most from this apparent 'greening' (sic) of the political debate at the 1990 election was the Australian Democrats whose national primary vote had increased by 5.3 percent in the House of Representatives and 4.5 percent in the Senate. With leader Haines out of the picture thanks to her unsuccessful attempt to win a lower house seat, the parliamentary leadership passed on to Janet Powell who was also leader when the first Gulf War commenced. This was significant because the Australian Democrats joined the nascent green parties as part of the anti-war opposition at the time that the ALP and the Liberal-National coalition were converging in their support of United Nations military actions against Saddam Hussien's Iraq.

It was this sense of convergence between the Democrats and emerging green parties that became the catalyst for a power struggle within the Democrats. Janet Powell seemed to be quite willing to see a merger between her party and the general 'green' movement, including its parties. The concrete proposal to merge the Democrats with parties like the NDP and various 'green' parties emanated from this period (Economou 1997). Two newly elected Democrat senators, Meg Lees (South Australia) and Cheryl Kernot (Queensland), were not so enamoured with the idea of a Democrat-Green merger. Here lay the basis of a schism within the parliamentary wing that was to result in the first real utilisation of the party's mechanism for the mass membership to directly elect the parliamentary leader when Powell, Meg Lees and John Coulter contested a membership ballot for the leadership. With an interim leader in the form of Queensland senator Michael Macklin holding the fort while the process was discharged, the membership ballot saw the defeat of Powell (who promptly resigned and would later join Dr Bob Brown's Greens party) not by Lees, but by the former environmental scientist and now South Australian senator John Coulter. It was Coulter who led the party to its worst electoral performance to that point in 1993 – and for this, Coulter was to pay a political price when he was defeated by Cheryl Kernot for the leadership soon after the election.

The Australian Democrats had been given a strong warning from the electorate about the electoral dangers of allowing a bitter internecine squabble within its very small parliamentary wing to fester over the matter of the leadership. The party's rules about such matters seemed to exacerbate the problem, first by dragging another senator in to the leadership morass in the capacity of care-taker, and then by subjecting the matter to a vote of the membership that, amongst other things, dragged the process out much longer than would have been necessary had the matter been resolved by the parliamentary wing. As if all this wasn't enough, the membership managed to come up with another green-tending parliamentary leader in the form of John Coulter to replace Powell, and the controversy over Democrat-Green relations was to bubble away for at least another three years. Had it not been for the strength of the Democrat vote in South Australia, and the weakness of the Labor vote in Queensland allowing the Democrats to pick up a Senate seat in that state as well, the 1993 election would have been the moment that the party would have been confronted with failing to win a seat, thereby being made to confront the electoral dangers of indulging in protracted leadership politics. As it was, the party did secure two seats. Under Kernot's

leadership, recovery commenced in 1996 and again in 1998 albeit under Lees' leadership.

Endgame: GST, the leadership and electoral demise

The circumstances surrounding the electoral demise of the Australian Democrats between the 2001 and 2004 federal elections bears some uncanny resemblance to the deterioration of the party's position between 1990 and 1993, although in the case of the latter contest the electoral damage caused by the party's internecine battles was much greater. The policy substance was also different: between 2001 and 2004 the party battled with itself over the role it had played in expediting the Howard government's GST. Whereas there had been evidence of ambivalence within key sections of the party about the proposal to sidle up to the emerging 'green' politics (Cheryl Kernot was to maintain dialogue on this matter for some time upon becoming leader), the GST issue proved to be extremely divisive across the party. The schism within the party manifested itself on two important fronts: first, there was a clear division within the parliamentary wing where two of the nine Democrat senators, Natasha Stott-Despoja (South Australia) and Andrew Bartlett (Queensland), indicated their implacable opposition to the tax and voted against their Democrat senate colleagues including the leader Meg Lees when the bills went through the Senate. Second, the issue drove a major wedge between the seven parliamentary Democrats who voted for the GST and the party's membership and this was to result in a series of attempts by aggrieved members to launch retributive strikes against leader Meg Lees in particular that also dragged the party's executive in to the dispute (see Gauja 2005).

Almost from the moment that the GST bills passed the Senate Meg Lees came under attack from sections of the party's mass membership. An attempt to instigate a leadership ballot through the lodging of a petition of at least 100 bona fide members occurred in 1999, although this was rebuffed by the party's national executive who deemed that only 96 of the 118 signatures acquired by former senator John Coulter on behalf of the NSW branch of the party were legitimate members. The party's federal executive, caught between the parliamentary and membership wings, voted 9-8 to refuse the petition (Gauja 2005). A second petition was lodged, with the 100 signatories this time proving to be bona fide. The national executive called a ballot on the leadership but, with Lees the only person nominating, the poll returned from about 60 percent of the membership gave Lees an 80 percent approval rate (see Crabb 1999). Far from resolving internal tensions, the first attempt to dislodge Lees appeared to ferment more dissent from the party branches some of which issued public calls on Stott-Despoja to contest the leadership.

The debilitating impact of all of this on the Democrats' vote was demonstrated in the Western Australian state election where the party's vote fell to 3.7 percent and the two sitting Democrat Legislative Councillors in the state's upper house lost their seats (the result was made worse by the strength of the One Nation vote that returned three upper house seats (see Black and Phillips 2001:562-563)). This particularly poor result in a state that had previously been strong for the party precipitated another reaction from the Democrat branch membership, with a second petition calling for a leadership spill lodged by the ACT branch. This time the leadership ballot was to involve a contest as Stott-Despoja indicated her intention to seek the leadership. On 6 April 2001 the party executive announced that it had concluded the ballot, and that

Stott-Despoja had been elected leader with 69 percent of the vote cast. The elevation of the young and charismatic senator to the party leadership was newsworthy in itself, but the political reality was that the poll revealed the extent of the rift that had opened up between the parliamentary Democrats and the mass membership. Given the way the parliamentary wing had voted on the GST issue, the membership had effectively elected a leader who could be assured of the loyalty of only one other of her eight parliamentary colleagues. The sense of disconnection between the mass membership and the parliamentary wing could not have been more clearly exposed than in the outcome of this ballot.

The proximity of the 2001 federal election – conducted, somewhat fortuitously for the Democrats, amidst the furore over the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, the decision of the Howard government to join the US in its ‘war on terror’, and the *Tampa* crisis rather than the GST (Warhurst 2002) – quelled internal dissent within the parliamentary wing about the new leader in the short term. Despite the creditable electoral outcome (see above), attacks on Stott-Despoja’s leadership from her own parliamentary colleagues began almost as soon as the election was over. The main perpetrators of the attack were the displaced former leader Lees and her loyal lieutenant Andrew Murray who spent most of the period between the two elections threatening to resign from the party. The Democrat vote fell again in another election, this time in the state election for the usually Democrat stronghold of South Australia (Manning 2002:580). Criticism of Stott-Despoja for failing to campaign in this election thus started to emanate from organisational people in the leader’s home state.

The sniping between Stott-Despoja and Lees continued on and found another policy matter to contest. With the Howard government’s full privatisation of Telstra requiring some additional support in the Senate to pass, Lees indicated that she supported the government’s proposal given that it intended to direct the proceeds of the sale to environmental conservation programs. Stott-Despoja, however, opposed the sale (see Maiden 2002). A politics website was to reveal that Stott-Despoja had sought to impose her authority over Lees by referring the matter to the party’s national president, Liz Oss-Emer, to invoke the rather Orwellian-sounding Compliance Committee to force Lees to stop making comments on Telstra. The leaking of this correspondence did serious damage to Stott-Despoja (see <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/stories/s632981.htm>). Apart from casting her in the role as an authoritarian leader seeking to impose discipline over a party known to the public as a party that philosophically rejected such an approach, the action also poisoned her relationship with the already divided parliamentary wing. Murray threatened another walk-out, Lees did walk out, and at least three other Democrat senators indicated their support for Murray and Lees in their fight against Stott-Despoja.

With other personal problems occurring, Stott-Despoja resigned the leadership in August 2002, thereby necessitating another leadership ballot. Once again an interim leader was put in place with Western Australian senator Brian Greig taking charge as the membership ballot was conducted. Greig also nominated for the ballot along with Andrew Bartlett. Given his loyalty to Stott-Despoja and his voting record on both the GST and Telstra, Bartlett was clearly seen by the membership as the proxy for Stott-Despoja. This left Greig in the role of the candidate representing the Lees-Murray

group (Murray refused to nominate to contest the leadership). Bartlett won the ballot, but there were a number of ominous signs associated with the poll. The rate at which the membership voted in the contest fell below 50 percent, and the press reported that a large number of ballot papers had had Stott-Despoja's name written on them by the voters themselves (see Secombe 2002). Bartlett took the leadership as Newspoll indicated that support for the Australian Democrats amongst voters had slumped to 2.5 percent nationally. Rather like Coulter ahead of the 1993 election, Bartlett was elevated to the leadership of a party wracked by division and soured by a nasty and protracted leadership struggle just before the 2004 election. Some of Bartlett's own performances, including an allegedly drunken action in the Senate for which he had to publicly apologise, didn't help his task of resurrecting the party's electoral fortunes (see Nicholson, DeBelle & Dickie, 2003). The 2004 election result simply confirmed what Newspoll was saying, and while the party still had four senators whose fate would not be determined until the next election, the rendering of the party as irrelevant actually occurred in this election as the Liberal and National parties won enough Senate seats to secure an upper house majority.

Conclusion

At its simplest, the collapse of the Australian Democrats as a Senate party may be accounted for by referring to the role the party's parliamentary leadership played in expediting the imposition of the Howard government's GST. Interestingly, the initial damage caused by the GST impacted not on the party's electoral fortunes, for, as this paper has shown, the party actually achieved a comparatively strong result in the subsequent 2001 election. Rather, the decision by parliamentary leader Meg Lees, with the support of Andrew Murray, to expedite the tax actually precipitated a comprehensive break-down of their party's unity after which organisational functionality was the next casualty. Those who appeared to be most offended by the party's decision to expedite the GST were the ordinary members of the Australian Democrats who, thanks to the party's rules, had the power to seek retribution against Lees. In so doing, the membership precipitated an ugly leadership struggle between Lees and her immediate successor Stott-Despoja. As Stott-Despoja and her successor as leader Andrew Bartlett were the two who voted against Lees and her GST in the Senate, it must be assumed that these were the only members of the parliamentary wing of the Australian Democrats who were closest to the outlook of the party membership. The members responded by putting what was effectively the minority faction in the parliamentary wing in charge of the Senate party. The party's internal polling mechanism, called in to action three times between 2001 and 2004, prolonged the struggle and transmitted a sense of seemingly unresolvable leadership crisis to the general public. Herein lay the basis of the party's chronic organisational dysfunctionality. This is what the voters responded to in the 2004 election.

At another level the events between 2001 and 2004 point to the importance of the problems associated with the Australian Democrats' own structure as the major contributor to its demise. In this approach the GST matter simply becomes the issue that precipitated an irreconcilable disconnection between the party's mass membership and its parliamentary wing – a potential for fundamental dysfunctionality that was waiting to happen. As this paper has argued, the Australian Democrats had been at this crisis point once before between 1990 and 1993 when, after its best electoral performance, the party quickly descended into internecine

struggles over Janet Powell's leadership. And, as in the case of the Lees-Stott-Despoja struggle over the GST, the party's cumbersome leadership rules made heavy weather for those involved in the battle over who would lead the party. Once again the party membership came up with a leader from the weaker faction in the parliamentary wing, reflecting a serious disconnect between the outlooks of the mass membership and the perspective of the parliamentary party. The party's ability to win a couple of seats despite suffering a major decline in its vote in 1993 staved off immediate disaster. The party had no such luxury in 2004, and the replication of the collapse of the party's result in the 2007 election resulted in the elimination of its parliamentary wing.

What this all suggests is that the Australian Democrats' organisational rules and structure, sometimes vaunted for their innovative nature and their apparently strong commitment to notions of internal party democracy (see Chipp 2004; Gauja 2005), were fundamentally flawed and inadequate in times of real internecine stress. The fact that the party was beset with differences of opinion over policy and struggles for influence over key aspects of party political function such as who would be parliamentary leader is not itself particularly surprising, for, as so many party theorists have noted, internecine power struggles and factionalism are endemic to party politics. The real issue thus becomes one of how well a party's organisation can deal with these matters and, if they can't deal with them well, whether the party can prove to be durable notwithstanding the onset of crisis. In this case the Australian Democrats failed the test. The party's rules giving the mass membership the power to determine the parliamentary leadership had only really been engaged in the midst of a serious factional dispute twice since 1977, and, on both occasions, they proved cumbersome and prone to installing leaders who did not have the support of their parliamentary colleagues. What is more, they became the prelude to electoral failure. In 2004, the failure was so complete it led to collapse of the parliamentary wing and an interesting situation where, as other parties worry about the hollowing out of their mass membership, the Australian voters hollowed out the Australian Democrats' parliamentary wing.

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Table 1: Senate electoral performance – the Australian Democrats 1977-2007

		1977*	1980*	1983*	1984	1987*	1990	1993	1996	1998	2001	2004	2007
National	vote	11.3	8.3	8.6	7.6	8.1	12.6	5.3	10.8	8.4	7.2	2.1	1.3
	seats	2	3	5	5	7	5	2	5	4	4	0	0
New South Wales	vote	8.3	6.3	7.8	7.3	9.1	11.8	4.9	9.5	7.3	6.2	2.2	0.8
	seats	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0
Victoria	vote	16.2	10	10.7	6.9	8.5	14.2	3.9	10.8	9.8	7.8	1.8	1.6
	seats	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0
Queensland	vote	8.9	9.0	7.2	9.2	7.5	12.5	7.0	13.2	7.8	6.6	2.2	1.8
	seats	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0
South Australia	vote	11.2	11.8	10.7	11.2	11.2	16.4	9.8	14.5	12.4	12.6	2.3	0.8
	seats	0	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	0	0
Western Australia	vote	12.5	8.3	6.2	4.8	5.7	9.4	4.0	9.3	6.4	5.8	2.0	1.0
	seats	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0
Tasmania	vote	5.8	2.9	6.3	6.1	6.8	7.9	1.6	7.1	3.9	4.6	0.8	-
	seats	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	-

source: <http://elections.uwa.edu.au/>

* - denotes full Senate elections

Table 2: Leadership politics – The Australian Democrats 1977-2007

leader	tenure	departure	means of election	other candidates
Don Chipp	1977-1986	retired	foundation leader	n/a
Janine Haines	1986-1990	election loss (HOR)	elected by membership	no other candidates
Michael Macklin	1990	6 weeks later	interim leader while membership poll conducted	
Janet Powell	1990-1991	no-confidence party room loss in membership ballot	elected by membership	no other candidates
John Coulter	1991-1993	loss in membership ballot	elected by membership	Meg Lees, Janet Powell
Cheryl Kernot	1993-1997	defected to the ALP	elected by membership	John Coulter
Meg Lees	1997-2001	loss in membership ballot	elected by membership	no other candidates
Natasha Stott-Despoja	2001-2002	resigned leadership	elected by membership	Meg Lees
Brian Greig	2002	6 weeks later	interim leader while membership poll conducted	
Andrew Bartlett	2002-2005	resigned leadership	elected by membership	Brian Greig
Lyn Allison	2004-2008	election loss (Senate)	elected unopposed	no other candidates