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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**THE SENATE**

**CONDOLENCES**

**Hon. Donald Leslie Chipp AO**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 4 September 2006**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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## SPEECH

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**Senator STOTT DESPOJA** (South Australia) (4.44 pm)—I rise to support this condolence motion on the death of the founder of our party, Don Chipp. I was privileged to speak at Don's state funeral on Saturday in Melbourne. I thank Don and his family for that great honour. In fact, for those who attended—and you have heard from my colleagues—it was a mix of ordinary Australians, people who had never met Don Chipp; his political colleagues, both friends and foes alike; many Democrats; Liberal Movement and Australia Party members; and former prime ministers. It was an extraordinary gathering but it was also a beautiful celebration.

The music reflected Don's whims and his tastes, whether it was *Zorba the Greek*, *Help* sung by John Farnham or jazz. We all walked out of St Pauls to the sounds of a jazz band. It was full of happy memories and images, from videos of Don, as my colleague Senator Bartlett has remarked, to photographs profiling his political and personal life. The eulogies and the speeches by his family were not only a testament to what an extraordinary, wonderful and passionate man Don was but also an absolute, glowing tribute to his talented, articulate, caring and loving family. The speeches by Debbie, Melissa, Greg and John, his children; the readings by Juliet and Laura, his younger daughters; and the speech by his last surviving brother, Alan, were all funny, interesting, clever and passionate, much like the man himself. It was an honour, along with Andrew Denton, to give tributes at that event. I probably risk doubling up on some of my comments at that event here today. I also want to thank John and Christine for the beautiful wake hosted at their house after the state funeral. It was extraordinary hospitality—happy and loving grieving but beautiful people. Again, it was very much a tribute to Don's passion for and love of family. Family was big for Don, and I am so glad that he met my son, Conrad.

Don Chipp knew exactly what the odds were against him and his party. He pitched himself against two-party dominance and he hoped that voters would see the advantage—and they did. His disillusionment with the major parties and his fervent desire for ordinary men and women to have a say led to the formation of the Australian Democrats on 9 May 1977. His vision, as you have heard from many speakers here, was for a party that stood for hope, optimism, reconciliation, honesty, tolerance and compassion, very much reflecting Don himself. He saw the party—and I paraphrase Don—as a credible alternative to cynicism, character assassination, misleading statistics, name-calling, pork-barrelling, union-bashing, dirty tricks, secrecy and despair. I think he covered the lot.

We were born of some strange bedfellows and I think Senator Bartlett in his speech today made it very clear that this was not simply a breakaway—not at all. This was a grassroots, participatory, democratic movement founded by this man and born of strange bedfellows: the Liberal Movement and Australia Party members, many of whom were in the church on Saturday. As I commented in the eulogy, the first ballot was for the name of the party. It was typical of Don, this focus on participatory democratic politics. Everything had to be balloted, and still is occasionally. The first ballot was for the name. Don and others swear that there was a 7,000-strong membership at that time, and why would we doubt him? The choices were, I think, 56 alternatives to the Australian Democrats. One was the Beacon on the Hill Party and the other was the Civic Sanity Party. I suspect we got really close to those ones! Australian Democrats it was—a wise choice. The media's preferred terminology or nomenclature for the Democrats over the years, and particularly at that time, seemed to focus on Chippocrats and Don's Party, which, as I have said before and on Saturday, while catchy, sound a little like an all-male strip review. Don and I thought maybe that explained Reverend Fred Nile's vocal opposition to the founding of this new party. But the Australian Democrats it was.

At the 1997 election, armed with I think \$44,000 in campaign funds, a four-page policy document and the claim to be a credible alternative to the major parties, Don Chipp and his colleagues stood for election. As you have heard, Colin Mason in New South Wales and Don Chipp were elected on that occasion. It was pretty irresistible, I suspect, but within our first year, the Democrats were polling double figures in state and federal elections.

The first actual policy ballot was on the environment. It was an anti-uranium platform. Again, I support the words of my colleague Senator Bartlett in saying that this whole Right-Left dichotomy is so difficult to apply to the Democrats, not just throughout our existence but at the formation, because Don was a radical and proud

environmentalist. He loved, cared for and sought to protect, both legislatively and through his other activities and public work, our wonderful natural heritage. Norm Sanders and he will forever be remembered for the campaign to save the Franklin in the 1980s. After the logging of the Daintree, he went on television and said, 'Those mindless bloody vandals.' He was an activist as well as a legislator and he was ahead of his time when it came to environmental issues. Environmental sustainability has been a core of our party ever since, along with human rights, accountability, democracy and all those other things that Don was passionate about. At the 1980 federal election, he asked:

When you decide on a party you support you are not really thinking about yourself, are you? Subconsciously, you are in fact thinking about your children and your grandchildren. You know that somehow or other that you and I will survive the eighties but what kind of Australia are we going to present to our kids at the end of the decade?

That is one of my favourite quotes; I know I have used it a lot. It sums up a notion that these days, I suppose, we refer to as 'intergenerational equity'. Don looked beyond electoral cycles. He was focused on the future. He cared about the environment. He loved family. I think that quote is a really important one for the Democrats to reflect on. Do we think that the period of time in Australian politics had it been without the Democrats would have been a better world? Is there a better Australian political climate as a consequence of the Democrats having been formed and the work we have done? You bet.

Don's vision inspired many new activists, politicians, supporters, voters and, indeed, members of parliament. I have said previously that we all wanted to be 'chips off the old block' in trying to encompass or perhaps even reconcile that strong belief in small 'I' liberal principles—the civil libertarian perspective—with some really progressive, radical notions. On the party's anti-uranium stance, even at our national conference this year, at which Don Chipp spoke, Don said his aim for the party was to be 'vigorously pro-environment and antinuclear'. That never changed. Until his death last week, that was a core of his philosophy; and to this day it is part of the Democrat philosophy. There was the belief in free education. There were the Democrat amendments to Medicare and our views on the provision of publicly available and funded health care. And there was the antiprivatisation stance.

These are not middle-of-the-road concepts, but they were embodied by Don just as, on the other side of the ledger, for lack of a better expression, there was his opposition to the Australia Card. Don debated what he saw as the looming potential for a national identity card—the so-called smart card that the government is introducing. He railed against that. He kept telling me, 'You have to run a campaign against this potentially invasive card.' And, of course, we have already heard Don's views on censorship.

As Greg Chipp, Don's son, pointed out on Saturday at the funeral, one of Don's last political acts was to sign a petition opposing the incarceration and detention of David Hicks in Guantanamo Bay for almost the last five years; I think it was a petition that I did with Amnesty. Again, that shows Don's love and respect for the rule of law. That is perhaps an issue that would refer to Don's small 'I' liberal principles and, certainly, to international humanitarian law, for which he had much time.

Don was never able to persuade enough people to have government within the party's grasp but, arguably, he was after hearts and minds, not government. He wanted the very special voice of thousands of Australians, who care more about ordinary people's lives than ideology and factions, to be heard. No-one can argue that he failed in that respect. Don had the satisfaction of seeing his small party do big things—of seeing Democrat senators emerge as fine legislators. I know that he was proud of and not disillusioned with, no matter what media reports might say, our work. Up until his death he was proud of our work. He was proud of our work in ameliorating unjust and harsh legislation over nearly 30 years now. He was proud of the fact that people in their thousands turned to the Australian Democrats for help and for policy that reflected his concern and his compassion.

I think Don was philosophical and unbowed by the special problems that afflict small parties, such as the personality differences that would usually be controlled in larger, more dogmatic parties, but which can cause serious difficulties in tiny parliamentary groups. He knew that no such party is immune from those problems, and he hoped that his wisdom would guide the Democrats through them; indeed, many times it did.

Through those times, Don was certainly always there for me, as he was at the times when I thought perhaps it was most politically difficult for me. I recall that was the case during the GST vote and my decision to cross the floor. In the midst of the negative media maelstrom Don was palpably excited by it all. To him, this was the living embodiment of everything he had been talking about in terms of his support for, and the establishment of, a conscience vote provision in the Australian Democrats. As he said in his national conference speech this

year, the party was to 'hate nobody and to allow its elected members to vote at all times in accordance with their conscience or what they perceive to be the best wishes of their electorate'.

I thank Don for his support during other times, difficult times, and for his support before, during and after my leadership. He came to understand how intractable some of those issues and differences were, and supported my decision to leave the leadership, just as he understood—if not accepted—in recent times my reasons for not resuming or attempting to return to the leadership.

But I have mostly fun memories of Don Chipp, as I am sure many people here do. There are stories people would have heard; I mentioned some at the funeral. There were birthdays—my 30th and seeing Don boogieing on down. There was Don's 80th—he was not quite boogieing at that stage, but he was certainly in fine form. There was meeting Conrad. There was putting up with Ian's politics. There was singing along to Robbie Williams DVDs. I tell you, Don was often in fine form and was always one to appreciate the skills of a fellow performer. He loved music, and Robbie Williams was one of his latest interests. There was the Constitutional Convention in 1998. I acknowledge former senator Karin Sowada, who I spoke to not only at the funeral but also last week after news of Don's death. Karin was reminding me of a photograph that was taken of the two of us at that convention, with Don in the middle and the two of us kissing him—we are trying to scoop up all copies of that photo, by the way! It was typical Don: he was a bit of a larrikin and liked a kiss with the girls.

One of my favourite and most honoured moments was the 25th anniversary dinner held for the founders of the party on 9 May 2002. What a great honour that was. As I said at the funeral, one of my favourite campaign stories was about the time he came to Adelaide, to the seat of Boothby, on the last full day of the 2002 election campaign, and he was campaigning with me in Marion shopping centre. It was very exciting for Marion shopping centre. It did not know what had hit it. There was this posse of Democrats led by Don and me, and people were just swarming around. People love this man. They would come up and say, 'How are you going?' 'Keep the bastards honest,' and 'Come back to politics.' They would ask him questions and he would throw out answers, preaching but all the time hugging and kissing. It was an interesting campaign tactic but nonetheless it worked; we got 19 per cent in that electorate. But, as I said on Saturday, it was almost like a campaign brilliance combined with elements of a Benny Hill skit. That was Don. People loved him, and he loved life. He did not take things too seriously, but he took the things that mattered seriously. He did not take himself seriously, but the policies and the principles that mattered were most important to him.

The theme on Saturday was very much about love and family. He was an idealist, and he was a lover of peace and kindness. He held the flame high for social justice and humanity. He would never have proclaimed war—he hated war. Even if he were the most powerful man in the nation he would not have proclaimed war. He would have always found a better way, and that way would not have involved the suffering of the weakest.

To be called an honorary daughter and to be loved like one was an incredible honour. As Leader of the Democrats I was really proud to have helped lobby this government to establish the Don Chipp Foundation so that Don's work can, in a policy sense, live on—of course, there is no doubt about that. I thank the people involved in establishing the Don Chipp Foundation, because I think it is really important as a think tank now that we can continue work on the policy and principle issues that Don was committed to.

There are those who with indecent haste are seeing Don's death as a sign that his party is dead too. I think it would serve this nation better if they were to look at what Don Chipp's party has meant to many, many thousands of Australians since he founded it. It would be smarter of them if they paused to think what the Senate is like today without the Democrats in the balance of power. It is an emasculated house, a rubber stamp for the government's ideological excesses. They might actually see Don's achievement as a significant force for the better in politics, as it has been and as it may be again.

As I said on Saturday—and I want to put the full quote on the record—the pain of death is the pain of loss. But can we really believe that we have lost Don Chipp? Whatever the fate of his Democrats, I think there will be a little bit of Don in every new party formed to oppose those with overweening power and too little concern for ordinary people. That must be a comfort to his family, and it is a comfort to us all. Don, we are going to miss you greatly. I offer my condolences, of course, to the beautiful Idun, to Monica as well, to his children Juliet, Laura, Debbie, Melissa, John and Greg and of course their grandchildren.