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Abstract

Peace and the politics of peace are complex issues. However over the past 30 years the Australian Democrats have been a consistent voice in support of peace, not merely opposing military engagement but also proposing significant legislation that will support peace-making in Australia and emergence of a peaceful country. Those citizens who support peace and understanding could do well to support the Australian Democrats.

Essay

William Shakespeare wrote in *Henry IV* (II, Act 4, Scene 2) that "Peace is of the nature of a conquest; for then both parties nobly are subdued, and neither party loser". The statement is indicative of the complex nature of peace and why the politics of peace is also complex. All political parties will say that they are committed to peace. And in this era of political cynicism it is not unexpected that the rhetoric of peace is regarded with great suspicion. Yet there are a number of indicators which suggest that the Australian Democrats ought to be considered Australia's political party of peace at the present time and that the Democrats deserve support from those committed to peace.

At the outset, it is noteworthy that the Democrats have origins in the Vietnam anti-war and anti-conscription movements, through the predecessor parties of the Australia Party and the Liberal Movement. Both these parties were peace protest parties in the liberal tradition, in that they were opposed to war although still had a strong belief in the importance of individual enterprise and limitation of the power of the state. Opposition to war and support for the rights of the individual are strong themes within classical liberalism. Indeed there are logical reasons why this would be the case, as the military tends to be one of the strongest of all state institutions and war is the paramount destroyer of human rights.

It is relevant also that the Democrats were formed as a centrist party, attracting support from both sides of the political spectrum. A centrist party is not one which is afraid of moral commitment. Rather, a centrist party aims to decide matters not on a partisan or ideological basis, but rather through an examination of issues on their merits, weighing up the pros and cons. This is in accordance with the Gandhian principle that one ought not to destroy your opponent, but rather to seek areas of commonality and co-operation. Thus in politics, the Democrats have sought to co-operate with the political left and the political right whenever possible.

Since the formation of the Democrats in 1977, the party has consistently been at the forefront of peace politics. The Democrats were the only parliamentary party not to accept the Indonesian occupation and annexation of East Timor. The Democrats were the only federal parliamentary party to campaign against Australian involvement in the 1991 Gulf War, successfully agitating for the decision to recall Parliament for a historic two-day debate on the war. The Democrats have also campaigned against the invasion of Iraq and have consistently supported the full implementation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The peace commitment of the Democrats was formally recognized in 1997, when a series of party objectives was voted on by the party membership. Under Objective 3, the Democrats accepted a commitment "to recognize the interdependence of all peoples and all nations, to co-operate fully with the United Nations, and to accept our obligation to the developing countries by co-operating with them in their social and economic development". The above Party Objective is very much in accord with the liberal objective of encouraging good international citizenship. It also understands the link between the right to peace and the right to development, something that is recognized in most United Nations declarations. The inter-

relationship between peace and development is also recognized in most peace research formulations.

In recent decades, the legislative commitment of the Democrats to peace issues has continued, including the 1997 *Defence Co-operation Control Bill*, which sought to limit military co-operation with countries with human rights abuses and the 2003/4 *Defence Amendment (Parliamentary Approval for Australian Involvement in Overseas Conflicts) Bill*, both of which sought to require parliamentary approval before a Government could commit Australian forces to war; the 2006 *Cluster Munitions (Prohibitions) Bill*, which seeks to ban the use of cluster bombs by Australian military forces. And, perhaps most significantly, the 2007 *Peace and Nonviolence Commission Bill*, which seeks to establish an agency which will examine all government actions to see how these impact upon establishing a more peaceful society.

It is instructive to look at the attitude of Democrats founder Don Chipp towards peace legislation, as he was formerly a cabinet minister during the Vietnam War. Don Chipp admitted that the Vietnam War was a mistake and this was part of his motivation to enact parliamentary oversight over decisions to go to war. The attempt to legislate was commenced by Colin Mason, but taken up by Don Chipp and others. The recent legislation introduced by Andrew Bartlett, the *Defence Amendment (Parliamentary Approval for Australian Involvement in Overseas Conflicts) Bill*, is the most recent attempt by the Democrats at legislating parliamentary oversight over war-making.

The existence of war is often used as a pretext for winding back democratic rights and the so-called war on terror has been no exception, both in Australia and overseas. The Democrats have campaigned for those Australians incarcerated overseas. The Democrats were successful in removing some of the worst aspects of the *Security Legislation Amendment (Terrorism) Bill 2002* and the *Australian Security Intelligence Organisation Amendment (Terrorism) Bill 2002*. However the Democrats did not vote in favour of this legislation, as it was still flawed, but it passed with the support of the major parties.

Within peace studies, it is generally accepted that recognition of indigenous rights is vital. As a settler society, Australia owes a special responsibility to its indigenous peoples. The Democrats have been at the forefront of advocacy for the rights of indigenous peoples, advocating action to improve social and health conditions, self-determination by Aboriginal peoples, the formation of a Reparations Tribunal, amendment of the Constitution to acknowledge indigenous peoples, the return of stolen wages, and, most recently, Australian endorsement of the United Nations *Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*..

As the 1999 United Nations *Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace* points out, peace is more than protest against war and that a crucial aspect of authentic peace is democratic participation. This is where the Australian Democrats are quite uniquely a peace party - with policy, leadership and constitution all determined by popular ballot. Participatory democracy is not easy and a cursory reading of the history of the Democrats over the past decade will illustrate this. Yet the alternative to genuine participatory democracy is packaged politics which can only exacerbate the cynicism and disengagement which already exists.

Do the Democrats have a future? One of the problems for the Democrats is that although there is a universal profession of support for peace and social justice, any political party actually committed to such ideals tends to be marginalised and devalued by those in positions of power. There seems to be something of a decline in beneficence in Australian culture - it is a telling comment that do-gooder is now a term of derision in popular discourse. The irony of this is that it is precisely in time of war and in time of crisis that the voice of peace and

moderation is more relevant than ever. Those citizens of goodwill concerned with peace and justice could do well to support the party which for the past 30 years has been a consistent advocate for this cause.