

## **CHIPP, Donald Leslie (1925–2006) Senator, Victoria, 1978–86 (Australian Democrats)**

<http://biography.senate.gov.au/chipp-donald-leslie/>

Don Chipp's Senate career almost never happened. Dropped from Malcolm Fraser's Liberal Party ministry in December 1975, he turned this career blow into an opportunity to fight for the causes in which he believed. The result of Chipp's personal and political upheaval was the creation of a third force in Australian politics, the Australian Democrats.[1]

Donald Leslie Chipp was born in Melbourne on 21 August 1925, the first child of Leslie Travancore Chipp and his wife Jessie Sarah, née McLeod. Don's father Les was a fitter and turner who later became a foreman. With Les in regular employment during the 1930s, the Chipp family was cushioned from some of the harsher aspects of the Depression years. However, the economic downturn must have had some impact, because Don remembered his father saying to his four boys that 'When you all grow up, I want you to be wearing white collars. White collars, that's what you should aim at'.

Chipp matriculated from Northcote High School at the age of fifteen, then worked as a clerk for the State Electricity Commission (SEC). He also began studying part-time for a Bachelor of Commerce at the University of Melbourne. In 1943, at age eighteen, he joined the Royal Australian Air Force, and spent much of the last two years of the Second World War undergoing pilot training within Australia. Discharged as a Leading Aircraftman in September 1945, Chipp took advantage of the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme which provided ex-service personnel with subsidised tuition and living allowances. This enabled him to complete his commerce degree at Melbourne University. After graduating in late 1947, Chipp returned briefly to work at the SEC and subsequently became a cost accountant at a Richmond factory.

During these formative years, Chipp was a talented sportsman. From the late 1940s and until well into the 1950s he played Australian Rules Football, including a few first-grade games for Fitzroy in the Victorian Football League. In addition, he was an accomplished runner. In 1953, Chipp competed in Australia's leading professional foot race, the Stawell Gift, later lamenting that it was 'the best race I ran in my life, but I didn't win my heat'.

In 1950 Chipp became assistant State Registrar of the Commonwealth Institute of Accountants. On 27 October 1951 he married Monica Lalor, with whom he had four children. With Monica's support he stood and won a seat on the Kew City Council which he held from 1955 to 1961. During this time he also became an active member of the Liberal Party.

From 1955 to 1956 Chipp was Chief Executive Officer for the Olympic Civic Committee. In this role, he helped organise some of the civic aspects of the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne: 'I had to make arrangements for all the visitors except the athletes. I had to decorate the City, run the Olympic Festival of Fine Arts, and organise eighteen social functions for V.I.P.s'. In the late 1950s Chipp helped organise a promotional campaign to 'Sell Victoria' for the Victorian Liberal Government and assisted with a doorknock appeal for cancer research. Setting himself up as a management consultant, he also worked on behalf of the Australian Hotels Association to publicise the benefits of ending the early closing time (6 pm) of Victorian licensed hotels. His maintenance of a high profile through these activities, together with his prominence as a local sportsman, helped him to forge connections with Liberal politicians, and coincided with his increasing ambition to become a federal parliamentarian.[2]

The sudden death of Frank Timson, federal Liberal MP for Higinbotham (Vic.), saw Chipp secure Liberal Party preselection for this seat, which he won at the subsequent by-election in 1960. He held the seat until the electorate of Higinbotham was abolished in 1969, when he transferred to the new electorate of Hotham (Vic.), which he held until 1977.

Chipp's first speech in the House of Representatives dealt with the need to populate and develop Northern Australia. The young backbencher's 'big picture' concern for a region thousands of miles distant from his own

electorate suggests that Chipp hoped to demonstrate to the Liberal Party that he was a future minister with a national perspective. The Minister for Territories, Paul Hasluck, privately reflected that Chipp was playing ... 'the role of an up-and-coming young man ... it seemed to me that his mind had become infected by his own sales talk'. The more mature Chipp presented a similar assessment of his younger political self: 'Was I being truthful to myself? I found I wasn't. I was concentrating more on being a glamorous, good-looking, up-and-coming future prime minister'.

During the 1960s Chipp was an anti-communist, conformist Liberal: an ardent supporter of the Vietnam War and the US alliance. This was the Chipp that the public generally saw, but there were signs of the independent thinker he was later to become. Fellow Victorian MP Peter Howson wrote in his diary on 13 October 1965: 'Party meeting: Don Chipp wanted us to amend [the] White Australia policy, but not many party members supported him'.<sup>[3]</sup>

In 1966 Chipp was appointed Minister in Charge of Tourist Activities and Minister for the Navy by Prime Minister Holt. It was not an opportune time to be Navy Minister. In February 1964 HMAS *Melbourne* had collided with HMAS *Voyager* near Jervis Bay (NSW) with the loss of 82 lives. While a 1964 Royal Commission failed to find a clear cause for the accident, it found that it had been largely caused by the *Voyager*, but recorded mild criticism of Captain Robertson of the *Melbourne* and his officers. Liberal backbencher John Jess came into possession of statements, recorded by Captain Robertson, of Peter Cabban, *Voyager's* second-in-command during the year prior to the disaster. Cabban alleged that the *Voyager's* commander, Captain Duncan Stevens, had a severe alcohol problem. Jess and other Liberal backbenchers, reflecting public dissatisfaction with the conduct and findings of the Royal Commission, pressed for a re-examination of the case, and succeeded in pressuring Holt into holding a parliamentary debate on the issue in 1967.

Chipp as Navy Minister appeared to see his role as protecting the reputation of the Royal Australian Navy and defending the Liberal Government record by dismissing the worth of Cabban's testimony. Disregarding the traditional courtesy of hearing a Member's first speech in silence, Chipp interrupted Edward St John's speech supporting Cabban's statements with the comment: 'Who verifies them?' Chipp also poured scorn on Liberal backbencher Henry Turner's pro-Cabban speech with sarcastic laughter, interjecting that Turner was rubbishing 'a dead man' (the *Voyager* Captain). The Government subsequently established a second *Voyager* inquiry, which found that Captain Stevens had suffered from chronic ill-health but that the accident was not alcohol-related. The *Voyager* affair was damaging for the Navy, for the Holt Government, and for Chipp, who felt that it revealed how politicking could undermine the parliamentary system.

Chipp's career took a turn for the worse when Holt vanished at sea in December 1967 and was presumed drowned. Early in the New Year, the parliamentary Liberal Party chose John Gorton as Prime Minister. The new leader did not choose Chipp for his first ministry; some commentators have suggested that Chipp was seen by Gorton as too close to leadership rival Billy Snedden, with whom he had forged a friendship early in his political career.<sup>[4]</sup>

Chipp's career setbacks over the next decade gave him time for reflection, allowing him to re-invent himself as a 'conviction politician'—a sharp contrast to the pragmatic careerist he had been (in public if not in private) during the 1960s. When Gorton appointed him as Minister for Customs and Excise following the October 1969 election, Chipp was no longer the conventional politician he once was: 'When I came back [to the Ministry] ... I had a new set of values. And I was going to do exactly what was right. What I believed to be right'. Chipp's 'new set of values' was undoubtedly influenced by the spirit of the times. Gorton's small 'l' liberalism and independent nationalism were taking the Liberal Party temporarily in a new direction. Liberal backbenchers were also showing signs of assertiveness and ill-discipline, a reaction perhaps to the conformity of the Menzies years.

Chipp now displayed unusual candour and the appearance of vulnerability to the Australian people. He publicly agonised about the decisions he had to make as the minister chiefly responsible for censorship. Chipp was inclined, however, to take a permissive view of sexually explicit films and literature, stressing the role of parents and businesses in shielding children from possible harm.

Unlike many of his colleagues in the early 1970s, Chipp was not afraid to colour his media appearances as

minister with his personal opinions about society. 'There seems to be an obsession in Australia about sex', he stated: 'We should be more concerned about hate, envy, jealousy, greed ... '. While Chipp disliked violent images, he shared with the Australian public his difficulty as to where to draw the line as a censor: 'films which show man's inhumanity to man in war ... might get people involved enough to try to solve the problems of war'.

At the end of his time as Customs Minister, Chipp could boast substantial reforms to censorship policy. Many important works of literature, previously banned in Australia because of their sexual content, became freely available. Adults could now purchase novels such as *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Tropic of Cancer*. Furthermore, in 1971 Chipp introduced the 'R' certificate for films, enabling adults to see sexually explicit or violent films while barring the entry of children and adolescents.

When McMahon replaced Gorton as Prime Minister in March 1971 he retained Chipp as Customs Minister, and in August 1972 made him Leader of the House. These appointments ended abruptly when the McMahon Government was swept out of office in December 1972. Chipp became shadow spokesperson for international trade and tariffs as part of the Opposition now led by Billy Snedden. From 1974 he was spokesman for health and social security. During his years in Opposition, Chipp consolidated his media image as the 'most liberal Liberal'. He wrote articles for the *Age* in 1973 expressing concern at the decline in freedom of speech in Indonesia under the Suharto regime; participated in the *Sunday Mirror* newspaper's panel discussion on sexual morality, revealing a relaxed attitude towards pre-marital sex; and was in heavy demand as a speaker at universities and other forums.[5]

When Snedden was replaced by Malcolm Fraser as Opposition Leader in early 1975, Chipp's prospects as a career politician dimmed. The extroverted small 'l' liberal Chipp and the more reserved Fraser were not close colleagues and differed strongly in terms of style and personality. These differences sometimes flared to open enmity: years later, Chipp recalled losing his temper in front of members of the Press Gallery over a proposed Royal Commission on aspects of sexual relationships (including abortion) which Fraser opposed, and telling Fraser that he was 'beneath everyone's contempt'.

The anecdote reflected Chipp's marked tendency to take real or imagined slights very much to heart. In his memoirs, he felt the need to reveal those occasions when he fell out with colleagues who had upset him, including Robert Menzies ('I have a feeling we are no longer close') and Billy Snedden ('[our] friendship ... diminished when he allowed Gorton to sack me without protest'). Chipp's sensitive personality, seen at its most positive as Customs Minister, could be a disadvantage for an ambitious man trying to navigate the ups and downs of a political career.

Malcolm Fraser became caretaker Prime Minister when the Governor-General dismissed the Whitlam Government on 11 November 1975. While Chipp was appointed Minister for Social Security, Health, and for Repatriation and Compensation for the duration of the caretaker period, he was dropped from the Ministry soon after the Fraser Government was elected in its own right in December 1975. Chipp's enduring anger over his sacking was palpable in his memoirs and media interviews for the next thirty years. Aside from his own thwarted ambitions, Chipp was disturbed that a number of Whitlam schemes he favoured, like the community welfare-oriented Australian Assistance Plan, were dismantled.

Chipp initially chose to continue to serve as a Liberal backbencher. It was difficult, however, for him to remain in a party where he felt his views were no longer welcome, and which he felt was too inclined to focus on economic gains rather than on 'quality of life' issues. The Coalition Government's positive and predominantly economic attitude towards uranium mining was of specific concern.

Chipp resigned from the Liberal Party on 24 March 1977, explaining that he had:

“ ... become disenchanted with party politics ... I wonder whether the ordinary voter is not becoming sick and tired of the vested interests which unduly influence the present political parties and yearn for the emergence of a third political force, representing middle of the road policies which would owe allegiance to no outside pressure group.

As his speech had implied, the time was right for a new moderate party to emerge. The Governor-General's

dismissal of the Whitlam Government prior to the holding of a general election caused many to question the legitimacy of the incoming Fraser Liberal Government. Yet the Whitlam Government's erratic administration led to disenchantment with both major parties. On 9 May 1977 Chipp addressed a meeting organised by the Committee of Concerned Citizens at Melbourne Town Hall on the need to create a 'centre-line' political party. Faced with an enthusiastic crowd of over 2 500 people, he declared that at the upcoming general election, he would lead a new political organisation, which subsequently became the Australian Democrats.[6]

The Australian Democrats did not emerge from the initiative of Chipp alone. In early 1977, Chipp had engaged in talks with representatives of two similarly progressive political parties with conservative origins, the Australia Party (AP) and the New Liberal Movement (NLM). The NLM and AP had been unable to seriously challenge the two party culture, but believed that Chipp's high profile and political skills could give them effective leadership in a united new political organisation.

The Democrats espoused an unusual degree of internal democracy: party members decided upon policies through voluntary postal ballots. Parliamentary representatives of the Democrats could, nonetheless, vote against an official Australian Democrats policy if they could not genuinely support it on the floor of Parliament. More generally, the new party stood for a 'quality of life' agenda that was marked by strong support for the environment and opposition to the mining of uranium.

In the months leading up to the December 1977 federal election, Chipp addressed public meetings in cities and towns across the continent, a tough program which assisted in the creation of regional branches of the party and helped raise the Australian Democrats' electoral profile. Chipp was focused on gaining Democrats representation in the Australian Senate. In his speeches, he tapped into a longing within the community for less expediency and more principle in public life:

“ *We [the Australian Democrats] ... offer you a politics based on three simple virtues that have been badly battered and abused in recent years ... I speak of honesty, I speak of tolerance and I speak of compassion.*

In December 1977 Chipp and Colin Mason were elected as Australian Democrat senators, a major achievement for a party that had only been in existence for a few months. The dramatic shift in Chipp's political identity was mirrored in his personal life. In the late 1970s he divorced his first wife and in 1979 he married Idun Welz, with whom he had two daughters.[7]

Following the federal election of October 1980 the total number of Australian Democrats senators rose to five; this meant that from July 1981, the Democrats had the balance of power in the Senate (along with Tasmanian Independent Brian Harradine). The Democrats Senate team enjoyed continuous balance of power status in the Upper Chamber (either in their own right or with independents or other minority parties) for over two decades. Chipp proved somewhat ambivalent about the Democrats' potential for greater political influence. He believed that a key role of the Democrats was to act as an example and inspiration to the major parties by their commitment to doing what they thought was 'right'. This included the burden of acting as a Senate watchdog, ensuring legislation was fairer and that the chamber fulfilled its 'house of review' role. In other words, the Democrats would 'Keep the Bastards [i.e. the major parties] Honest', as Chipp famously put it in 1980.

Yet the Australian Democrats was also a political party that needed to achieve party goals if it wanted to retain its place in the Senate. The contradictions between the Democrats' dual persona of watchdog and political party bubbled to the surface as the reality of holding the balance of power in the Senate became clear. The Democrats' indecision in August 1981 over blocking an increase in sales tax in the 1981–82 Fraser Budget was striking. Chipp was torn. On the one hand he wanted to block parts of the Sales Tax Amendment Bills (Nos. 1A to 9A) 1981 with Labor support because the legislation increased taxes on education, food and other items that were a burden for the poorer sections of the community; on the other, Chipp did not want his party to be seen as obstructing the Budget, especially since the Democrats had effectively pledged in 1980 not to do so if they won the balance of power in the Senate. Chipp persuaded his party to adopt the position that they would support requests for amendments to parts of the sales tax that dealt with the necessities of life: if the requests were rejected in the Lower House, however, the Democrats



would then allow the legislation to pass. The House of Representatives resolved not to make the Senate's amendments, and when they were pressed by the Senate, the House declined to consider the bills again, and they were ultimately discharged from the Notice Paper.

By February 1982, Chipp had changed (or was persuaded to change) his mind. He affirmed that his party would resolutely vote against parts of the sales tax bills which targeted life's necessities. The Democrats joined the vote to defeat a second reading for the bills when they were submitted to the Senate in the same form by the House of Representatives in March 1982, and the sales tax legislation, together with four other twice-rejected bills, was considered, in 1983, to provide grounds for a dissolution of Parliament under section 57 of the Constitution. Chipp's initial unwillingness to effectively wield parliamentary influence showed that there was a parliamentary traditionalist within the soul of this supposed radical. His caution appears to have been based on a consciousness that his party did not represent the majority of the electorate.[8]

The Democrats took the process of reviewing government legislation in the Senate seriously, and at times used their balance of power status to secure selected changes. For instance, the ALP government accepted Democrats' amendments to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Bill 1983 designed to maintain the independence of the ABC. In securing such alterations Chipp's friendly relationship with Bob Hawke, Paul Keating and other ALP figures may have been a contributing factor.

As a Democrats senator, Chipp was proudest of his party's role, alongside the grassroots environmental movement, in saving South West Tasmania's Franklin River from being flooded by the damming of the Gordon River. Chipp gained invaluable publicity for the cause by taking a journey down the Franklin River by raft in 1981. Inside Parliament, he kept the Senate's attention on the issue, most notably by initiating a Select Committee on South West Tasmania, which inquired, among other things, into 'federal responsibility in assisting Tasmania to preserve its wilderness areas of national and international importance'. In early 1983, new ALP Opposition leader Bob Hawke declared that a Labor government, if elected in that year's federal poll, would introduce legislation to save the Franklin from the dam, a promise he kept as Prime Minister.

Chipp and his colleagues pioneered the use of the Senate as a means of highlighting awareness of Australia's environmental heritage, including the Daintree and other rainforests. Implicit in Chipp's actions was the notion that environmental protection was a national issue that sometimes overrode economic development and state rights. The Democrats gained strong electoral appeal as an environmentally conscious party, an advantage gradually eroded by the rise of the Australian Greens in subsequent decades.

Aside from environmental issues, Chipp was best known in his Democrats years for his anti-nuclear stance, although it left the major parties unimpressed. Chipp was especially concerned with the Cold War implications of Australia's defence alliance with the United States, then in an arms race with the Soviet Union. Chipp wanted Australia to be more self-reliant in defence and avoid becoming a nuclear target: 'To rely on the protection of the so-called United States nuclear umbrella is mindless'. Chipp's increasing obsession with 'protecting the world for its children' through opposition to wood-chipping, uranium mining, and American bases on Australian soil could sometimes lead to very sweeping emotional statements: 'Australians just don't give a damn. This is a massive disappointment after 25 years of working my guts out for them'.[9]

Re-elected at the double dissolution election of 1983 by a full quota on the first count, Chipp resigned his Senate seat on 18 August 1986, paving the way for Janine Haines to take over as Leader of the Australian Democrats. One of the more amusing retrospectives on Chipp's twenty-five years in Parliament was Phillip Adams' 'Ode to Don':

... at the setting of life's sun,  
You'll know why you were born,  
You kept the bastards honest,  
And you gave us soft-core porn.

After his retirement from politics, Chipp kept himself in the public eye. Having produced his first book of memoirs in 1978 (*Don Chipp: The Third Man*), Chipp published a further two volumes of reminiscences and

political/social commentary. Appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in the Queen's Birthday Honours in 1992, he was a pro-monarchist representative at the 1998 Constitutional Convention, and campaigned, unsuccessfully, to become Lord Mayor of Melbourne in 2001. Chipp maintained a regular media profile, writing newspaper columns and dabbling as a broadcaster on commercial radio. Towards the end of his life Chipp developed Parkinson's disease, which he tackled with his customary pugnaciousness.

Don Chipp died in Melbourne on 28 August 2006 and was given a state funeral at St Paul's Anglican Cathedral, Melbourne. He was survived by Idun, six children and eight grandchildren.

There is no doubting Don Chipp's contribution to Australian public life. As a Minister he liberalised censorship laws while instigating a classification system that was designed to protect the young from violence and sexual imagery. His energy and passion were a crucial impetus for the formation of a new political party in 1977, and without his charisma and capacity to persuade, it is unlikely that the Democrats would have had as much influence and support as they ultimately did over three decades. Further, Chipp and the Australian Democrats demonstrated to many in the electorate that the Senate could and should be a house of review, where each piece of legislation is 'thoroughly discussed and clearly understood inside and outside the parliament, before it is passed'.<sup>[10]</sup>

### Lyndon Megarrity

[1] This entry draws throughout on Don Chipp and John Larkin, *Don Chipp: The Third Man*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1978 [Chipp and Larkin], and Don Chipp, *Chipp*, Methuen Hayes, North Ryde, NSW, 1987 [Chipp]; on the transcript of an interview with Don Chipp by Bernadette Schedvin, 14 May–12 Oct. 1987, POHP; and on Tim Hewat and David Wilson, *Don Chipp*, Widescope International Publishers Pty Ltd, Camberwell, Vic., 1978 [Hewat and Wilson].

[2] Donald Leslie Chipp, Defence Service Record, 439022, NAA; Transcript, Don Chipp interview by Peter Thompson, ABCTV 'Talking Heads', 13 May 2005.

[3] *CPD* (R), 8 March 1961, pp. 28–31; Paul Hasluck, *The Chance of Politics*, Text Publishing, Melb., 1997, p. 180; 'Talking Heads' interview, 13 May 2005; Chipp to Gorton, 30 April 1969, Gorton papers, M3787/38 4029598, NAA; Chipp and Larkin, pp. 21–2; Peter Howson, *The Howson Diaries: The Life of Politics*, Viking Press, Ringwood, Vic., 1984, p. 179.

[4] Tom Frame, *The Life and Death of Harold Holt*, Allen & Unwin, Crow's Nest, NSW, 2005, pp. 207–9; *CPD* (R), 16 May 1967, pp. 2143–79; Chipp and Larkin, pp. 63–84.

[5] 'Talking Heads' interview, 13 May 2005; Mungo MacCallum, *Mungo: The Man Who Laughs*, Duffy & Snellgrove, Sydney, 2001, pp. 175–7; *CPD* (R), 11 June 1970, pp. 3372–6; *WA* (Perth), 31 May 1971, p. 8; James Sabine (ed), *A Century of Australian Cinema*, William Heinemann, Port Melb., Vic., 1995, pp. 75–8; Hewat and Wilson, pp. 28–46, 59–62; *Herald* (Melb.), 29 April 1974, p. 4; *The Bulletin* (Syd.), 28 July 1973, p. 28.

[6] POHP; Chipp and Larkin, pp. 57, 151; *Chipp*, p. 151; Russell Deiley, 'Playboy Interview: Don Chipp', *Australian Playboy*, 1 May 1983, pp. 136–7; *CPD* (R), 24 March 1977, pp. 555–8; *Age* (Melb.) 10 May 1977, p. 3.

[7] John Warhurst, '1977: Don Chipp's New Party', in John Warhurst (ed.), *Keeping the Bastards Honest: The Australian Democrats' First Twenty Years*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1997, pp. 49–64; *The Bulletin* (Syd.), 2 April 1977, p. 17; Max Edwards, 'The Australian Democrats', in Dennis Woodward, Andrew Parkin and John Summers (eds), *Government, Politics and Power in Australia*, 3rd ed., Longman Cheshire, Melb., 1985, pp. 176–82; Chipp, speech at Camberwell Town Hall, 23 Nov. 1977, quoted in Warhurst, 1997, p. 64.

[8] Cathy Madden, *Australian Democrats: The Passing of an Era*, Research Paper No. 25, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2009, p. 9; Transcript of press conference speech, Don Chipp, 19 Sept. 1980; John

Siddons, *A Spanner In the Works*, Macmillan, South Melb., Vic., 1990, pp. 173–5; *CPD*, 9 Sept. 1981, pp. 576–8, 16 Sept. 1981, pp. 802–6; Liz Young, 'Red leather rules and the art of cross-benching', in Warhurst, 1997, pp. 178–82; *Australian* (Syd.) 18 Jan. 1997, p. 4.

[9] *CPD*, 25 May 1983, pp. 826–30; Senate, *Journals*, 25 and 26 May 1983; *Chipp*, pp. 56–71, 96–112; *CPD*, 23 Sept. 1981, p. 920; Australian Democrats, *30 Years, Australian Democrats*, East Melb., Vic., 2007; Scott Bennett, *The Rise of the Australian Greens*, Research Paper No. 8, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2008; *CPD*, 12 June 1986, pp. 3915–8, 16 Nov. 1983, pp. 2615–7; *Age* (Melb.) 7 June 1986, p. 17.

[10] Phillip Adams, 'Ode to Don' (1986), quoted in *Chipp*, 1987, p. 233; *Age* (Melb.), 7 Dec. 1989, pp. 1, 6; *Sunday Mail* (Adel.), 28 March 2004, p. 15; *CPD*, 4 Sept. 2006, pp. 42–6.

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