

GREEN LIGHT

She has the credentials and drive to change the world. Queensland's first Greens senator, mum-of-one Larissa Waters, also intends to bring heart to her new role

BY
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PHOTOGRAPHY
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people shouting insults at each other across the chamber. That's not real. That's just an artificial construct. What's real is the people here today who want a better world and want a bit more heart from their representatives. So I'm going to hang on to that, when I'm there in those big leather chairs helping to write our laws."

Waters, a former environmental lawyer who worked at the Environmental Defenders Office for eight years, will be officially sworn in in Canberra on Monday, July 4. It's a date she has been waiting for since being elected in August, 2010, with 12.8 per cent of the vote.

She takes on a historic position as Queensland's first Greens senator.

Last year's election was a nail-biter for the two major parties, but the other big story was the success of the Greens. The Greens received a swing of 4 per cent nationally to receive more than 1.6 million votes, or 13 per cent of the total. Come July 1, the Greens will have the balance of power in the Senate, with nine representatives, at least one from each state, and one Lower House MP, Adam Bandt for Melbourne. It's a first for any minor party.

The Green vote has steadily grown since the party formed in 1992, as the environment becomes a topic never off the agenda. It shows a seachange in Queenslanders' voting patterns, says political commentator Paul Williams from Griffith University.

"It's what we call the greening of the electorate, where environmental issues have become front and centre. In that sense, Queensland, in terms of voting patterns, is beginning to fall into line with other states.

"Every state now has a Greens representative in the Senate; Queensland was the last to join the pack, which says something about our conservative nature and desire

to develop the state and put the environment second, but that's rapidly changing."

It's not just a city vote either. Waters says 9 per cent of Queenslanders in rural areas voted for the Greens in the Senate, driven by issues such as rainforest conservation and coal seam gas extraction in agricultural areas.

Many believe she is the right person in the job at the right time, none more so, of course, than party leader Bob Brown.

"I think the more Queenslanders see of Larissa the more they're going to like her," Brown says.

"She's highly qualified, she's got her legal qualifications, she's got a huge knowledge of ecology, but she's also got her feet on the ground in society and all those things are going to hold her in good stead. She's also got an abundantly cheery personality, which is gold in Parliament House.

"It's terrific because Queensland has a green voice in the national Parliament and whether it's the Great Barrier Reef or the plan for 40,000 (coal seam gas) drill holes in the Darling Downs, Larissa's voice is going to be very important for Queenslanders."

But while it may be an honour and privilege to represent the state, there will be challenges ahead. In Canberra, Waters will be entering a battlefield of war-scarred cynics. There is little love and warmth in politics.

Competing interest groups have spent time and money fighting for the ear of those in power. There are some who believe the Greens' ideas are radical and destructive. There are those who say she will have a hard time of it.

And there are those who, while not sharing her views, still have a healthy respect for her.

"What you do with everyone at the start of their career is you wish them all the best," says LNP Senator Barnaby Joyce. "I think Larissa's a really nice person. She seems like a really decent person.

"It's going to be a very interesting time. I hope on Queensland's behalf she has immense responsibility for some of the policies that her party might want to pursue that might be really damaging to Queensland."

But policy does not necessarily equate to personality, Joyce says.

"In politics it's a lot like football, the way you act on the political field is not the way you act off the field. Off the field we actually treat people with dignity, have a laugh, in fact some of our better friends are from other parties."

After the rally, Waters visits an office she might rent. There are strict guidelines such as how big the office should be and that all staff need to be on the same floor for good communication. Two people from the Commonwealth Parliament Office have come to check out the building. Jiri Martinek has been settling senators into their roles for years. He asks about the bathrooms, which are accessed from outside. Security is a concern because sometimes staff can be working until midnight. Then there is the threat of potential protesters. "We are the protesters," jokes Waters.

She has employed four staff: an office manager, media adviser, campaigns officer, and a policy and strategy adviser. Eighty-one people applied.



Environmental lawyer
Larissa Waters will be officially sworn in as a senator in Canberra on July 4.

shall we go?" says Larissa Waters, smartly dressed in a dark suit with her brightly coloured "TV-shirt" as she calls it (the one she wore on ABC's *Q&A*), her Greens pin proudly displayed on her suit jacket.

It's 10am and in one hour the senator-elect, who takes office on July 1, will be speaking at a rally for the Australian Services Union in Brisbane.

Waters has packed her lunch in reused takeaway containers. She brings her own metal knives and forks. She's happy to car pool today; otherwise she would have caught the train.

Her two-year-old daughter, Lana, has already been bundled off to grandma's house. News radio is playing in the background and the day's papers are spread out on a table. A bookshelf reveals titles such as Barack Obama's autobiography, David Suzuki's *The Sacred Balance*, *Australian Sociologies*, *Debating the Earth*, *Australia's Remarkable Trees* as well as books on motherhood and by Shakespeare. "That's my serious bookshelf," Waters, 34, says with a grin. "The non-serious one is downstairs."

We leave the cosy Queensland home and set off for the rally, cheekily held in a park outside Wayne Swan's office in northern Brisbane.

There is a healthy turnout. Groups of community workers in red shirts gather on the lawn; red balloons float towards the sky. Despite the carnival atmosphere the rally has a serious side. Workers who recently won a pay increase now want the Government to back it up by allocating funding for their wages, lost hours and services be cut. They wear T-shirts that say "Pay up! No more lip service to equal pay" and chant slogans such as "It's been ages, fund our wages!"

After her speech, Waters can't walk far without people stopping to talk to her. One woman asks her about the carbon tax, a group of refugees discuss the difficulties they face, a community worker brings up the problem of domestic violence.

Everybody has an agenda; everybody wants to be heard. Politics is a job of talking and listening.

"It's a typical day and one she'll be having a lot more of.

"When will you be making your maiden speech?" asks one person.

"First speech, I prefer to say," she corrects him with a smile.

"I just met a senator," says another, as though she were a rock star, after she has gone on to talk with someone else.

After listening to some harrowing abuse stories, Waters is clearly moved.

"I can't imagine a child who's been in a war zone, having to process that trauma," she says. "Ever since I've had a kid I always relate it to my own experience."

But she feels honoured that people want to share these things with her. After all, that's why she's here, as their representative.

"It's a whole spectrum of things that people want to talk to you about, and I love that," she says. "I really enjoy that human interaction. Feeling that you can be part of making a change for the better for those people."

"It's nice to remember that. I think when I'm down in Canberra, it feels like a bit of a bubble, and there's all these