



Larissa Waters addresses community service workers at a recent rally in Brisbane as she prepares for her debut role in political office. The woman who will be Queensland's first Greens senator says she enjoys human interaction and being part of the process of change for a better world, and promises to put heart into her role.



"I felt so blessed. It was a tough choice, but I finally settled on four staff to help me, which I certainly need because it's an awfully big state, and there's an awful lot going on."

Waters' appointment comes at a crucial time as the Government nits out the details of its carbon tax plan. The controversial scheme will put a price on carbon, in line with other countries, making big polluters, such as coal-fired power stations, pay for their emissions. Revenue raised will then go towards funding renewable technologies. If energy companies pass on those costs to consumers, the Government says it will compensate householders to make sure they are not out of pocket.

"It's a simple concept," Waters says. "You make it more expensive to keep polluting, it gets cheaper to not pollute, industry learns that it needs to clean up its act. And if householders are forced to pay more... they get compensated so they're not worse off."

The goal of the scheme is to reduce emissions to 5 per cent below 2000 levels by 2020, a target the major political parties have all agreed to. It is intended as an interim measure until an emissions trading scheme is finalised. Opponents say it is a pointless exercise that will hurt key industries and affect householders without any measurable difference to the world's climate. The tax has been particularly controversial in Queensland, which is the largest coal exporting state in the largest coal exporting country in the world.

But Waters pits the coal industry against the Great Barrier Reef which, through tourism, employs 63,000, which is more than double the coal industry nationally. She says the reef is a key earner for Queensland and is directly threatened by climate change caused by major polluters.

"The latest reef science is saying that a one degree temperature rise will see massive coral bleaching," Waters says. "Our mining and exporting and burning of coal is a direct threat to our Great Barrier Reef. Given a choice between fossil fuels and the reef, I pick the reef. We can power our homes in other ways that aren't damaging to the environment."

The reef is the proverbial "canary in the coalmine," she says, but ignoring climate change would also be devastating for native species whose habitats rely on intricate temperature conditions, not to mention the human costs for future generations.

The Greens' vision is to move away from fossil fuel dependence and invest in renewables, such as solar, wind and wave technology. Waters cites a University of Melbourne study, in consultation with the group Beyond Zero Emissions, that says using today's technology we could power all homes and business within 10 years with 100 per cent renewables.

Other countries, such as Germany, lead the way. It produces solar energy in a multi-billion dollar export industry employing more than 350,000.

At present Australia uses around 5 per cent renewable energies, compared with other countries, such as Germany at 17 per cent or New Zealand at more than 70 per cent.

"The world is moving faster than we are and eventually the world's not going to want our dirty coal," Waters says. "It's going to want our clean sunlight. So if we hurry up and make that transition then we stand to do very well economically as well as environmentally."

Although Australia is responsible for less than 2 per cent of the world's emissions, we have the highest per capita level in the developed world.

"We actually have more influence on the world stage than we realise," Waters says. "When it comes to the Olympics, you don't hear people say, 'oh well, we're not that big why bother aiming at a gold medal?'"

Taking coal out of the equation is an economic impossibility, says the other side. Says Senator Joyce: "It's like taking the major income earner out of the house."

But the Greens say they want a level playing field. The Government currently subsidises fossil fuel industries to the tune of \$11 billion a year. A Galaxy poll commissioned by the Greens showed that 84 per cent of Australians want to see those subsidies redirected to renewable energy.

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LARISSA WATERS



addition," Waters says. "Is it any wonder that renewable energy is more expensive? It's up against an \$11 billion hurdle. So let's turn that around and then see how cheap renewables will become."

Waters never had any designs to enter politics. The former Kelvin Grove student first studied drama before branching into law. She worked for eight years at the Environmental Defenders Office, representing community and environmental groups. She was named Australian Young Environmental Lawyer of the Year 2010 by the Law Council of Australia. But she felt she needed to do more.

"I was getting really frustrated telling people you have some rights, but no, you can't stop that new dam, you can't stop that bushland being felled and no, there's no way you can stop that new coal mine going ahead. So I thought, well, you need to be in there to be changing those laws in order to give people better rights."

Some of the most successful cases included environmental wins against big projects such as the Traveston Dam and Nathan Dam, including broadening the focus for Environmental Impact Statements.

"She's a very hard worker, and she's extremely thorough," says Jo Bragg, her former boss at the EDO.

"She said the only job that would tempt her away from the work she loved was a political role, in which she might achieve reform. There's a massive volunteer movement in Queensland protecting the bush, protecting endangered

animals, speaking up on climate change, and they'll know that Larissa is really with them on those issues."

When Waters first read the Green policies, they represented everything she agreed with, not only on the environment but social justice issues.

She was asked to stand against Premier Peter Beattie in the 2006 state election, a job no one else wanted. She found she loved it. She enjoyed campaigning, meeting people and listening to their concerns.

"I guess what I was most heartened by was issues that people were raising with me were things that I was concerned about as well, so it made me feel as if I was on the right track," she says.

She ran for the Senate in 2007, just missing out, and then against Wayne Swan in 2009, while she was pregnant, which she doesn't recommend. "I didn't do a lot of doorknocking as my ankles were huge."

But 2010 was her year.

Waters grew up in Brisbane, the daughter of a molecular biologist father and psychologist mother. She came from a generation where environment was part of the school curriculum.

She remembers winning the environment prize in Grade 4, and learning about the plight of the crown of thorns starfish. But it's the next generation who are even more switched on, she says, in terms of caring for our planet. "And they'll have to be because if we don't fix it then it will fall to them."

And they're smart too, she says, because that's where the jobs will be as the world shifts towards a low carbon economy. "There's jobs in protecting our environment, there's jobs in cleaning up our environment, there's jobs in designing more efficient buildings and retrofitting homes and building rainwater tanks, so there's a call for those uni courses to get those skills."

With two weeks to go, we visit the Commonwealth Parliament Office on the top floor of a swanky building overlooking the Brisbane River. This is where the big wigs of politics have offices when they're in town. Waters will have a temporary office here until she rents one of her own.

She and Martinek discuss what car she might have: she would like a Prius but will have to inherit a Galais from the outgoing senator. At home, with her partner Brendan O'Malley, a News Queensland journalist, she drives a Honda Jazz, rated one of the most fuel-efficient cars.

She jokes about pulling up in the carpark beside all the Mercedes and Porsches.

In the lobby, behind a glass cabinet is displayed the Hansard collection: every volume of parliamentary proceedings since Federation in 1901, except for the first volume, which has mysteriously gone walkabout.

Martinek comments that in the early days, politicians spoke like statesmen. These days, of course, it can sound more like quips exchanged on a school field.

She looks around. "I'm going to enjoy this," she says.

But there will be challenges ahead. One of the biggest will be spending enough time with her family. She will be renting a place in Canberra for herself, her mother and Lana, while her partner will work fewer days so he can spend time with the family.

As for the political fray, Waters is up for the challenge. "I'm quite happy to take on the establishment and I don't feel daunted or out of my depth. I've been a good lawyer and I hope to be a good representative," she says. "I want to be that voice for the community and I'm encouraging people to contact my office. I want people to know that I'll be doing my absolute best. I want people to let me know if they think I'm doing a good job or a bad job."

"I think our politicians could do with a good dose of idealism. The Greens have got that."

"Maybe we can try and bring the hope back in, bring the positive outcome back in."

Enter the room where press conferences are held. Waters leans against the podium, beaming widely.

"She will fight them on the beaches," says Martinek quoting Churchill's famous speech.

"Well," says Waters with a smile, "we will non-violently negotiate with them on the beaches."