



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**THE SENATE**

**FIRST SPEECH**

**SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 23 August 2011**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

---

## SPEECH

**Date** Tuesday, 23 August 2011  
**Page** 5225  
**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Waters, Sen Larissa

**Source** Senate  
**Proof** No  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

---

**Senator WATERS** (Queensland) (17:28): I am so pleased that we start our day in this chamber acknowledging the traditional custodians of this land, the Ngunawal people. To that daily ritual, I add my personal respects to this ancient and enduring culture of our land. It is with great pride that I give my first speech today, the first ever speech of a Green senator representing Queensland. Queensland has a long history of green activism but it has taken us 20 years to gain a seat in federal parliament. So today is a historic occasion.

I am privileged to be the first Green elected at any level of government in Queensland. A congruence of history, many years of campaigning by dedicated people, the inspirational leadership of Senator Bob Brown and being in the right place at the right time have meant that this remarkable opportunity has fallen to me. Expectation is high and need is great for there are many pressing issues confronting Queensland.

I want to begin by paying tribute to the Queensland Greens members whose efforts over those long years have put me here today, particularly Drew Hutton and Libby Connors, and more recently Ian Gittus, Mark White and Sam La Rocca. I stand on their shoulders and draw on their wisdom. Likewise, I would not be here without the thousands of committed Greens members, volunteers and campaign workers who share this victory today. Some of them are in the gallery tonight, including the former Democrat senator, and now Greens member, my friend Andrew Bartlett. I am touched that they are here to share this moment.

To my eternally hardworking staff, who are also here tonight: thank you for everything you do for me. Collectively, we will make a difference, and let us have fun doing it. It is a great honour but also a huge responsibility to stand here as the voice of 312,000 Queenslanders who voted one year ago for a fairer and more sustainable future. I hope to do justice to their faith and trust in the Greens.

Eight months ago, our state suffered its worst flooding since 1974, with devastation of our towns, our countryside and our homes and, tragically, the deaths of 35 Queenslanders, four of them children. The sheer destruction was almost incomprehensible. And yet from the depths of this loss grew a great sense of common purpose. People rallied to help neighbours and strangers alike. I will never forget the image of a man rescuing an injured kangaroo joey from floodwaters, carrying it in his arms to safety. There were countless acts of great selflessness and bravery. Overwhelming adversity was a great unifier.

It is the confidence born of that deep community spirit which gives me unshakeable hope for our future. The challenges we face are great and the experts are telling us that we must act quickly—more quickly than those with vested interests in the status quo would like, but we will make it. Despite the awesome global task of arresting climate change and preserving this wondrous planet for years to come, we will do it.

That determined optimism is what drives me in this place. It is what keeps me going despite the long hours away from my two-year-old little girl, Lana, who is upside down up there in the glass gallery. When she is older, I want to be able to tell her that I did everything I could to give her a better future and to ensure that she can enjoy the beauty and the diversity and the glorious joy of this one planet and its multitude of species.

In another life, I went to drama school, so indulge me a Shakespeare reference. Hamlet, in one of his regular self-pitying moments, laments 'the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals' as 'a sterile promontory' and 'a quintessence of dust'. He needed to get out more. And clearly he had never been to Queensland. My home state is blessed with verdant rainforests, stunning beaches, rich but scarce farmlands and abundant community spirit. Queensland has a vast and rugged beauty. And we have the privilege of living on the shores of the Great Barrier Reef, the largest coral ecosystem in the world, an internationally significant biodiversity icon.

Like many other Queenslanders, I feel a fierce protectiveness towards our reef. From my first visit at age 11 to a remote reef island as part of a turtle-monitoring expedition—thanks, Dad—I have loved this underwater paradise. I am not alone. Today it supports a \$6 billion tourism industry which employs 67,000 people. Yet this great employer and money-spinner for Queensland, this ancient natural wonder, is being turned into a coal and

gas highway in the race to double Queensland's coal exports by 2030 and ride the coal seam gas boom for its 25-year life span in the dying days of the fossil fuel industry. It is a great irony that the burning of those fossil fuels is endangering our coral ecosystems through ocean acidification and increased water temperatures, just as the proliferation of massive tankers and the millions of tonnes of dredging—for new coal and gas ports—within the reef world heritage area are directly threatening our reef.

The extraction of coal and coal seam gas is also threatening that other great Queensland industry—agriculture. Just 2.2 per cent of Queensland is good quality agricultural land, yet the coal and coal seam gas miners want to go into our best food-producing land sitting on top of the Great Artesian Basin and turn our food bowl into an industrial wasteland. You cannot eat coal and you cannot drink gas. It beggars belief that neither the state government nor the federal government is taking a long-term view of how we are going to feed ourselves if the groundwater table drops or if those aquifers are contaminated. The coal seam gas industry is still trying to work out what to do with the billions of litres of water it extracts from coal beds. It does not need a water licence, and it considers water a waste product. In this driest continent on the planet, who could ever conceive of water as a waste product? Food security should be beyond politics and it should not be sold out for short-term royalties and offshore private profits. We simply do not know enough about our underground water resources to understand what new connections gas well drilling and hydraulic fracturing might create. We need a moratorium on new approvals until we fully understand the risks—the precautionary principle demands it and the community demands it.

Likewise, there is no coexistence between open-cut coalmines and farming. Those huge, 30-megatonne mines eat up the landscape. Those generational farming families of our rich Darling Downs should be applauded for the strength of their spirit and their campaign against this rapacious industry. Why risk it, when we have alternatives to energy production but no alternatives to food? We have wonderful solar resources in Queensland, some promising geothermal deposits, wave and tidal potential and, to a lesser extent, wind. Innovative nations like Spain are rolling out remarkable new solar thermal technologies that can supply baseload solar power. I want to see Queensland have a part in that. I want Queensland to lead the way, lead Australia's charge to the new low-carbon economy.

Numerous reports tell us that renewable energy generation is more job intensive than old coal, and that we have the technological capacity to power our nation with 100 per cent renewable energy within a decade. That is such an exciting prospect, environmentally and economically. We need to be making plans now for just transitions for coal based communities so no-one is left behind when the day comes that the world does not want our coal anymore. Getting rid of the \$11 billion of fossil fuel subsidies would be a good and fiscally responsible start.

The carbon price is another vital step. I cannot think of a greater honour than to be part of the parliament that passes climate laws, including the complementary measures like \$10 billion for renewable energy and \$1 billion for biodiversity. That will be a great day for this nation. It is the tireless work of my dedicated and incredibly bright colleagues that will deliver a carbon price. I want to thank all of them for being a constant source of inspiration to me, particularly Bob and Christine. I feel so privileged to be part of this visionary and brave team.

I come to this place from the community legal sector, from one of 200 of Australia's vastly underfunded, non-government, not-for-profit legal practices. Eschewing the emptiness of corporate legal work, I spent the bulk of my working life on an award wage as a public interest environmental lawyer at the Environmental Defenders Office in Brisbane, an organisation which is a great unsung hero of many legal improvements in Queensland.

It was a privilege to work with individuals, community and environmental groups who sought to use the law to protect the environment, those busy folk who took time from their own working and family lives to fight for causes bigger than their own self-interest. They did not sit back and accept bad environmental outcomes; they did not allow developers or government to get away with unlawful conduct; they were not deterred by the sheer magnitude of the David and Goliath challenge to powerful interests. They put their time, their money and themselves on the line and fought for the public interest. They remain my heroes.

Working in a community legal centre brought home to me the lack of genuine access to justice. Having good laws on paper does not do much if people are not aware of their rights, are not able to enforce them or cannot even afford legal advice to know where to begin. The risk of crippling court costs in public enforcement cases, the sheer complexity of environmental laws and the lack of understanding of the handful of rights people actually

have to protect the environment all need redressing. We need legal aid for the environment, and all community legal centres need more recurrent funding for services—and decent wages at least in parity with the public sector.

I would like to thank my boss at EDO, the gracious yet tenacious Jo Bragg, for her tutelage on law, politics and negotiation. I miss her companionship, gentle guidance and constant support of me. She is a true friend and mentor. During those nine years at EDO I am particularly proud of using our federal environmental laws to stand up for the Great Barrier Reef and being part of the team who successfully argued that, when conducting environmental impact assessment, the federal minister must take a broad approach and must consider the purpose for which development is proposed. In that case, it meant that the EIS for the proposed Nathan Dam on the Dawson River needed to consider the likely run-off of endosulfan and other pesticides and fertiliser into, ultimately, the Great Barrier Reef. It was also an honour to work on a case that protected 896—we counted them—rare and threatened plants in World Heritage quality rainforest on beautiful Springbrook Plateau in the Gold Coast hinterland, one of my favourite places in the world.

But those wins were, sadly, rare. Over the years I grew increasingly frustrated with the limits of the law to achieve good environmental outcomes. I got sick of having to tell people that they had no legal rights to stop that new coalmine, or protect that local patch of bushland, or stop that infrastructure going right through koala habitat. I realised that the laws needed changing to give people more rights to stand up for the environment for the common good. That is what encouraged me to seek change through politics.

Our family was never very political, but a reverence for nature and a love for all living creatures was imbued in my upbringing. I won the environment prize at Rainworth State School in grades 4, 5 and 6, and my sense of injustice was ignited in my early teens when reading David Day's *Whale Wars* about the international whaling fights of the 1980s. At 14 I turned vegetarian because of my love for animals and later for ecological reasons, and I have continued that decision for 20 years now.

The Greens were the only choice for me. No other political party captures my beliefs and values so entirely, operates with unfailing integrity and honesty, stands up for what is right even if it is controversial, and has living within our ecological means and treating each other with more kindness as its central tenets.

In that decision I have been supported by my family. My parents always encouraged me to stand up for what I believe in and I would not be here without their teachings. They are in the gallery today along with my wonderful stepparents. Mum and Nick, dad and Anne, thank you for your patience, love and support. I hope to do you proud in this place. I want to particularly thank my mum, Lorraine, who is now giving up a well-earned retirement to be our part-time nanny. From being the best mother in the world to me, she is now the best grandmother a girl could hope for. I couldn't do this without her. Not everyone is as lucky as I am, so we need better support systems for women, particularly young women, to encourage them into politics. I thank the strong women who have gone before me in this place and paved the way.

My stepsister sadly can't be here today but my aunt and some dear friends are—it means a lot that you are here.

To my partner, Brendan, I love you. Thank you for letting me do this and for always knowing what to say. You are a wonderful father to our little girl, Lana, and I am so lucky to have you. To little Lana, who is running around up there, you are the light of my life and it is you that keeps me going. Although you are too young to understand, I hope you will be proud of your mum, and learn to dream big.

I often wonder what the world will be like when Lana is my age. Despite my unfailing positivity, with a world population heading for 9.2 billion by 2050, I worry at the scarcity of resources and I despair at the inequity of their distribution. We need to address the sheer numbers of humans on this fragile and finite planet, but we must also address our overconsumption. We are richer now than at any time in history, we have more stuff, but are we happier? The endless treadmill of consumption is not enriching our spirit or fulfilling us. As a society we are becoming more detached from the natural world and from our communities.

But as a shameless optimist, I can envisage a different future. I see sustainable cities and towns, with active, healthy citizens who have better work-life balance and the time to engage in their local communities, in settlements designed for people and not cars, with local health and educational services and local food production—real communities.

I am not alone in these aspirations. The relocalisation movement is, somewhat ironically, going global, and for good reason. The impact of our current consumption is such that we need 1.5 earths to fuel our greed, and with population growth patterns and business as usual we would need two planet earths by 2030. We have presided over the fastest rate of species extinction in history, sending biodiversity into massive decline. I do not believe that we have the right to do that. We are caretakers of this unique planet and we need to deliver it to future generations and to other species in better condition than we inherited it. To do that, we need to start living within our ecological means and address the disparity of wealth that sees millions of children living in poverty without clean water or enough food. We must recognise that in a finite system there must necessarily be limits to growth, and that we can have shared prosperity without growth. And above all, we must recognise that the economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the planet. In this great time in history, when the fate of the world and its life support systems is so finely balanced, we in this place must have the courage to be leaders in our community and yet also give voice to our communities. I see a lot of lobbyists walking these halls—powerful vested interests, captains of industry. I see fewer non-government organisations and very few ordinary community members. As the only Queensland senator from outside the major parties, I want to give progressive Queenslanders their voice back in this parliament.

If, when my time is up, I leave this place having contributed in some small way to improving our environmental laws with better community rights, consideration of cumulative impacts, and federal oversight of water, the lawyer in me will be delighted. If I leave this place having been part of putting a price on pollution to protect the Great Barrier Reef, the mother in me will be happy. If I leave this place having delivered better funding to community legal centres, seeing the proceeds of our mineral wealth shared more fairly and helping vulnerable people in our community of all creeds, the humanist in me will rejoice. If I can do all of those things, I will feel that my time away from my little girl and my family was worth it.

For many years I have had a screen saver which says, 'Make a difference.' Now more than ever I have that chance and I am grateful and so humbled by it. It is with a big heart and a passionate belief in the goodness of humanity that I undertake this journey. I hope to play a part in creating a fairer, safer and happier future for the generations to come. I look forward to working with all of you to do so. Thank you.