



Speech By  
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**MEMBER FOR MAIWAR**

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## VACANCY IN SENATE OF COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

### Election of Senator

 **Mr BERKMAN** (Maiwar—Grn) (4.14 pm): I rise to speak on the nomination of Larissa Waters to fill the vacancy in our federal Senate. Larissa and her family have faced difficult circumstances over the last year. I could not be more pleased to have the opportunity to speak to her reappointment as a senator for Queensland. She was kind enough to join me here for my first speech earlier this year, and I am so chuffed to have her back here today to be returned to her role as a senator for Queensland.

Larissa is a dear friend of mine, and she has also been a true role model for me and so many others for well over a decade. It is not such a little known fact, it seems—the Premier has made the point already—that Larissa and I have much in common in our lives before parliament. We are both graduates of the Griffith University Law School, where we studied environmental law. A number of members were at a Griffith University alumni dinner earlier this week, and I had a chance to speak to both Vice Chancellor Ian O'Connor and Pro Vice Chancellor Paul Mazerolle, who is in charge of arts, education and law. Both of them commented on how pleased they were to see Larissa returning to the Senate and how impressive she had been in the role previously. They expressed their genuine pride at having such an outstanding community representative as part of the university's impressive alumni.

Larissa's and my careers began in the same top-tier commercial law firm, where we both worked as paralegals and, albeit briefly, as junior planning and environment lawyers. She later moved into the community legal sector to help communities use the law to protect the environment and fight back against a rigged system that gives big mining companies far too much power. I remember as a student of environmental law reading seminal cases that Larissa was instrumental in running—cases that genuinely moved environmental protections forward and improved the way our law is administered in Queensland and Australia.

Foremost amongst these is the Nathan Dam case, which every law student in Queensland and Australia would be well aware of. Its principles are fundamental to the way environmental impacts are assessed and considered by decision-makers. It was the first time reef water quality impacts were considered properly in the assessment of activities undertaken up-catchment far from the reef coast.

There was also the Newlands Coal Mine case, which effectively established that there is no space in Queensland courts for the science of climate change to be disputed. It was a vitally important development, even if politicians still consider it their right to weigh in on climate science as non-experts more than 10 years later, and even though the Bligh government simply legislated to shunt this coalmine past that loss in court. It is not unlike the special legislative loopholes we have seen in favour of Adani in more recent times.

Larissa has been at the figurative coalface helping communities fight dangerous mines for years now, despite the unwavering support for the climate-wrecking industry we still see today from both sides of politics. We shared a common path into politics, in that our experience in trying to enforce ineffective environmental law has been a key motivator.

It is very unusual in these circumstances to have the opportunity to speak to a nominee's previous experience in the Senate. I have it on authority from the library that this is in fact the first occasion on which a formerly sitting senator will be appointed by this parliament. When the news first broke last year that Larissa would be forced to step down, we said that the big corporations and mining billionaires who have a stranglehold on our politics would be popping the champagne. The Senate had lost a fearless enemy of injustice and Queenslanders had lost one of their greatest champions. I am so glad to be here to welcome her back. Her track record in the Senate speaks for itself, but I want to reflect on just some of the moments that made me proud to be in the Greens.

Right after she arrived in the Senate the Greens helped put in place, along with the Gillard government, our world-leading price on carbon pollution which saw big polluters start to pay their fair share and the proceeds going to the lowest income households in Australia. That package created a 20 per cent clean energy target and put a massive \$13 billion into clean energy by the Australian Renewable Energy Agency and the Clean Energy Finance Corporation. Despite attempts by Tony Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull to scrap them, those agencies are still creating jobs in Queensland today.

Larissa fought for, and helped win, stronger protections for groundwater against coalmines and fracking via the federal water trigger, as it is known. She was instrumental in pushing the government to list koalas for protection under our national environment laws in 2012. With shocking inaction at the state level, that protection is one of the few things that is helping stop the extinction of koalas in South-East Queensland.

Larissa and the Greens tried to stop Labor kicking thousands of mums off the single-parent payment in 2013, a decision that ultimately pushed many of those folks into poverty. Larissa was fighting to stop Adani before it was cool. It is probably fitting that we are listening to the action happening outside at this particular moment. After both Queensland Labor and the federal Liberals and Nationals approved projects to open up the Galilee Basin and trash the reef, Larissa launched a pivotal Senate inquiry which helped make Adani, the reef and climate change national issues. We saw Queensland and federal parliament ban offshore dumping in the reef, and the people powered campaign to stop Adani and keep coal in the ground kicked off.

Larissa led the campaign against dangerous fracking for CSG and shale gas, to protect the renewable energy target and to abolish fossil fuel subsidies and represented the millions calling for stronger action at the Paris climate conference.

Larissa marched in the streets and fought in the parliament to stop Tony Abbott's 2014 budget. Together, a huge community movement stopped \$100,000 degrees, the \$7 GP tax and even more attacks on the most vulnerable. Since then she has pushed tirelessly to save funding for Queensland schools and hospitals from cuts under successive Liberal prime ministers.

Larissa's work in establishing a Senate inquiry into domestic violence was a crucial piece in our growing national conversation about this epidemic. When the federal coalition government tried to cut millions from front-line services, she helped to stop them.

Women have had no better advocate in the federal parliament. Larissa is a fierce advocate for closing the gender pay gap and standing up for low-income women, especially by protecting penalty rates. She set an amazing example by being the first to breastfeed in the federal parliament, making international headlines.

On a purely selfish note, it has been quite nice over the past year to have more time to spend with Alia, who is a bit bigger now than she was then, and with Jeremy, Larissa and Lana, who is not here today. It is the silver lining, if there is one, in this circumstance.

She was a voice for marriage equality, for shutting down our offshore prison camps and for peace. The Greens message is a message of hope. We are fighting for universal health care, universal housing, child care for all, raising the minimum wage and Newstart, 100 per cent clean energy and making big corporations pay their fair share. We want to create a future for us all.

I will take a moment to thank Andrew Bartlett for stepping up after the High Court delivered its findings on Larissa's eligibility. It is wonderful to have had such a safe set of hands, and we are fortunate in the Greens to have had this depth of experience to draw on when the unexpected circumstance arose. I also thank Andrew for his decision to step aside to allow Larissa to return, freeing him up to run a fierce campaign in the seat of Brisbane. The federal LNP is on the nose right now. I think Trevor Evans, as a one-time chief of staff to Peter Dutton, must be feeling the pressure from Andrew and his campaign team. As he was in his time in the Senate, Andrew Bartlett is in amongst his community, listening to the issues that matter to people and offering an alternative vision—a far cry from the inward-looking, self-serving conduct we have seen from the federal government and its ugly internal power plays in recent weeks.

To finish, I want to reflect on the integrity that Larissa and her fellow former Greens senator Scott Ludlum showed in resigning from the Senate. At that time none of us could have anticipated what would follow these two resignations and the slew of MPs embroiled in the whole affair—more than a dozen others from various parties. It is fair to say that, despite the criticisms levelled at the Greens by Labor and LNP politicians at the time, not one of the impugned politicians in these parties acted swiftly and in the public interest the way Larissa and Scott did. Self-interest was the apparent motivation behind all their actions.

Larissa was an outstanding senator for Queensland in her previous time in the Senate. Queenslanders are indeed lucky to have such a representative returning to Canberra. I commend her nomination and this motion to the House.