

Sarah Wilson and Wentworth MP Dave Sharma talk climate change

When I Quit Sugar wellness guru turned environmental champion Sarah Wilson took on her local MP Dave Sharma over climate change, the Wentworth Courier was there to capture all the action.

Emily Macdonald

@emilymac_journo



Dave Sharma won the seat of Wentworth after wooing back the voters who had defaulted to independent and climate champion Dr Kerryn Phelps.

A “Modern Liberal” according to his election material, his economic conservatism combined with his evidence based stance on global warming resonated with both the blue ribbon and progressive pockets of the eastern suburbs.

“In 2020 Australia invested \$7.7 billion or \$299 per person in renewable energy. This places us ahead of countries like Canada, Germany, Japan, Korea, New Zealand and the United States on a per person basis,” Mr Sharma told parliament in early February.

“Emissions fell by three per cent in the year to June 2020, to their lowest levels since

1998. “Our emissions are now nearly 17 per cent below 2005 levels.”

Bondi's Sarah Wilson exploded onto the global stage when her book *I Quit Sugar* became a New York Times bestseller.

Since then, the former journalist has turned her hand to philanthropy and climate activism, regularly sharing calls to arms with her almost 300,000 social media followers.

She espouses the benefits of a minimalist lifestyle – she turned up to the interview on a borrowed bicycle and pieces of her outfit were 30 years old.

Ms Wilson's latest book, *This One Wild and Precious Life*, is a "radical spiritual guidebook" penned after spending three years hiking around the world.

During her travels she has interviewed some of the world's leading voices on global warming including Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change scientists about how to avert the crisis.

"The fact is the entire world must reduce CO2 emissions to zero by 2020 (at the very latest) so temperatures do not go above 1.5C above pre-industrial levels (at a maximum) to survive," Ms Wilson writes on her site sarahwilson.com

She tells the *Wentworth Courier* she is not currently planning a tilt at politics as an independent but does not deny she has been approached to do so.

She arranged to interview the sitting MP and the *Wentworth Courier* was invited along to watch it all play out.

SARAH WILSON V DAVE SHARMA

The following interview transcript has been edited for length and clarity

Sarah Wilson: From my point of view I'm here as a voter and a constituent but also obviously as someone who talks to a community about these things.

But I'm not a climate scientist and I'm not a full time politician with access to things so I'm really asking from the point of view of someone who lives in the area and is concerned about things.

I don't think we really need to establish, because you've been quite upfront about this, Australians are really concerned about climate change, obviously.



It's escalating off the back of the bushfires, I think the last year or so it's (the climate change movement) definitely, definitely ramped up and people are starting to understand a bit more of the science.

I know that you've put yourself there as a modern Liberal and been quite vocal about your concerns for the climate and also support in the lead up to the election in 2019 you were saying we need faster and more supportive targets so that's no big secret.

I just want to ask an open ended question. What are you doing personally in terms of the climate space, in terms of representing Wentworth?

Dave Sharma: At a federal level I'm one of the people arguing for a net zero by 2050 and I think we've made good progress in that direction.

You saw what the Prime Minister said at the National Press Club last week (Scott Morrison said it was his "preference" to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050). I was an advocate for forgoing our use of Kyoto credits to meet our Paris emission reductions targets, which the PM announced we are doing that – we wouldn't need them to meet our Paris emission reductions targets.

And an advocate, bluntly, to maintain our Paris commitment because that hasn't always been taken for granted. To commit to net zero by 2050, to work in concert with other countries and to help basically smooth what is an inevitable transition underway.

First and foremost in the electricity sector which is where Australia and the world has made the most progress. But increasingly it's going to have to be in industrial processes, transport, building efficiencies. Locally, I've been a supporter of organic waste recycling initiatives. Randwick City Council launched their recycling program,

Woollahra is doing it, City of Sydney is doing a pilot, Waverley is sort of toying with the idea at the moment.

Around 50 per cent of household waste is regarded as organic stuff, basically it goes to landfill and decomposes without oxygen and produces methane.

It's quite easy to do, and this is what Randwick has done: the green bin gets collected every week and the regular red bin every two weeks now.

I was also on the committee to look at how we modernise our recycling industry in Australia. We've committed now to basically no export of unprocessed plastic, glass and other waste so we're building a sort of circular economy in Australia where we are increasingly putting requirements on people to manage the whole life cycle if they produce batteries, for example.



The meeting started o well with a COVIDsafe elbow bump. Picture: John Appleyard

SW: Including the food industry? So Coca Cola will have to take stewardship of their bottles or the Mount Franklin water bottles?

DS: They don't at the moment but it's going to grow. So I've been a proponent of that legislation which we just passed in the parliament in the last year.

SW: And recycling facilities? Because we need huge infrastructure to take up the slack where China dropped it all off?

DS: That's part of this recycling and waste elimination initiative. The way it works, it's a complicated intergovernmental arrangement because the state government has responsibility to a degree, local government areas also have responsibility for waste collection, but the federal government is trying to get them altogether by putting in place the legislative framework and then making financial contributions.

SW: I think that's something there's a lot of confusion around. People say, 'well I recycle my bottle but where do they go?' I think it's a bit of a low hanging fruit, a really pivotal touch point for consumers because it's so visible and tangible.



The pair agreed on many climate change issues however butted heads on others. Picture: John Appleyard

DS: There is now in Australia road resurfacing material made from crushed glass (reconophalt) so Woollahra Council are doing road repaving projects from an aggregate mix that's made from some recyclable materials.

The other thing I'll deal with quickly because it's a very local issue – health of the oceans. Particularly, there's an offshore drilling and exploration licence, petroleum exploration permit 11 or PEP-11 which spans the waterways from Newcastle to down here north of Wollongong. That permit has expired it's up for renewal so I've been campaigning against its renewal. I've written to the federal minister, the state minister against renewing it. Whilst I'm not opposed to offshore exploration everywhere, I think this is a particularly densely populated, high traffic waterway where a lot of people live and congregate

and we shouldn't have that there.



The Woollahra Council 2020/21 program consists of an additional 4,040 tonnes of Reconophalt covering 30,710m² of road surface which will create a saving of 50.2 tonnes of carbon dioxide, which is equivalent to 21 cars off the road for one year.

SW: You mentioned transport and I know electric vehicles has come up as a very popular discussion especially off the back of the Superbowl General Motors ad with Will Ferrell.

The Morrison government, your government, has come out and announced a transport plan of sorts. Do you think there's enough being done with electric vehicles especially given what (US president Joe) Biden has come out with which is expansive and then we've got GM making their commitment all electric by 2030 and Ford has done much the same and most of Europe has made this commitment? There doesn't seem to be a commitment supporting electric vehicles in Australia.

DS: I think the important thing to note is that's a discussion paper (the Morrison government transport initiative) it's not a policy.

SW: Why wouldn't we commit given all these incredible vehicles are going to be denied to Australians? It's something Australians are really hungry for. To see this Will Ferrell ad and then go 'oh but they won't

come to Australia because we don't have the policies in place to support it'.



Comparing green transport methods. Dave Sharma with a Lime scooter and Health and Lifestyle Author and presenter Sarah Wilson with her electric bike. Picture: John Appleyard

DS: Firstly we don't manufacture vehicles in Australia anymore so we are always going to import vehicles. People are always free to buy electric vehicles in Australia there's nothing preventing that.

SW: Yes, but we need incentives.

DS: Most of what the market research tells us is it's range anxiety and charging infrastructure prohibiting people (from buying).

SW: Which is the federal government – we need help with that.

DS: Yes, true. Waverley Council, your local government area, is putting in charging infrastructure. The state governments are as well. I think the federal government has got to do more here. Probably the biggest potential gain here with electrical transport is freight – road freight and transport fleet

management. That's an area we need to focus because a long haul trip from Sydney to Brisbane in a B class carrier is about 3.5 tonnes of carbon dioxide.

SW: It's about a third of the carbon emissions in this country

DS: Transport yes. Which is similar to most countries. The discussion paper is out, I think we need to do more to incentivise the uptake of electric vehicles. I don't think we are going to be mandating choices but I think there's a lot of consumer preference this way. But people firstly want cars that are more affordable because electric vehicles aren't particularly affordable and secondly if you don't have a garage at the moment you can't charge your car.

SW: The affordability thing I just don't buy because the world is shifting this way and when you've got Ford and GM, your mainstream manufacturers making this switch we are going to miss out on that incredible technology and ability to buy these cars.

DS: I think once mass manufacturing begins the price will come down, people will buy them, charging infrastructure will be built that's how most of these transitions tend to happen.

SW: The big thing for me at a personal level, I've got to say I am pretty embarrassed on the world stage. I used to travel a lot for work I used to live equally in different parts of the world. I don't know if you know much about me Dave but I've lived out of backpack for sort of eight of the last 10 years.

I am very minimal. I don't have a car, I don't own things, I am wearing clothes from 30 years ago. That's how I choose to live but I move around the world a fair bit so I'm in conversations with different economists, climate scientists.

I've written a book about all of this coalescing it. So I'm up to speed and when I talk as an Australian I'm a little bit embarrassed and what I pick up in the electorate is there are a lot of parents having to talk to their children about these issues and it's an embarrassing answer to have to give.

You've got China, US, Korea making these really solid commitments to zero net emissions by 2050. Not a "preferably" by 2050 or a second half of the century kind of commitments. Hundreds of leaders around the world including our state and territory leaders are signing up to this but the federal government hasn't.

DS: I certainly accept Australia can be doing better ...

SW: The Morrison government has been snubbed internationally ahead of speaking at a climate conference that says a lot.

DS: I don't accept that characterisation.

SW: Well that's essentially what happened. He was prevented from speaking.

DS: He wasn't invited to speak. There's 193 countries in the world and only 28 were

invited to speak. **SW:** But usually the Australian government has representation there.

DS: No this was a private conference by the UK Prime Minister. I don't accept that.

SW: Well that is how it has been reported and that is how it has been perceived. It speaks to the fact that as Australians we are embarrassed. The other thing of course is there's been things like the Kyoto credits and I know you said you'd worked to get them taken off the agenda.

But there's just these kind of ways of us talking about climate commitments and halfway plans and halfway measures and it's like guys, the rest of the world is on to this. They're not debating the science – they gave up on this years ago. And yet we are still having these ridiculous conversations in the party that's in power about the climate science.

DS: Can I respond to all this? Firstly I'd accept I'd like to see Australia doing more but I'm not embarrassed by Australia's record on this front.

If you look at our emissions for 2020 vs 2005 they're 17 per cent down. The average reduction of emissions for OECD countries is nine per cent so we are better than any OECD country.

In fact the Paris emissions reductions targets are based on the 2005 benchmark so that is the correct period to be measuring from.

Countries like New Zealand are one per cent reduction in emissions over the commensurate period, countries like Canada less than one per cent. You're citing countries making commitments but they haven't actually delivered much in terms of emissions reductions.

Our political debate in Australia has been unedifying from time to time. Going back 12 or 13 years and I agree that's probably hurt us reputationally.

But as someone who has professionally represented Australia overseas for two decades I think we've got a good record here. Doesn't mean we shouldn't be doing better, but we shouldn't always be beating up on ourselves over this.

It's all great for China to be saying oh look we're going to reach net zero by 2060 but their emissions are still increasing. India's are still increasing. Large parts of the developing world are still increasing.

There are good reasons for that – they're further back in terms of industrialisation but amongst the developed countries the OECD countries, as I said our emissions are reducing at a faster rate than theirs and they have done over the period of 15 years.

SW: The 2030 commitment we're talking about how we are galloping towards it and we are going to meet it and therefore we don't need the Kyoto credits and so on. Your own advisers have said it needs to be more like 40 to 60 per cent and the 26 to 28 per cent is not going to cut it and it's not going to get us to the 2050 target.

DS: There's no doubt this has been a politically contentious issue in Australia and we need a policy that the inner city supports just as much as Far North Queensland just as much as Western Australia.

Because if we don't we have a politically unsustainable policy. I think the worst feature of Australian climate policy over the last 13 years has been because it's politically volatile the policies have changed every two or three years. So I'm interested in making sure we have a policy that's ambitious enough that it gets us where we need to be but embracing enough to ensure those parts of Australia who aren't as keen on this issue as the inner city of Sydney and are in industries and jobs where they feel are going to be more exposed by this transition are coming along with us.

SW: I totally agree that's the job of a politician. But now we've got these discussions where we pull agriculture out of the 2050 commitment. I understand why the Nationals in particular want to have that on the table.

DS: I don't think we should do that. I'm opposed to it and I've said as much. There will be parts of the economy that still emit. It's not going to be like every household has to be zero it's the economy as a whole. So agriculture may still emit.

SW: The Zali Steggall climate change bill. What is your take on that? From an optics point of view it seems to be the thing that seems to be happening at a parliamentary level that gets to the front pages of the newspapers and has coalesced a lot of business anchors and a lot of other different groups.

DS: I disagree with that characterisation. It's an interesting piece of legislation and it's currently before a committee. I'll look at what the committee has got to say on it. What I'm not attracted to about it is it basically devolves decision making about how to reach the target to an independent body of non-elected officials. Ultimately I think elected officials who are directly accountable to the public need to be taking these decisions and making these commitments.

SW: Will you push to have it taken to the floor? You can encourage the government and say it's probably time we had a conscience vote on this. Would you support a conscience vote on this?

DS: I am going to wait to see what the committee report says and see if she adjusts the legislation. There are parts I'm attracted to and parts I'm not attracted to. We have already got a body which is called the Climate Change Authority which provides advice to government on how to reach its targets. If Zali's bill is just replicating that I don't really see the point.

SW: Except that body has been defunded significantly. It's gone from 50 staff to eight staff.

DS: Look if there's a question about resourcing I'm happy to have a discussion about whether these bodies should be better resourced. But the legislation at the moment I don't think it offers a compelling alternative.

Ultimately something like this should be taken to an election. Zali is free to take it to an election and each party will be free to adopt ... We didn't run and I didn't say I'm going to support a bill I haven't seen written by an independent. I said I ran as the Liberal candidate and in fact Liberal policies on this issue have moved in a better direction since I was elected.

SW: Beaches is a big thing in this electorate: it's part of our identity. We now know that 50 per cent of beaches are likely to be wiped out over the next 80 years with Australia being at the absolute top of the list. Has a risk assessment been done federally or even just for this electorate? Of what the costs are? Because that is looming and it is soon.

DS: I don't know to be honest.

SW: You don't know? Well the council should have done one ...

DS: Well potentially the council has done one. I know bodies like the Insurance Council of Australia have done broad modelling.

SW: This is a massive, massive issue in this electorate and probably more so than in other electorate in Australia if not the world.

DS: well if you are talking about rising sea levels it's going to have an impact on every part of Australia and every part of the world. There's broad scale modelling that's been done on this by the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) and other expert bodies but specific analysis on this electorate – I'm not aware of it.

SW: I'd love to see this conversation continuing. I know you've got your three daughters and I know that you care about this climate stuff and I also know you care about our positioning on the world stage.

DS: I've met with Australian Conservation Foundation, Climate Citizens Council – I'll try to meet with any constituents who want to get in touch.