



## ***Alice Springs - Laura Robertson***

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**09 February 2018**

***Alice Springs Convention Centre***

***Speaker: Laura Robertson***

Laura Robertson: Thanks for the opportunity to be here. My name's Laura Robertson. I would like to begin to make, by making it really clear, why I'm here today. I'm here as an educator. I'm representing the voice of young people, and to talk about the experience I've had teaching a unit on fracking at a local school. I teach at St. Philip's College, which is a school of the Uniting Church, in Alice Springs. I'm a history, geography and English teacher of year seven to 12. Ultimately, I'm here to represent the voices of young people, and what I took away from teaching this unit.

I became a teacher, because I believe in fostering critical thinking, and instilling an ability for young people to question sources and evidence. I would like to share with you what I took away from teaching this unit on fracking. Before I continue, I'd like to briefly give you on some context about where I'm coming from. The Year 10 geography curriculum is a study of well-being, which gives students an opportunity to explore a case study that is related to inland water.

Geography is predominantly a study of place, space, environment, interconnection, and sustainability, and I strongly believe, to make a subject like geography engaging, it is essential to make it relevant, and connect it to young people. The idea came to me very quickly to explore fracking, as this is a very real issue for the people of Alice Springs, and it closely related to inland water, as we get our drinking supply from the Mereenie. This is something the students of Alice Springs know and understand. It is in their backyard, so it immediately caught their attention, and had their interest.

The case study was designed by me, with the assistance of my Aboriginal colleague, who is also a teacher at the school. Across the classes, there was a range of demographics and background, so we had male, female, indigenous background, Asian, African. The key aims and learning outcomes for the unit were to get students to come to their own conclusions, in response to the overarching question, "Should we allow fracking in the NT?"

As stated above, I believe in fostering critical thinking, and in order to do this, believed it was essential to get in as many different perspectives on the topic as possible. As well as engaging a number of inquiry activities, inside and outside the classroom, to look at the positive and negative effects,



potentially, that fracking in the NT could have, we also had a range of guest speakers come in and share their thoughts on the matter. So all angles were represented.

Included were the Central Australia Frack Free Alliance. We had two representatives from Central Petroleum come out. We also had a mechanical engineer who was designing solar power technology. We also went on a field trip to the Roe Creek Bore. We were guided around by a Power and Water engineer, who explained to us how we exactly access our water in Alice Springs.

Now, I'd like to raise some of the key concerns that I had, in conclusion of this unit, and what I observed from these Year 10 students. Firstly, based on our unit of study, almost 100% of the students came out against the idea of fracking in the Northern Territory. After being presented with multiple perspectives on the issue, most students were extremely concerned, and opposed the notion of fracking going ahead.

I'd like to share a couple of quotes from the students themselves. One student said, "I questioned both sides of the debate, and what I concluded is that pursuing fracking is not worth it, because there is nothing renewable energy can't already do and provide." She went on, "We are the future. This is our future, and older generations are making decisions that will affect us. We want to be heard on this issue."

Another indigenous student said, "I think fracking is not good. They say that this is not affecting indigenous land and people, but it is. I know about many protests going on in my clan, and from my people. We do not want this to get ahead." Similar, appearing in the *Centralian Advocate* in December last year, my students were quoted saying, "Either way, we concluded that fracking is not the best solution to Australia's energy crisis. We can do better."

From another: "I find it a bit odd that we're presented with all these options for safe, clean, renewable energy, yet we pursue the ones that will do most harm." The students were quite concerned and alarmed when learning, when hearing some of the information presented from Central Petroleum, and the Power and Water representatives.

For example, the engineer at the bore fields appeared to be very misinformed about fracking, telling students that the type of hydraulic fracking that we're exploring at the moment had already been going ahead in the region, for many years, and there was absolutely no risks associated with it at all. Similar, Central Petroleum stated that solar energy was simply not a viable solution in the Northern Territory, because of the hefty costs involved, compared to fracking. We learnt from the solar energy engineer, that this is far from true these days.

So, I'll conclude by saying that I really believe the perspective of young people often gets lost, when it comes to important decisions, yet it is essential to take on board the opinions, concerns and perspectives of young



people, because, ultimately, they are the ones who'll be here, long after all of us.

I'd like to finish by inviting you to come out and talk to some of these young people. I was truly blown away by their intelligence, and motivation to inform themselves on the matter, and come to their own conclusions on this. They have important things to say, and insights to how they want their future to look. Thanks.

Hon. Justice Pepper: Thank you very much. That's a refreshing perspective that you have presented to us, and an important one, and one that perhaps hasn't been emphasised enough, at least, at the public hearing level. We certainly heard from young people during the Community Forums, but not at this level. Perhaps Ella's an exception, in that respect. But, then, so, thank you for that.

Regrettably, your invitation comes at the very late stage of this inquiry, and we must hand down our report in March. I must say, had it been issued earlier, we absolutely would have relished, I think, the chance of coming along and speaking to your students, without any doubt whatsoever. But, at least, perhaps we can ... I know you've got some copies of the, you've got a copy, of the executive summary there.

We'll see if we can furnish you with some additional materials that you can take back to your classroom, including a copy of the draft final report, and the appendices, as well. So just see one of the people in the Task Force on your way out the door, and at least, you can take those away with you.

Laura Robertson: Thank you.

Hon. Justice Pepper: I'm curious about what you said about the Central Petroleum saying that they, effectively, that the type of, I think ... Again, I'm paraphrasing, the type of fracking going ahead in, I'm assuming, that was talking about the Mereenie area. Is that right?

Laura Robertson: So, the Power and Water representative seemed to think that what was being proposed had already been happening, for a long time, from what I could understand.

Hon. Justice Pepper: In the Northern Territory?

Laura Robertson: Yeah.

Hon. Justice Pepper: They have fracked about a third of the wells, in Mereenie.

Laura Robertson: Yeah.

Hon. Justice Pepper: Just south of Alice. They haven't done horizontal drilling there, so, but they've done vertical drilling, and vertical fracking. So that has occurred, and that process is, to all intents and purposes, similar. Some variations, but, critically, a similar, in terms of having to go through the aquifer, large volumes of water being pushed down, chemicals, the water coming up. All



that is very similar to what is proposed in the Beetaloo Basin. So it has been going on, for a period of time, at least.

Laura Robertson: Yeah. I think the students were aware of that ...

Hon. Justice Pepper: Okay.

Laura Robertson: When they actually, like, pressed it on this, as a horizontal matter.

Hon. Justice Pepper: Yeah.

Laura Robertson: He seemed confused.

Hon. Justice Pepper: Now, as far as we're aware, there's been very few wells, and only one that's successfully been drilled horizontally.

Laura Robertson: Yeah.

Hon. Justice Pepper: Yes? Dr. Jones?

Dr. David Jones: Ms. Robertson, thanks very much for your wonderful presentation to illustrate how you've been interacting with the younger people on this aspect. I guess I'd be interested to hear, from you, about the materials that the inquiry's actually been producing. Were any of the earlier materials used in your course units? And do you think how later material might be used again? Would you run this unit again? Because I think it would be very interesting, seeing, now that we've sort of, gone through the inquiry process, how that might inform their perception of the discussion otherwise?

Laura Robertson: I'd love to run this unit again. It's honestly one of the best things I've ever taught. I haven't been given Year 10 geography, first half of this year, but I know a couple of my colleagues are going to adapt what I designed, and teach it, and I would be more than happy to help them. But one thing I learnt, when I became a teacher is, you have to simplify things, majorly. So it would take a lot of work for me to decipher, and bring this across in a way that young people would truly get it.

Dr. David Jones: We are producing some, particularly for our, the Aboriginal communities, we are producing a plainer English version and explanation. So maybe that might be more appropriate for your classes.

Laura Robertson: Yeah, I'd love that.

Hon. Justice Pepper: Again, do see the people, behind, on the Task Force. They can give you, hopefully, copies of, if we have them, of everything that we have, in fact, published and produced so far. We can take away a hard copy of that, and that'll give you an idea of, kind of the package, that we've tried to put together.



- Laura Robertson: Fantastic.
- Hon. Justice Pepper: But, yeah, certainly, these are complex processes. But one of the great things about, what you've said about the unit, is that it takes into account, geography, culture, chemistry. It brings everything together.
- Laura Robertson: Yeah.
- Hon. Justice Pepper: Indeed, I might not have ended up as a lawyer, if I'd had a teacher as inspirational as you.
- Laura Robertson: Oh, my. Thank you.
- Hon. Justice Pepper: Okay. Yes, please? Yes, sir?
- Prof. Barry Hart: Just a quick one. A really, really impressive process that you've developed there. How long was the unit? Was it one term, one semester?
- Laura Robertson: It was one term. We did it in term four last year.
- Prof. Barry Hart: So that's, what, three months, 16 weeks, or something like ...
- Laura Robertson: Term four is about eight weeks.
- Prof. Barry Hart: Eight weeks.
- Laura Robertson: But it was prefaced by a study on well-being, in term three, so we shaped it around this idea of well-being. What's going to be good for people in the future, yeah.
- Prof. Barry Hart: Yeah. Yeah. Well, you've done a great Job.
- Laura Robertson: Yes. Thank you.
- Prof. Barry Hart: Yeah.
- Hon. Justice Pepper: Thank you. Any further comments, or questions? Oh.
- Dr. Vaughan Beck: Just, echo what's already been said. A very impressive fact that you took the trouble to get a number of people in from different perspectives, I think, is an excellent ... Why, I say you've obviously thought deeply, and done considerable work, so, sincere congratulations on what you've done. I'm sure that the students have benefited considerably from it.
- Laura Robertson: I hope so.
- Hon. Justice Pepper: Thank you.
- Laura Robertson: Thank you so much.



Hon. Justice Pepper: I thank you very much.

Laura Robertson: Thanks for your time.