Christine Milne

Do not underestimate Christine Milne. At 36 she is the youngest member in the Tasmanian parliament. One of five Green Independents who have held the balance of power in Tasmanian politics since April, she rose to political prominence through a much-publicised and successful fight to save the prime rural land of Wesley Vale from environmental destruction from pulp giants North Broken Hill and Noranda.

But the woman who took on the multinationals and won is discovering that leading the vanguard of Australian Green politics does not always deliver big returns. Just six months after her triumphant sweep into state parliament, Christine Milne, school teacher and history graduate, is exhausted and angry.

Her anger is directed at the Tasmanian Labor Party which holds power in the state parliament only through the Green-Labor accord, the terms of which Labor already shows signs of disregarding.

Already, the government has twice attempted to renegotiate the accord. It has baulked at revoking mining licences in the Jane River goldfields in the nominated World Heritage area of south-west Tasmania, and recently attempted to reopen negotiations on the state’s woodchip quota.

"I am disillusioned with the government. At the time the accord was drawn up we made some big compromises and they agreed to what they saw as a reasonable price to pay for being government. Now they’re secure in their ministerial suites and they’re moving away from making the hard decisions, the ones they agreed to in the accord."

If the Greens are confronting hard political reality, Christine Milne is one who will take the challenge head on. "We have to redefine our role and develop a mechanism to move the agenda and be seen to move the agenda. The ALP is already taking credit for our hard work and I’m daunted by that."

Christine Milne has been on the Australian political scene barely two years - first appearing when she successfully lobbied federal Environment Minister Graham Richardson to save some small bushwalkers’ huts in Tasmania’s Cradle Mountain National Park.

Despite stories circulating that she was once a member of the ALP (spread, she says, by former Liberal Premier Robin Gray), Milne says she has no political background. Her parents both voted Liberal, and becoming a politician was never her ambition. In 1976 she worked briefly on Michael Field’s election campaign "when he was a bright young man who opposed uranium mining". Her criticism of the Tasmanian ALP is summed up in her opinion of Field’s political metamorphosis. "I received a lesson in his view of compromise, that politics is only about compromise. The Greens believe that’s not the case."

"I never saw myself getting involved in the political system. But the (Liberal) government kept making decisions I couldn’t agree with. It’s inevitable that government would continue to make those decisions."

The campaign to save Wesley Vale from a billion dollar chemical pulp mill was a response to one of "those decisions". Milne stepped onto a treadmill when she was elected spokesperson for CROPS (Concerned Residents Opposing Pulp Mill Sitting) in March 1988, spearheading a campaign that concluded with the federal government ruling that environmental guidelines covering the proposed pulp mill, already accepted by the Liberal state government, were not strict enough. The partners withdrew from the project saying they could not comply with the new guidelines.

Still on the treadmill, Milne moved into mainstream politics with her decision to stand for the state seat of Lyons, the largest and most conservative Tasmanian electorate. Six months after stepping into parliament, Milne is overwhelmed by the workload.

Officially a backbencher, Milne, along with the other Independents, has responsibilities and a workload which far outstrip those of an ordinary MP.

She holds three shadow portfolios: primary industries, education and tourism. She concentrates her energy on pushing sustainability in primary industry, involving more teachers in decision-making, and developing a "much-needed philosophical framework around the appropriateness of the Tasmanian tourism industry."

The Greens are also pushing social justice issues - homosexuality, Aboriginal justice, domestic violence - up the government agenda. According to Milne, the government is beginning to move, though slowly. "The ALP would never have had the courage to run these issues on their own. Their track record indicates that."

The Tasmanian Greens have another level of responsibility - maintaining the momentum of their national leadership role. "People look to the Greens for a lead, giving them some hope for the future."

But in practical terms this involves a mountain of work for five individuals with minimal resources. For Milne and her colleagues, the price of commitment is high.

Milne is positive about the environmental commitment shown by the federal Labor government - particularly supporting Hawke’s and Richardson’s statements on Antarctica and Kakadu. She would like to see that commitment to understanding and supporting Australian environmental issues broaden internationally. "You’ve got to grab people’s imagination and reinforce their views. Tasmania’s only the start."

Clare Curran.