



24 MAR, 2021

Shift on quotas for women

Age, Melbourne

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Shift on quotas for women

Katina Curtis

The Liberal Party's long-held resistance to quotas to ensure women get elected is shifting after Prime Minister Scott Morrison flagged he is very open to the idea and senior female frontbenchers said it was time they were introduced.

Separately, a hunt is on for Coalition staff involved in sharing videos of lewd acts performed in Parliament House and the government has promised they will be sacked.

Mr Morrison gave an emotional speech in public and to the Coalition party room meeting yesterday about the "absolutely shameful" explicit videos, and the treatment of women more generally.

The Coalition has been reeling from sexual assault claims, including an allegation by former staffer Brittany Higgins that she was raped by a colleague in Parliament House.

Attorney-General Christian Porter is on leave after vehemently denying an allegation he raped a 16-year-old girl when he was a teenager at a Sydney debating competition.

This week it was revealed that a staffer had filmed himself masturbating over a female MP's desk.

"These events have triggered, right across this building, and indeed right across the country, women who have put up with this

rubbish and this crap for their entire lives, as their mothers did, as their grandmothers did," Mr Morrison said yesterday.

"We have been talking about it in this place for a month, they have been living with it for their entire lives."

Mr Morrison has also opened the way to stand Mr Porter aside, having taken advice from the Solicitor-General. He is talking to his own department "about how that sits with ministerial standards" and intends to make "further decisions" about the West Australian MP's future.

The Prime Minister said he was very open to the idea of introducing quotas for female MPs. Labor introduced quotas for women running in winnable seats in the mid-1990s, which has led to almost half the federal caucus being female compared with a quarter of the Coalition.

Ministers Marise Payne, Karen Andrews, Sussan Ley and Melissa Price spoke out in support of the measure, along with other Liberal MPs as the party seeks ways to recruit more women into Parliament in an effort to change its culture.

"We tried it the other way and it

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Lib resistance to quotas for women shifts

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isn't getting us the results we would like to see, so I would like to see us do better on that front," Mr Morrison said, adding he thought many other Liberals were coming to a similar view.

Ms Andrews is one of those changing her mind, saying the work done so far "hasn't had the success that it's needed ...

"I've always been quite anti-quotas because I felt that it was a disadvantage to women because they would be perceived as only getting promoted, only getting a job because they were a number," she said. "We can't continue doing the same thing and expect a different outcome. So I'm certainly open to a discussion about quotas."

Ms Ley said that right now she was "for the outcome more than the mechanism" but she had called for a debate on quotas for some time.

"We need more women believing they can run for politics and knowing they will be supported in doing so," she said.

Senator Payne, the Minister for Women, said there were "significant frustrations" in encouraging more Liberal women into Parliament and the party should take a "good, hard look" at quotas "because, clearly, there are ongoing issues that mean in parts of our organisation we have not been able to achieve the outcomes we want".

Ms Price said the party had to have a serious conversation involving men and women about what quotas would mean, although she did not see them as the only answer.

Liberal backbencher Katie Allen said she was open to quotas if they helped get more women "in the decision-making room" and Senator Hollie Hughes said everything should be back on the table. Veteran MP Russell Broadbent, who has asked the Prime Minister to convene a summit of women's organisations, thinks quotas are a good idea.

However, some female MPs including Fiona Martin and Nicolle Flint, believe reportable targets are a better option. "I didn't come to Canberra to fill a quota," Dr Martin said.

The Liberal Party's federal executive has recently backed measures aimed at increasing the number of women among its ranks. Half of the new federal MPs elected in 2019 were women.

"Progress has been made. However, much more needs to be done," a party spokesman said.

Mr Morrison acknowledged that many people had not liked or appreciated his own personal responses to the allegations of sexual assault and harassment. He has come under criticism first for saying his wife, Jenny, had told him to think about Ms Higgins as if she was one of his daughters, and for making remarks in Parliament that were interpreted

as saying women should be grateful they were not shot for protesting.

But he said he had listened to the stories of women over the past month.

He spoke of women being too afraid to call out bad behaviour for fear of losing their job, of being "overlooked and treated like they have nothing valuable to contribute".

"I have heard about being marginalised, women being intimidated, women being belittled, women being diminished, and women being objectified. That is not OK. Women who are afraid to walk to their car from the train, and they carry their keys in their hand like a knife for fear of being attacked. That is not OK. That is not acceptable."

Colleagues in the party room said they believed the Prime Minister was now leaning into the issue and pointed out he had a history of getting behind issues only when he intended to act.

A Coalition staffer was sacked on Monday night for filming himself performing a sex act over a female Liberal MP's desk, while another video showed him performing a sex act on a man in a parliamentary office. The government is trying to find out the identities of other staff reported by Ten News to have shared photos and videos of themselves performing lewd acts in Parliament House.



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Finance Minister Simon Birmingham, whose department is the formal employer of all political staff, said the only thing standing between other staff involved and being sacked was their identification. He said colleagues were engaging with the female MP whose desk appeared in one of the videos and she had been made aware of her options if she wanted further support.

The government's formal response to Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins' landmark workplace sexual harassment report, *Respect@Work*, is now expected within weeks.

Ms Jenkins is also starting a review of the workplace culture in Parliament House, and outlined her plans to Coalition MPs yesterday. She met Labor MPs and staff last week and has made it clear her intention was not to investigate individual complaints but to outline how to create cultural reform.





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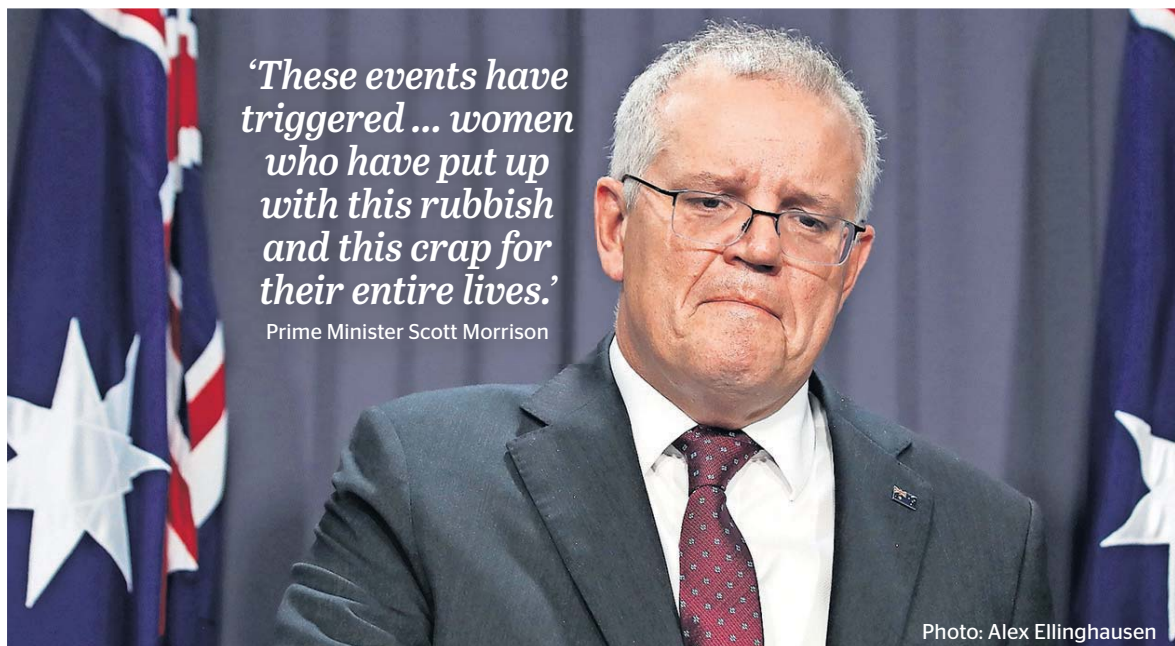
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Prime Minister Scott Morrison
during question time yesterday.
Inset: In conversation with
Deputy PM Michael McCormack.
Photos: Alex Ellinghausen



*‘These events have
triggered ... women
who have put up
with this rubbish
and this crap for
their entire lives.’*

Prime Minister Scott Morrison

Photo: Alex Ellinghausen