


Liberal women line up to back quotas

EXCLUSIVE

By **ROSIE LEWIS, RICHARD FERGUSON** and **ADESHOLA ORE**

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A record number of federal Liberal MPs say the party must consider quotas to boost female representation, after weeks of sexual assault allegations and misbehaviour against women forced the party's leadership to publicly declare its support.

The Australian has spoken to a dozen Liberal backbenchers who said quotas must be on the table, joining Scott Morrison and ministers including Foreign Minister Marise Payne, Health Minister Greg Hunt, Environment Minister Sussan Ley, Industry Minister Karen Andrews, Education Minister Alan Tudge, Defence Industry Minister Melissa Price and Financial Services Minister Jane Hume.

NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian also said she was “open-minded” on gender quotas, conceding targets had failed the Liberal Party's bid to reach 50 per cent of female MPs. But the Liberal National Party in Queensland rejected quotas while saying it was “actively -encouraging more women to stand for preselection”, especially in winnable seats.

Former Victorian premier Jeff Kennett, who is being tipped to run as the state's Liberal - president, stopped short of backing quotas but said the party should pursue Robert Menzies' ideal of a greater role for women.

Lucy Wicks, who represents the marginal federal NSW central coast seat of Robertson, agreed with the Prime Minister that the party should look at quotas. She said quotas for safe seats and the Senate should be added to the policy mix.

“I'm a great believer in merit-based selection,” Ms Wicks said. “I'm a great believer in training and mentoring, but to be frank I think the times have bypassed all of that. We should do it (adopt quotas) quickly and we should do it in time for the next federal election. Quotas may not be the ideal solution for the Liberal Party and there is some valid criticism of quotas. But we've been talking about the problems associated with quotas versus merit-based selection for 20 years and we are still not at 50 per cent representation in the federal parliament.”

It will be up to state divisions to debate and approve quotas. The party remains bitterly divided over embracing the mechanism, which it has repeatedly rejected.

Victorian Liberal senator Sarah Henderson, who lost her seat of Corangamite at the 2019 election, said just six of the party's 39 safe or reasonably safe seats (15 per cent) were held by women and there was 26 per cent female representation at a federal level. "That is not good enough and strong action is required, in particular to ensure more women are preselected in safe seats," she said.

"I support a robust conversation about any mechanism, whether or not it involves quotas, which results in more female Liberal parliamentarians. With a disproportionate number of Liberal women battling to hold marginal seats, no matter how talented, this impacts on their capacity to move into senior leadership positions and into cabinet where government decisions are made."

Mr Morrison has been under pressure over his handling of the treatment of women in parliament, which has embroiled the government in controversy for five weeks since former Liberal staffer Brittany Higgins alleged she was raped in then defence industry minister Linda Reynolds' office. Mr Morrison told parliament on Wednesday he "understood the pain so many Australians are feeling" and was listening to what they had endured after having to apologise for wrongly claiming News Corp was investigating a complaint against one of its journalists for harassing a woman in a female toilet.

News Corp, publisher of The Australian, said a "verbal exchange" about a workplace issue did occur but there was no complaint, it was not sexual harassment, it did not occur in a toilet and the matter, which involved two women, was "resolved" when HR wrote to one of the journalists involved.

"I have apologised unreservedly for what I did in bringing that matter into that press conference and erasing something I should never have raised," Mr Morrison said. "That was done not respecting those individuals who were at the centre of that particular issue."

Anthony Albanese reflected on the "catastrophic issues" confronting Mr Morrison, including: a now-sacked Coalition staffer performing a lewd sex act on a female MP's desk; questions over the political future of Attorney-General Christian Porter, who is on leave after identifying himself as the cabinet minister accused of an historical rape, which he denies; and the government's handling of Ms Higgins' rape allegation. Liberal backbenchers Hollie Hughes, Katie Allen, Melissa McIntosh, Angie Bell, Andrew Bragg, Trent Zimmerman, Bridget Archer, David Van, Andrew Laming and Wendy Askew were among those open to a conversation on quotas.

“The corporate sector has for many years been implementing quotas and I support evidence-based programs drawing on the experience of the corporate sector that have proven success,” said Ms McIntosh, a NSW Liberal.

Senator Hughes, also from NSW, said she was never a supporter of quotas but now believed everything had to be on the table.

“While I believe in equality of opportunity rather than outcome, I’m not sure we are currently meeting the equality of opportunity threshold,” Senator Hughes said.

Ms Bell, a former Liberal National Party women’s president, said she introduced programs to recruit, prepare and raise support and funds and support greater female representation in parliament and more of those actions were needed.

“As far as quotas for the preselection of women, I believe there will be a serious consideration of this issue,” she said.

While Mr Morrison’s endorsement of quotas has paved the way for an unprecedented level of support for the measure within the parliamentary party, there are also many MPs who remain vehemently opposed.

NSW Liberal senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells warned conflating bad behaviour by politicians with preselection processes to argue for quotas was wrong.

“Preselection should always be on merit and individuals should always be responsible for their actions,” she said.

Tasmanian Liberal senator Claire Chandler said improved representation could be achieved without mandated quotas.

“The review I led into female engagement in the Tasmanian Liberal Party in 2017 resulted in rapid and significant improvements in female representation, with three of the last four Tasmanian Liberals elected to federal parliament being women,” she said.

“We achieved this without mandating quotas and I’d like to be directly involved in implementing similar strategies and a similar approach at a federal level.”

*ADDITIONAL REPORTING: MAX MADDISON,
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