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Shocked Liberals shift on quotas

Sydney Morning Herald, Sydney

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Shocked Liberals shift on quotas

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

A hunt is also on for Coalition staffers involved in sharing videos of lewd acts performed in Parliament House, with the government promising they will be sacked once they are found. Mr Morrison gave emotional speeches in public and to the Coalition party room yesterday about the "absolutely shameful" explicit videos, and the treatment of women more generally.

The Coalition government has been reeling from a series of sexual assault accusations, including former staffer Brittany Higgins alleging she was raped by a colleague in Parliament House and the revelation a staffer filmed himself masturbating over a female MP's desk. Last night, the first female presi-

dent of the NSW Liberals, NSW MP Catherine Cusack, said Mr Morrison had no understanding of how diabolical political life had become for women, and said she was so appalled with her party's treatment of women that she would no longer attend parliamentary party room meetings.

"Federal Liberal women need to band together and explain to the Prime Minister just how serious

this has become because he is living in his own bubble," Ms Cusack said. "He appears to think this is just a political problem, but it is really a big moment in time and female Liberals need to tell him it is not the responsibility of women to solve this problem."

In an earlier press conference, Mr Morrison had addressed some of the recent events.

"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
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Morrison and Liberal MPs shift on quotas for women

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month, they have been living with it for their entire lives.”

Attorney-General Christian Porter is also on leave after he vehemently denied historical allegations he raped a 16-year-old girl when he was a teenager at a Sydney debating competition.

Mr Morrison also opened the way to stand Mr Porter aside. The Prime Minister has taken advice from the solicitor-general and is now talking it through with 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 quotas for female MPs. Labor introduced quotas for women candidates in winnable seats in the 1990s, leading to almost half the federal caucus being female, compared with just one-quarter of the Coalition. Ministers Marise Payne, Karen Andrews, Sussan Ley and Melissa Price spoke out in support of the measure with several other Liberal MPs as the party searches for ways to recruit more women into Parliament in a bid to change its culture.

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

“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.

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”.

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.

However, other female MPs including Fiona Martin and Nicolle Flint believe reportable targets are a better option than quotas. “I didn’t come to Canberra to fill a quota,” Dr Martin said.

The Liberal Party’s federal executive has backed some measures to increase the number of women 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 many people had not liked or appreciated his own personal responses to the allegations of sexual assault and harassment, and the tens of thousands of women who rallied around the country in the March 4 Justice last week.

He has come under fire 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.