It seems easier for Malcolm Turnbull to say he is one, or to be one, than apparently it is for Julie Bishop or Michaelia Cash. Turnbull's direct answer on Monday to a simple question – "would you describe yourself as a feminist?" - showed up those senior colleagues who never want to wear such a tag. It is also ensured ministers will likely be randomly hit around the campaign with the same question.

"I would describe myself as a feminist," Turnbull told his news conference. You almost expected him to add, "Isn't everyone?" "As I often say, women hold up half the sky". Respect for women had been "absolutely ingrained in me at a very early age by my father in particular and also by my mum".

Turnbull linked very directly back to his personal story, which has suddenly become part of his campaign pitch.

At the weekend the Liberals released a video in which Turnbull spoke of his father, as a single parent, bringing him up after his mother deserted the family. It was a counter to Labor's depiction of him as the rich man out of touch with ordinary people, as well as an attempt to have voters know more about him and his life before those riches.

Turnbull has recounted the tale of his boyhood enough times that most people who have followed his career are familiar with it, though not necessarily the public. He told it again during his Monday press conference at Engineers Australia.

His father – to whom he was genuinely and deeply devoted – had taught him to cook and to iron, he said. Also "he taught me respect and loyalty. I would not be the man I am today without him. You know, there are many remarkable things about my dad, but I tell you one thing that was in some ways the most remarkable.

"When my mother left us, we had nowhere to live. Dad rented a flat and didn't have any furniture … He had every reason to be a bit unhappy, to say the least. And yet he never, ever said a bad word about her. … You think about how rare that is. He never uttered a critical word of my mother in all of those years."

After his father was killed in an air crash and his mother had died, Turnbull had their correspondence. His father's letters to his mother were filled with "sadness and reproach" of her. "I thought, what does it say about a man? What does it say about his love that he could sit down and write letters like that, pouring out his heart and then turn to his little boy and say 'your mother is the greatest woman in the world and she loves you more than anything.' … What a great man. … There you go. Fathers rock and so do the mothers too."

Labor sees the airing of the Turnbull personal story as a sign its depiction of him is biting.

But what will voters make of his back story? Perhaps not much. It's all a half-century ago. People are more likely to be judging him, positively or negatively, in relation to the here and now.

Turnbull's "feminist" declaration came after he had been talking up girls' and women's potential. "Girls can do anything. In particular, they can do engineering. You've seen so many impressive, talented women who are engineers," he said, highlighting his Assistant Minister for Science Karen Andrews, one of the first two women to graduate from QUT in mechanical engineering. "You see the young women that have succeeded her in that profession, inventing robots and technology that is taking the world by storm."

Turnbull's ready empathy with women's issues of empowerment contrasts with predecessor Tony Abbott's chronic awkwardness whenever he ventured anywhere near this ground, however much he tried.

On Monday it was Bill Shorten who found himself under fire for comments that some had taken, whether genuinely or conveniently, as a slur on women or men or both.

On Sunday Shorten said, in the context of Labor's launch of its child care policy: "Let's face it, men in Australia rely on the women in Australia to do the childcare and to organise childcare… Where you've got mums working part-time or full time, it's the second job in the family, and frankly they're doing a lot of the unpaid work, they've got to try to work out the childcare bills."

It seemed a fairly unexceptional if generalised statement but Shorten was quickly under attack. One newspaper heading said “Mums ranked second by Bill”. Deputy Nationals leader Fiona Nash accused him of “appalling” comments and “prehistoric” language, claiming he was portraying men as having to rely on their “little women”.

In his Monday clean up Shorten, visiting a childcare centre, said that “men are stepping up in terms of childcare”, but stuck with his argument that “the fact of the matter is that the burden of childcare falls disproportionately on working mums”. It’s a proposition that one would imagine resonates with many women trying to juggle jobs and family.

Read more http://theconversation.com/turnbull-finds-it-easy-to-declare-himself-a-feminist-60574