

Liberals deride quotas for women MPs but how are they going to make targets work?

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Before the election Malcolm Turnbull had no trouble calling himself a feminist but now his party has had its woman problem highlighted by the result.

There will only be 13 women among the 60 (assuming the party loses Herbert) Liberals in the House of Representatives. That's 21.7%. In the last House there were 17 women among 75 Liberals (22.7%). The decline might be marginal but the representation is unacceptably low in both terms.

And when people start highlighting the problem, everything comes to be seen through the gender prism.

After he became prime minister Turnbull boosted the number of women in cabinet from two to five. Kelly O'Dwyer, Marise Payne and Michaelia Cash were elevated. Payne became Australia's first female defence minister.

A few months later the number of women went to six, when Fiona Nash became Nationals deputy.

In this week's ministerial reshuffle, two of the Liberal cabinet women have had large parts of their ministerial bailiwicks stripped away.

O'Dwyer keeps her (renamed) area of revenue and financial services but small business has been removed. Christopher Pyne, in a newly created job of defence industry, now has a big slice of defence minister Payne's former territory.

Labor deputy leader Tanya Plibersek quickly claimed the two had been "demoted". That wasn't actually true but it drew attention to the fact they'd come out losers.

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Turnbull overloaded O'Dwyer initially, giving her areas previously held by two ministers. Splitting the roles better distributes the workload, although he was probably driven by having to accommodate the Nationals – who had more spots and wanted small business (which is now outside cabinet, to the sector's anger).

The well-regarded Payne hasn't had much time to prove herself in one of the most testing ministries. Pyne is not a junior minister to help out but her cabinet equal. It's hard to see the exercise as other than giving Pyne, a South Australian, a large pork barrel that will be very useful in the politics of his state, where the Xenophon forces have run rampant. It's also suggested Pyne will be more of a salesman than the rather reticent Payne.

Health Minister Sussan Ley had been under some criticism, leading to speculation she might be moved. The case against shifting her could have been strengthened by the prospective backlash if three women had been targeted – even if the motives had nothing to do with gender.

The small number of Liberal women in the lower house has sparked a fresh debate about what can be done.

One problem is that women often tend to be in marginal seats and so their fates are more tied to swings, positive and negative. When John Howard won in 1996 a good number of women entered parliament on the coat-tails of that victory. A negative swing can work the other way, although in this election the swing against the Liberals hit men and women roughly proportionately.

Liberal deputy Julie Bishop has suggested the wider use of preselection plebiscites might help boost numbers. Plebiscites are desirable for a range of reasons but will they act to get more women? Not necessarily, if the Victorian Liberal experience is any guide. The party's state division has plebiscites but there are only three women among its 14 House of Representatives members (including the new member for Chisholm, Julia Banks, who took the seat from Labor).

The Liberals are vociferously against quotas, but in Victoria at an organisational level they have always had them. When the Liberals were founded by Robert Menzies in the mid-1940s, the powerful Australian Women's National League merged into the new party on the condition of equal male-female representation on governing bodies throughout the Victorian division. One

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would have thought the women in the organisation could have used this power better to get more women into parliament.

Georgina Downer, who ran unsuccessfully for preselection in the safe seat of Goldstein, says a big difficulty is getting enough women to contest preselections.

There aren't many younger women in the party membership, she says, while "young ambitious guys are reasonably plentiful". Party activism takes a lot of hours and women aged from the late 20s to early 40s, when political hopefuls are seeking preselection, are often juggling family and work responsibilities.

Another Victorian Liberal source says there are too few women who take on the chair positions in the party's electorate bodies, which would improve their chances when preselections have become so local.

The Liberal federal executive has embraced "a national aspirational target of 50% for female representation in Australian parliaments by 2025". But this is subject to each state division agreeing and devising a strategy for reaching it.

Without a dramatically greater commitment and effort by the party this won't have the slightest chance of happening.

Such an effort needs to include very actively seeking potential female candidates and maximising their competitiveness in preselections, including by convincing sometimes sceptical rank-and-file preselectors that it is important for the party to get more women into parliament.

Senior Liberal women should bring whatever heft they can to doing this, and to ensuring senior men play their part too. Turnbull should use his influence with the Liberal organisation.

It's no good the Liberals being sanctimonious about how much better "targets" are than "quotas"

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if their performance is so lamentable that they can't achieve any meaningful targets.

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