

It must be cold comfort to Jane Prentice, Assistant Minister for Social Services and Disability Services and Liberal moderate, that her preselection dumping has re-ignited the debate about her party's parlous record in getting women into federal parliament.

Or that Malcolm Turnbull had been on her side.

While some Liberals are discussing Prentice's overwhelming defeat through the prism of gender, it might be noted that if the women preselectors, of whom there were many, had strongly backed her, the numbers would have looked somewhat different.

Turnbull was one of the first to contact Prentice after her drubbing.

"I regret Jane losing preselection," he [told 3AW](#) on Tuesday. "I certainly stood up for her. I gave a reference. My representative who went to the meeting [Peter Dutton] voted for her – but he was one out of just under 370 people at the meeting."

Prentice, 64, fell victim to the ambition of her young protege, Julian Simmonds, 33, and, her critics say, to her failure to pay sufficient attention to her home base.

Simmonds had worked for her when she was a Brisbane City councillor. After she left the council bound for Parliament, he took her place there. He was her campaign director at the last election, and was seen as her preferred successor, although there was dispute over when she would retire.

A while ago, new branch members started to appear in her Ryan electorate. Prentice was aware of them but, reassured after some checks, she was not alert enough to the danger. She appears to have been taken down by a classic sting.

Regardless of the gender issue, the question of whether and in what circumstances MPs should be protected from preselection challenges is vexed.

Turnbull himself entered parliament after stacking branches in the electorate of Wentworth and knocking off the sitting member, Peter King. But King was a backbencher – should ministers get immunity? What about assistant ministers, who have a fancy title but in reality are parliamentary secretaries?

And what should be the rights of the rank-and-file members of the party? This is about the only time they get a say in party affairs. If you advocate intra-party democracy, there have to be good reasons to prevent or override a ballot.

One of those reasons can be branch stacking. But then, there are stacks and stacks – filling branches with a large number of ethnic “sleeper” members (popular over the years in the Victorian ALP) is not the same as intensive recruitment. Anyway, some LNP sources say the number of new members brought in was significantly less than the margin of Simmonds’ win.

In relation to Prentice, what’s done is done. But cabinet minister Kelly O’Dwyer is trying to leverage her loss into something positive for women in the Liberal party.

O’Dwyer - who has responsibility for women among her ministerial duties - has written to fellow cabinet ministers, pointing out that “despite being one of the first nations to grant female suffrage, it is extraordinary that since Federation just 24 female Cabinet members out of a total of 385 have been women.

“While I am pleased that female Coalition members have held the majority of these positions it is clear that all parties need to find proactive and practical ways of doing better.”

In a move she announced earlier this year O’Dwyer has established the [Enid Lyons](#) Fighting Fund, named after the first federal woman cabinet minister, “to provide financial assistance to support the campaigns of current female members of Parliament in marginal electorates and Liberal women preselected in winnable federal seats.”

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Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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O'Dwyer has committed \$50,000 from her federal electorate conference's funds and urged her colleagues to do the same. Turnbull on Tuesday said his Wentworth conference would match the donation. It will be interesting to see, in the run up to an election in which money will be tight, how many other cabinet ministers do the same. Deputy Liberal Leader Julie Bishop interviewed on the ABC on Tuesday night also promised a contribution although she declined to be pinned down on an amount.

Money no doubt will be useful, but it won't be enough to significantly boost the number of Liberal women in federal parliament. Without quotas - which Labor uses but the Liberals reject in favour of targets - the party will continue to battle to get a critical mass of women MPs.

There are the handicaps – for instance, women juggling work and family may have less time for activity to build a political career, at least when they are younger, than male counterparts. As well, there are disincentives to a parliamentary life that are affecting men and women, but perhaps especially women. Some may be put off by the commuting required of federal MPs. Or they may be discouraged by the intense toxicity that characterises today's parliamentary battleground.

The Menzies Research Centre, the Liberals' think tank, pointed out in a 2017 paper by Nick Cater and Nicolle Flint that “between the five elections beginning 2004 and ending 2016, out of a possible 150 [House of Representatives] seats female Liberal candidates numbered a low of 29 (in 2010) and a high of 38 (2016).”

The paper also stressed that the Liberals had “lost ground to the Labor Party in terms of the female vote”, since 2001.

To achieve substantially higher Liberal female parliamentary representation, more women aspirants need to be going through the party's ranks.

The Menzies paper said that women's under-representation in the party “begins in the Young Liberal movement, continues through to the senior membership of the party and is evidenced in every level of party leadership”.

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“We know that the lack of women in grassroots leadership roles is resulting in a lack of women in preselections and then as candidates,” it said.

The paper also noted that “a significant number of Liberals either deny, or prefer not to admit, that gender imbalance matters. Others seem to think that to discuss the issue openly would play into the hands of their political opponents.”

While there were “no simple solutions”, it said, “the first step in addressing the representation of women in the Liberal Party ... is to acknowledge that the Party does in fact have a problem”.

The fate of Prentice, while not actually gender-driven, has put up in lights that problem.

*Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.*

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