

## **Bragg drops out of Liberal preselection battle, calling for woman candidate**

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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Andrew Bragg, one of the frontrunners in the Wentworth Liberal preselection battle, has withdrawn from the contest, urging the party to choose a woman.

Bragg has also fuelled the row over bullying in the party, declaring allegations by Liberal backbencher Julia Banks “genuinely shocked me”.

Bragg, who is close to Malcolm Turnbull and quit his job at the Business Council of Australia to run for preselection, said his stepping out of the contest could pave the way for a woman.

There are three women in the field - Mary-Lou Jarvis, a vice-president of the NSW Liberal party; Katherine O'Regan, a commercial board director, and Maxine Szramka, a rheumatologist.

The Liberals are worried about the impact on their vote if, as expected, the high-profile Kerryn Phelps, who has a medical practice in Wentworth, contests the seat, where Turnbull had a 17.7% margin. The huge swing that cost the Liberals the NSW state seat of Wagga Wagga at the weekend will further alarm them. The seat has been won by a well-known independent.

Bragg said in a statement that Banks “is an incredibly impressive woman who has made it in the upper echelons of corporate Australia.”

He said her exit from public life - she had she will quit at the election - “is a loss for all of us. Julia is exactly the type of professional woman that the Liberal Party must be able to attract and keep in Parliament. Her loss is an enormous step in the wrong direction.”

Bragg also said comments by former foreign minister Julie Bishop that it was unacceptable for the Liberal party to drag the nation’s female parliamentary representation ranking from 15th in 1999 to 50th “equally ring true.

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"I believe these recent events and comments have changed the mood and accordingly I will withdraw my nomination. I am also a father and a husband who wants to see professional women make it into the highest offices in the land as representatives of the Liberal Party. This preselection provides that opportunity."

Earlier, Liberal backbencher Warren Entsch said MPs should name names in the bullying row. One Liberal backbencher, senator Lucy Gichuhi, has threatened to out people.

Entsch told the ABC: "I am of the view you don't threat, you do it.

"I think there should be zero tolerance and bullying, whether it be against male or female colleagues. I think it is unacceptable and we've seen too much of it in the parliament in recent times.

"At the moment, there is a real focus on some of our female Liberal members. But don't forget, it wasn't that long ago that it was on the other side of politics as well," he said.

"If there are people responsible for this type of action, I think they should be at least identified and counselled, if you like."

Entsch said that he knew Banks had been under "a lot of pressure".

"She'd been raising concerns from before this process started", about both her own side and Labor, he said.

Entsch said he "became aware of a female member of the party that was causing her a lot of grief at the time"; he had encouraged her to not be afraid and to stand up and identify the culprits.

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Entsch also lashed out at those in the media that had pressured MPs, singling out Sky.

"I thought it was an absolute disgrace. I don't think Sky News in particular wrapped themselves in glory.

"I actually saw texts coming through to colleagues encouraging them to get rid of the prime minister, from some of these commentators. And to me, that's overstepping the line," he said.

Their "absolute dislike" of Malcolm Turnbull was "quite obvious".

"There was nothing that the former prime minister could have done to satisfy their obvious hatred of him. And they took every opportunity to actively have him removed", including texting some MPs about how they should vote.

Appealing for Scott Morrison to be given a go, Entsch said he had "got there on loyalty, he got there on hard work, and he also got therein being outstanding in his performance in the various portfolios he had."

Replying to an opposition question on Entsch's comments about bullying, Morrison said he'd had "a chat" with Entsch and "he's fully satisfied with the way that the party is managing all issues that are germane to the internal running of the Liberal Party and the support of all colleagues.

"We have a clear process for handling the welfare of our members. It's handled by our whips ... They have a care role when it comes to issues of management with colleagues."

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

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