

View from The Hill: Morrison's challenge with women goes beyond simple numbers

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Mutual interest is a great bonding agent, so the bromance between 2GB shock jock Ray Hadley and Scott Morrison is on again.

Morrison will once more make regular appearances with Hadley, who dumped him unceremoniously last year, with a spurious excuse, because he considered him too boring.

As treasurer Morrison was “captive to cabinet solidarity”, Hadley [said](#) on Tuesday, explaining their “parting of the ways”. But as prime minister, he was the boss and “unharnessed”.

“Unharnessed” is also one way to describe the state of the government, as MPs kick over the traces, and the still-new prime minister struggles to get a hold on the reins.

The Senate on Monday and Tuesday (and last Thursday) found itself with little to do; Morrison cancelled an October meeting with the states because more work was needed on the matters to be discussed.

In the spooked team, you'd be hard pressed to find many who think the Coalition can turn things around in time for next year's election.

The row over bullying and the separate but now intertwined question of the under-representation of women among Liberal MPs is continuing to rip through the Liberal party, unable to be contained.

Morrison is conflicted. It's risky for him to play down the allegations of standover tactics, let alone fail to take seriously enough the party's need for more female MPs.

But he is attempting to sideline the bullying issue by saying the problem isn't with the parliamentarians - rather, it lies in the party organisation.

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This week he ordered that organisation to set up a complaints mechanism.

Read more: [Morrison tells Liberal organisation to act on bullying after second woman flags she'll quit](#)

On female representation, Morrison has no answers. Yes, he says, he would like more Liberal women in parliament. But how to get them? Certainly not with quotas. And he just wants the best candidates.

Post election, Liberal women in the House of Representatives are likely to be an endangered species – perhaps around half a dozen. Currently there are 12 Liberal women in the House, and one National.

Two of the present women MPs, Ann Sudmalis, from NSW, and Julia Banks, from Victoria, have announced they're quitting at the election, calling out bad behaviour (with Sudmalis naming a NSW state Liberal MP as her bete noire). Queensland's Jane Prentice has lost preselection. Julie Bishop is unlikely to stand. Several women are on tight [margins](#).

After Sudmalis' lashing out on Monday, comments from Liberals on Tuesday sent unhelpful messages.

Minister Steve Ciobo tried to claim the Liberals really had done quite well on the women front; Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells invoked Harry S. Truman's line about departing hot kitchens. Morrison said skirmishes "can happen in the local branches of a P&C", adding "though I don't think it probably gets as willing as what we see in politics".

The government's "women problem" goes beyond lack of women MPs and candidates.

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In presenting its face to voters, especially female voters, Labor has two formidable female performers at the top of its team – deputy leader Tanya Plibersek and its Senate leader Penny Wong.

With Bishop's departure from the deputyship, the Liberals have no female face in their leadership positions. Bridget McKenzie is the Nationals deputy leader, but obviously regionally focussed.

Kelly O'Dwyer, Minister for Jobs and Industrial Relations and Minister for Women, doesn't do a great deal of the government's broad heavy lifting. New Foreign Minister Marise Payne does virtually none of it (although in this portfolio she'll have to step up from her near invisibility while in defence). Michaelia Cash has a heap of her own political problems.

There is also the question of how Morrison will appeal to female voters.

So far, the public are still getting their heads around the fact of unexpectedly finding themselves with a new prime minister, about whom they knew little. Voters seem open-minded about Morrison: they have already put him ahead of Bill Shorten as preferred PM – probably as much a comment on their low opinion of Shorten as a definite statement about Morrison.

Women's judgment of Morrison will take a while to shake out. He's started by looking very blokey, with his frequent invoking of the term "mate", his preoccupation with rugby league, and his penchant for getting around in a Cronulla Sharks cap.

But Morrison's chameleon quality means that he may be able to modify the blokey approach if the focus groups suggest that's required.

The Morrison persona will be tested in the Wentworth byelection. (One Labor-aligned voter from that wealthy electorate says cruelly, "The average Wentworthian would see Morrison as a bit of a hick from The Shire".)

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Read more: [View from The Hill: Morrison faces the challenge of community-based candidate in Wentworth](#)

As is well known, Morrison wanted a woman candidate for the seat, an effort that failed. Now he is faced with the political nightmare of fighting a high profile independent female in Kerryn Phelps.

Phelps is well placed to exploit the Liberals' women problem. One would expect many of the women of Wentworth will be interested in whether Morrison during the coming weeks can produce any plans to improve the gender balance among Liberal MPs.

As the campaign progresses, the Liberal party's focus groups will be carefully watched for whether there is a gender difference in how voters perceive the Prime Minister. Those results would help shape campaigning later.

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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