

Liberal women must surely be asking why their party is so clear-eyed when facilitating the departure of competent women, and yet so mealy-mouthed about recruiting and promoting them.

Prominent among Prime Minister Scott Morrison's comments on Kelly O'Dwyer's retirement to pursue family life, was to say he [supported his minister's decision](#), and indeed supported all such choices by women.

Such clarity has been conspicuously absent from the Liberal Party's leadership since its now widely accepted "women" problem came to the fore in 2018 amid claims of bullying, implied career threats, ingrained gender bias, and other generally oafish behaviour.

Even more opaque has been the Liberal Party's puzzling refusal to broach any corrective action to address a powerful internal preference for men, when selecting candidates in winnable seats. This, despite a miserable return of just 13 female MPs of its 76 in the lower house after the 2016 election.

It is even worse now, and voters are on to it.

Not the first such departure

O'Dwyer is the second female Liberal from Victoria to call it quits in six months after her friend, the talented rookie backbencher Julia Banks, spectacularly called time on the party in the wake of Malcolm Turnbull's brutal ouster.

Banks went to the cross bench to form a quartet of competent female moderates with past ties or sympathies to the centre-right – Banks, Kerryn Phelps, Rebekha Sharkie, and Cathy McGowan.

There have been other high-profile departures this term also on family grounds with two

frontbenchers on the Labor side – former minister Kate Ellis, and rising star Tim Hammond – both bowing out.

That federal politics is hard on families and relationships is hardly news, but the slew of resignations / defections underscores how little has been done to change things.

And poignant, given her portfolio

In any event, O'Dwyer's retreat is arguably the most pointed given the current debate, her particular government portfolio, her hard-won ministerial seniority, and her party's woes.

It makes Liberal retention of her previously safe Melbourne seat of Higgins somewhere between problematic and unlikely.

On the social media platform Twitter where cynicism and vitriol flows freely from people hiding behind false identities, her departure has been met with some appallingly personal abuse, exaggerated outrage, and claims she was merely a rat leaving a sinking ship.

It is true that retaining the seat would have been no certainty even with O'Dwyer still as the candidate, especially given Victoria's recent anti-conservative tendencies in state election races, but with a new candidate, the Liberal jewel is undoubtedly more vulnerable.

Feminists will be aggrieved to see another senior woman go but they might also be quietly disappointed in her stated reasons.

In contradistinction to some of her predecessors, O'Dwyer, did substantive work as minister for women, and unlike some, gave the impression of actually believing in the mission.

She also garnered respect from across the aisle and within the press gallery as a person of warmth and humility – stand-out qualities on Capital Hill.

It is a portfolio she believed in

O'Dwyer created enemies however on her party's increasingly reactionary right flank by outlining the challenges for women – especially in politics – acknowledging the Liberal Party's poor image in some quarters.

She was even reputed to have told colleagues they were seen as a bunch of [“homophobic, anti-women, climate change deniers”](#);

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Her introduction of a women's economic security statement last year was another material achievement resisted by some as political correctness.

But in declaring her job's incompatibility with family life, there was an unmistakable note of resignation, even defeat in O'Dwyer's "choice". And coming from the minister most directly involved in remediating that problem for women, her resignation cannot help but reinforce the message that politics may well be no place for women.

Morrison's superficially virtuous support for the choices for women, was no help either - typical of much conservative sophistry around this whole issue.

Morrison isn't helping

Masquerading as a pro-choice feminist while endorsing a senior colleague's decision to give up her career for child-rearing and home duties takes some chutzpah.

An alternative approach might have been to lament her departure as symptomatic of a flawed representational system, acknowledge the failure of politics to renovate its male paradigm, and vow to change the culture in material ways.

It might even be called leadership.

For a government laced with longstanding (if undeclared) quotas for ministerial selection – think ratios in the ministry applied to the number of Libs to Nats, House to Senate, moderates to conservatives, and even between states – the blind spot over women's under-representation and the philosophical objection to corrective action (quotas) is all the more bizarre.

It is a mark of how far conservative Liberals have drifted from contemporary public attitudes and even their own philosophy that some would countenance re-nationalising of energy assets and building new coal-fired power stations before correcting a clear market imperfection within their own organisation.

Read more: [View from The Hill: Julie Bishop will be open to post-politics offers](#)

And with speculation that Julie Bishop could also withdraw from the 2019 field, the situation facing Morrison's Liberals threatens to deepen.

Through all of this, voters' views come second.

Not so long ago, Bishop was easily the most popular alternative to Malcolm Turnbull in voter land but such unrivalled public support was good for just 11 votes in the party room.

Mark Kenny 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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Liberals lose yet another high-profile woman, yet still no action on gender

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