

Australia can do more to attract and keep women in parliament – here are some ideas

Written by Brendan Churchill, Research Fellow in Sociology, University of Melbourne

The resignation of Kelly O'Dwyer, Federal Minister for Women, Jobs and Industrial Relations, tells us what we have known for some time: Australia's parliament is a hostile workplace for women and working mothers.

O'Dwyer's desire for a [bigger family](#) and more quality time with her young children reflects, in some respects, the challenges ordinary working mothers in Australia face everyday. It also highlights yet another example of the difficulties faced by women in politics.

As Liberal senator Linda Reynolds [wrote in an opinion piece](#) : O'Dwyer's resignation “ ...is not simply a gender issue. It is a parent issue”.

But for every [Tim Hammond](#) (the federal Labor Member for Perth who quit politics last year for family reasons) there is a Kelly O'Dwyer or a [Kate Ellis](#) .

Women by and large are still the primary caregivers in this country regardless of whether they are an MP or senator.

Read more: [The Liberal Party is failing women miserably compared to other democracies, and needs quotas](#)

Institutionally, Australia's parliament has [made significant progress](#) over the past decade to accommodate parents. Parliament House now has childcare services and a breastfeeding room off to the side of both chambers for new mothers.

Breastfeeding mothers can vote by proxy in the House of Representatives. And in 2017, former Greens Senator [Larissa Waters](#) became the first federal MP to breastfeed in parliament.

But there is still progress to be made. Parliament remains family-unfriendly. Sitting hours often extend well beyond childcare hours and sitting weeks are often scheduled during school holidays.

Fewer options than other working women

These issues affect all working parents but must surely impact heavily on parliamentarians who have to travel from their electorates to Canberra. Ordinary working mothers [often opt for part-time work](#) to manage the demands of work and family. This is because we haven't quite figured out how to help women and families best manage their competing workloads.

An MP or senator does not have the option of working part-time. While women politicians do take maternity leave, a part-time MP or senator might not meet community expectations about politicians and service. We also know women in part-time work often end up feeling [more stressed](#) as they take on more domestic work or end up working outside of their set part-time hours.

But the idea of job sharing seems less remote. Historically, job sharing, which involves two people sharing what is normally a full-time role, has been seen as an alternative way for women to stay in the workforce. Some [preliminary research](#) in the UK suggests that might be a viable option for politicians. And [evidence](#) shows it works at the highest level of business, so this is perhaps one way parliaments can learn from the business community.

However, like all flexible working arrangements, job sharing cannot be seen as a solution or alternative for women alone – swapping the political sphere for the private. Male politicians with children would need to be encouraged to adopt these arrangements should they ever eventuate. And getting men to take up flexible working arrangements is [not always successful](#) as evidenced by policymakers' attempts to get new dads to take up parental leave.

Read more: [*Time pressure may be a better way to measure work-life balance*](#)

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As we enter the next decade, politicians, political parties and the parliament should consider how best to support working mothers (and fathers).

This must begin with a shift in culture. In her [resignation speech](#), former Liberal now Independent, Julia Banks, stated:

equal representation of men and women in this parliament is an urgent imperative which will create a culture change.

Advances towards equal representation are lopsided in the parliament. While Labor is on track to reach equal representation with almost half of its parliamentarians women, the Coalition's [ratio is only one in five](#)

. It's expected with O'Dwyer's resignation [along with recent announcements](#)

by [other women](#)

, female representation in the Liberal and National parties will be proportionally [lower](#) than when John Howard left office in 2007.

Regardless of political persuasion, fewer female MPs can only slow progress towards gender equality.

Tim Hammond's experience is an example of the toll experienced by fathers in federal parliament, but this is still the exception rather than the rule. Greater female representation will help shift cultural ideas about women and working mothers.

But shifts in ideas about working fathers in parliament are needed too. Images of male politicians working with their children at their side is a rarity saved only for election campaigns.

Like ordinary working women, female politicians need not only supportive workplaces but

supportive families. Former Queensland [premier Anna Bligh](#) relied on her partner and mother for support during her time in office. However, not every female politician has a Greg Withers or a [Clarke Gayford](#), partner of New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Arden, to care for their children while their partner gives a speech to the United Nations.

Ideas from other nations

Jacinda Arden provides one example of greater flexibility for mothers who are parliamentarians. She has broken up her schedule into [three-hour slots](#) so she can breastfeed. But not every woman in parliament has as much control over her schedule as a prime minister.

New Zealand is perhaps leading the pack in making parliaments work for parents. Recently, the [Speaker of the New Zealand parliament](#) has sought to make it even more family-friendly with a raft of measures, including the installation of highchairs in the cafe and a playground.

Read more: [*It's only a baby, right? Prime ministers, women and parenthood*](#)

In Europe, things are also progressive with women politicians in the European Parliament – including most famously Italian MEP [Licia Ronzulli](#) – taking their children to parliamentary debates and meetings.

In the US, the [number of mothers](#) in congress has doubled following the mid-term elections in 2018, which saw a record number of women run for office. Last year, Tammy Duckworth of Illinois became the [first senator](#) to have a baby in office, which necessitated changes to allow a baby on the senate floor.

Only [ten women](#) have given birth while in Congress and of those, six in the last 11 years.

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The presence of children, especially mothers breastfeeding in parliamentary chambers, continues to be [worldwide news](#), suggesting it's still a novelty. Japanese local government member, Yuka Ogata, has a number of times [been forced](#) to leave the assembly as irritation grows around her demanding more family-friendly policies.

At the press conference announcing O'Dwyer's resignation, the prime minister said he supported:

[...] all women's choices. I want women to have more choices and all the independence that comes with that.

But choices are always made in the context of individuals' lives. This is especially true for women who are working mothers. To ensure they make the choice to enter and stay in parliament we must ensure these issues are addressed.

It's important parliament be made up of working mothers so policies and laws that affect families and in particular working women are informed by those who experience these challenges.

Brendan Churchill 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.

Authors: Brendan Churchill, Research Fellow in Sociology, University of Melbourne

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