

This article is part of a [series](#) examining the Coalition government's record on key issues while in power and what Labor is promising if it wins the 2019 federal election.

Women's rights and gender equity

Louise Chappell, Director of the Australian Human Rights Institute and Scientia Professor, Law Faculty, UNSW

For most of the Coalition's time in office, gender justice concerns have received scant attention across the board. Former Women's Minister Michaelia Cash, in fact, is probably better remembered for her [sexist slurs](#) on Bill Shorten's female staff than any major policy announcement.

Since stepping into the minister role in 2017, [Kelly O'Dwyer](#) has clearly worked to improve the government's profile and performance and attempted to develop a coherent policy agenda.

On her watch, the government met its goal of reaching gender parity on government boards and announced a A\$109 million [women's economic security package](#) focused on workforce participation, economic independence, and expanding women's earning potential. While this was welcome, [some](#) [commentators](#) criticised the relatively small funding package, especially given the scale of the problems it set out to address.

Read more: [The Liberals have a serious women problem – and it's time they took action to change it](#)

No matter who is elected, more work remains on women's rights and Indigenous issues

Written by Louise Chappell, Director of the Australian Human Rights Institute; Professor of Law, UNSW

Politically, the Coalition's emphasis on support for domestic violence survivors in the package was a sign it was still playing catch-up after it threatened to strip [A\\$35 million in funding](#) from frontline legal domestic violence services in the 2014 budget. Earlier this year, the Morrison government also committed to spending A\$328 million to implement the [National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and Their Children](#), a program commenced under the [Rudd and Gillard ALP governments](#).

Other women's issues have been more problematic for the Coalition. For instance, the [Parents Next program](#) has been the subject of a [Senate inquiry](#) over [allegations of discrimination](#) on the basis of sex, race and family type. Critics also point to the lack of concrete action on [women's homelessness](#). Reforms to the childcare system implemented in [2018](#), meanwhile, are proving a [bureaucratic nightmare](#) for families with insecure, unpredictable or contract-based jobs.

The Coalition government has also notably failed when it comes to increasing [the number of women](#) in its ranks.

Across both houses of parliament, women comprise just 22.9% of [Liberal Party members](#) and only 9.5% of National Party representatives. Women have also held a small proportion of senior [Cabinet](#) positions since 2013 (10% under Tony Abbott, 21% under Malcolm Turnbull, and currently 30% under Scott Morrison). In addition, both Coalition partners continue to [resist](#) the introduction of gender quotas for parliament.

What about Labor?

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These numbers should improve if Labor wins the May election. With women currently making up [46% of Labor's](#) numbers in parliament, the ALP is close to reaching its goal of gender parity. A strong swing to Labor may well help it reach its goal of 50-50 female representation – [or more](#)

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The ALP has already announced a detailed women's policy platform, claiming it will [put gender at the centre of decision-making](#)

. This includes the reintroduction of “

[gender policy machinery](#)

” to government, meaning Labor pledges to conduct a gender impact assessment on all policy decisions and cabinet submissions, and release an annual gender budget statement.

Read more: [**Australia can do more to attract and keep women in parliament – here are some ideas**](#)

Tanya Plibersek, the deputy leader and shadow women's minister, has also made several key announcements, including new measures to tackle the [gender superannuation gap](#) and increase childcare funding. Most controversially, the ALP has outlined a plan to deliver a [National Sexual and Reproductive Health Strategy](#), which will include decriminalising abortion and providing access to termination services.

While history shows that ALP governments tend to have a [stronger record](#) than Coalition governments in advancing women's rights, it would be wrong to be complacent. Past Labor governments have proved inconsistent on women's issues, for example, [cutting single parent pensions](#) and keeping women [asylum seekers in detention](#)

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This means Australian women must continue to put pressure on both sides of politics to fully realise their rights.

Indigenous rights

Lindon Coombes, Industry Professor (Indigenous Policy), University of Technology Sydney

The Coalition has had a clear focus on employment and business development as the key platforms for improving Indigenous outcomes over both terms of its government, but its top-down approach and failure to genuinely work with Indigenous peoples and organisations has led to few successes.

One of the key components of the government's policies – and one of the most controversial – has been the [Community Development Program \(CDP\)](#), instituted in 2015. Although the program was championed by the Coalition as a key way of improving rural employment in Indigenous communities, it immediately came under fire and became the subject of a [Senate inquiry in 2017](#).

According to testimony at the inquiry, the success rate in getting Indigenous people into full-time or part-time work has only been about 10%. The program has also been overly punitive, with more than [350,000 fines issued to some 33,000 participants](#) for lateness or missed appointments.

Read more: [***Why the government was wrong to reject an Indigenous 'Voice to Parliament'***](#)

Another contentious Coalition-led initiative has been the so-called “[cashless welfare card](#)”, which has been [trialled in various locations](#) across the country. The government claims the card will reduce domestic violence and crime, and improve the welfare of children and families. But an

[evaluation of a similar program in the Northern Territory](#)

could not find “any substantive evidence of the program having significant changes relative to its key policy objectives”.

[Equally controversial](#) has been the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS), one of Tony Abbott’s key policy initiatives. In 2016 a [Senate inquiry](#) found that less than half of successful applications had gone to Indigenous organisations the year before. Last November, it was [also revealed](#) that A\$500,000 of IAS money had been given to non-Indigenous industry groups to counter Aboriginal land claims.

Perhaps most disappointing to Indigenous peoples, however, has been the lack of support in the Coalition government for the Uluru Statement’s call for an Indigenous voice to Parliament. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull [dismissed the statement](#) as an unworkable attempt to create a “third chamber” of parliament. His successor, Scott Morrison, [echoed this view](#) after coming to power.

What about Labor?

While both parties are committed to Constitutional recognition of Indigenous peoples, the ALP has promised to [hold a referendum](#) on enshrining an Indigenous voice to parliament in the Constitution. Labor has also pledged to establish a [Makarrata Commission](#) to supervise a truth-telling and agreement-making process formed between governments and Indigenous peoples.

It appears unlikely the Coalition will support either measure as part of its platform.

Read more: [***With a seat on the UN Human Rights Council, Australia must fix its record on Indigenous rights***](#)

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The ALP has also [guaranteed it would comply](#) with the Racial Discrimination Act (RDA) and affirmed its support for the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#)

. The Coalition, meanwhile, has long expressed its desire to amend or abolish the RDA and has been largely silent on the UN declaration.

The ALP has also [committed](#) to support the [National Congress of Australia's First Peoples](#) as the peak national representative body for Indigenous peoples after it had its [funding slashed](#) by the Coalition.

Both parties have aligned behind the [Closing the Gap targets](#) , but the ALP has added [three extra targets](#) : to increase Indigenous participation in higher education, improve access to services for Indigenous peoples with disabilities, and reduce incarceration and victimisation rates in Indigenous communities.

Louise Chappell receives funding from the Australian Research Council.

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Read more <http://theconversation.com/no-matter-who-is-elected-more-work-remains-on-women-rights-and-indigenous-issues-114610>