

Sarah Henderson wins her way back to parliament

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Former assistant minister Sarah Henderson, who lost her marginal seat of Corangamite at the election, will return to parliament after winning preselection for a Victorian Senate vacancy on Sunday.

She takes the spot left by former minister Mitch Fifield, who quit to become ambassador to the United Nations.

Henderson had the support of Prime Minister Scott Morrison. Treasurer Josh Frydenberg, who is deputy Liberal leader, lobbied hard for her.

She beat Greg Mirabella, husband of former senior Liberal MP Sophie Mirabella, 234 to 197 after other runners were eliminated.

Henderson, 55, a moderate, was assistant minister for social services, housing and disability services under Morrison.

After her win, Henderson thanked Morrison and Frydenberg for their support and promised to “hit the ground running”.

The NSW Liberal party has yet to choose a replacement for Arthur Sinodinos, who will leave the Senate soon to become ambassador to the United States.

Parliament returns on Monday after the winter break for a fortnight sitting, with the legislation including the extension of the rollout of the cashless welfare card and the introduction of a trial drug testing of 5000 new recipients of Newstart and the Youth Allowance. The government has previously not had the numbers to pass the trialling of drug testing.

The government is also proposing mandatory sentencing as part of a legislative crackdown on

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paedophiles. Attorney-General Christian Porter said last week 28% of child sex offenders convicted of federal offences in 2018-19 did not spend a single day in jail. Labor is against mandatory sentencing in principle, but has indicated it would agree to it when it is tied to a measure the ALP supports.

The government is casting items on its current legislative agenda as tests for Labor. Morrison, speaking to the NSW Liberal state council on Saturday, said:

I like to set them tests when we come back to parliament. Because I'm just trying to help. I know they're struggling to work out who they are and what they're about so I just thought I should ask them a few questions every time we come to parliament.

In relation to the cashless card, "The test is on them next week - whose side are they on when it comes to getting people off welfare and into work?"

On drug testing, "I want to help people get off welfare and into work. And drugs and substance abuse is an obstacle to that."

Labor leader Anthony Albanese dismissed the government's agenda as looking for distractions from economic issues.

He said there was no evidence the cashless welfare card had made any significant improvement on jobs. As for the drug tests, "are we really going to start drug testing those people over the age of 55 who are on Newstart?"

What I want to see from the government this week is a plan for economic growth and a plan for jobs, because that's the main game that is facing Australia at the moment. The fact is, it's out of touch.

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Jackie Lambie, who holds a crucial crossbench vote in the Senate, said she had been a “big supporter” of the cashless card from the beginning.

She would not have a problem with the drug testing trials as long as anyone else who received money from the public purse - including parliamentarians and bureaucrats - was also subject to them. MPs and bureaucrats should “lead by example,” she said.

She had some concerns about mandatory sentencing. “It bothers me a little bit” because in some cases there might be mitigating circumstances.

Also in parliament this fortnight is legislation to protect farmers against trespassing activists.

But the government does not plan to push the medevac repeal legislation this fortnight. Lambie, who will hold the deciding vote on this, has made it clear she wants to see the Senate inquiry report, which will not be finished until October.

Pauline Hanson in a Sunday statement likened “Lambie’s sluggishness in supporting the medevac repeal bill to first calling for an official enquiry before firefighters can tackle raging bushfires.”

Hanson said she was keen to see the medevac repeal bill passed this week. Pointing also to the delay in the deportation of the Tamil family, whose case is before the federal court. Hanson said:

We seem to be losing control of our own country, so let’s repeal the medevac laws and deport all those who are ruled ineligible for refugee status.

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

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