

Rob Mitchell, Damian Drum speak on Prime Minister's response to treatment of women

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Women's Health Goulburn North East chief executive Amanda Kelly has called for State Budget funding to address inequality issues for women.

By Aleksandra Bliszczyk

POLITICAL and social equality leaders have criticised Prime Minister Scott Morrison for not taking action soon enough to address the ever-increasing allegations of sexual assault and harassment in Federal Parliament.

Mr Morrison yesterday announced several changes to ministerial roles, adding one extra female MP to federal cabinet, taking the total to seven female ministers.

Mr Morrison last week acknowledged the 'disgraceful acts' of a Liberal advisor who was sacked after the revelations of videos of unidentified Coalition advisors allegedly masturbating on the desks of female MPs.

"As much as it has been a topic of discussion here, and around the country specifically in relation to these disgraceful acts, it is something that has been the lived experience of Australian women for a very long time, and I welcome the spotlight that is now being placed on this," Mr Morrison said.

The comments were made weeks after Mr Morrison came under fire for saying he realised the severity of the rape allegations against a Liberal advisor made by former advisor Brittany Higgins, when his wife Jenny told him to 'think about it as a father first'.

Ms Higgins' rape allegations triggered an avalanche of allegations of sexual assault and harassment within Federal Parliament and the Liberal Party, as well as a 1988 rape allegation against the then Attorney-General Christian Porter.

Harassment and bullying allegations against Liberal backbencher Andrew Laming formed him to say he won't stand for re-election, were then followed by Victorian Nationals MP Anne Webster lodging a complaint against a man who allegedly harassed her in Parliament House.

Tasmanian Liberal Party member Sue Hickey also accused Liberal Senator Eric Abetz of 'slut-shaming' Ms Higgins and dismissing Mr Porter's rape allegations.

Women's Health Goulburn North East chief officer Amanda Kelly said Mr Morrison's responses to the allegations and to protesters, after he declined an invitation to attend the March 4 Justice against sexual assault and harassment, had demonstrated he did not take the issues seriously.

"The culture in Parliament House doesn't support a safe and respectful work environment, and it appears that the prime minister isn't very keen on doing anything about that. He's not taking people's concerns around this seriously," she said.

Ms Kelly said unequal treatment across society would continue unless leaders led by example.

"I think that it sets the scene for, for example, schoolboys singing misogynist chants on trams and thinking there's no problem with that. It sets the example that in other work places that

really this stuff isn't that bad and that people can get away with behaviour that's not being managed properly," she said.

Member for Nicholls Nationals MP Damian Drum said the alleged toxic culture was not a culture he had seen, identifying the behaviour as 'foreign to most members of Parliament', but calling for a 'crackdown' on 'bad behaviour'.

"We need to 100 per cent make sure that this work environment is 100 per cent safe for everybody and that people act with a sense of respect and responsibility around this place," he said.

Mr Drum said a cultural change needed to evolve 'in a fluid, natural way' and wasn't something that could be legislated.

But Minister for McEwen Rob Mitchell said Mr Morrison's actions set a negative example for Australians.

"I think it's out of step with the rest of Australia," he said.

"You can find the roughest person around and they would still say 'nah, this is wrong'. This bloke's supposed to have been the leader, and he should've done something from day one."

Mr Drum said parliament needed better human resources processes for victims to report incidents and feel supported, while Mr Mitchell said a code of conduct and an independent review of the allegations were critical to changing the culture in parliament.

But Ms Kelly said ad-hoc commissions into single incidents rarely fixed a systemic issue.

"What we want is parliament to be held to the highest standard around gender equality and that needs to be embedded not only in their policy but in their law and in their practices. They need to address that all of those levels, and if it takes women and allies marching in the street to do that, then we'll keep doing that," she said.
