

Sunrise (Seven Network) with Natalie Barr - 29 March

Well Queensland Liberal-National MP Andrew Laming won't recontest the next federal election. It follows a string of allegations by women, involving online harassment and taking an inappropriate photo of a woman while she was bending over. Mr Laming admits his behaviour towards women needs to be addressed and is taking leave from his role to seek counselling.

[Excerpt]

ANDREW LAMING: Not just to be a better MP, but to be a deeper and more emphatic person, and to better understand the implications of what my actions are on other people. It certainly hasn't been demonstrated that that's the case in recent days.

[End of excerpt]

NATALIE BARR: Multiple female MPs have called for his immediate resignation, but the Treasurer says Andrew Laming was elected by his community and will continue to serve them in parliament. If Mr Laming left now, the Federal Government's majority in the Lower House would be under threat. For more, I'm joined by Environment Minister Sussan Ley. Morning to you. Would Andrew Laming be sacked if the Government had a stronger majority?

SUSSAN LEY: Morning. Well, the point is that Andrew Laming is sent to Canberra by his community, I expect the phones in his electorate office are running hot this morning and there's a lot of dissatisfaction with his behaviour. He stepped away, he said he's going to honestly consider his future, I think that's a good thing.

NATALIE BARR: So, the rest of the country, if this happened to them, if they'd took a photo of a woman bending over, they took a photo of her skirt, they're telling us they would be sacked. What's your response to that?

SUSSAN LEY: I understand that, and as I said, I think the phones will be running hot in Andrew Laming's electorate office and he may listen to the voices at the end of those calls because it is those people that, if you like, employ him, Nat, they sent him to Canberra, just as my constituents here along the Murray River in Western New South Wales send me to Canberra. So, it's a curious workplace in that sense, and that's one of the things that the Sex Discrimination Commissioner is looking at and how we in the building relate to everything that happens within and outside. We must never lose sight of the fact that we're sent to Canberra by the people who represent us and our standards should be higher than theirs. We want an exemplary workplace.

NATALIE BARR: But the next election could be a year away, and he is still there getting his pay packet. He's also been accused of trolling women, hiding in the bushes and taking photographs. As a woman, how comfortable are you being part of a government who may take his vote in the next year?

SUSSAN LEY: Well, he's not coming to Canberra in the next few weeks. He's considering his future. And, I agree, Nat, I am not comfortable. That behaviour is appalling. That behaviour is- needs to be called out and it has. And he needs to seriously consider his future. And I come back to the people that - if you like - employ him, which are his constituents. They're the ones who voted for him at the last election, and he's obviously not coming back at the next one. And in the meantime, he's having a serious think about the next steps for him. All of that is entirely appropriate. But you're point into our workplace, in this debate, I'm looking at everyone's workplace and how we can lift the standards for women across Australia. Because when I came back from Canberra to my electorate last week, my goodness, I heard from women in every corner - rural industries, on the factory floor, in corporate New South Wales, all with their own stories. So my determination is about making their workplaces much

better than they currently are. That's what I'm focusing on and I'm, you know, I think like a lot of women in the Liberal Party, we're determined to get this done and get this done properly.

NATALIE BARR: Yep, and the spotlight is on that house up on the hill at the moment. The Prime Minister's handling of this culture crisis in Canberra is evident in the latest Newspoll today. Scott Morrison's approval dropping four points to just 52 per cent. It is the lowest in a year. Do you think he's missed a chance to show strong leadership by sacking Laming? Because this issue, Laming's issue, isn't taken into consideration in this poll today.

SUSSAN LEY: I think the Prime Minister is showing strong leadership. But he's asking all of us to step up, and as I said, the women in the party. And I want to see the women in every workplace step up and stop playing nicely, stop sitting quietly when you hear something that you don't like and that you don't think is right, speak up and speak out. Now the Prime Minister has issued that instruction to all of us, if you like. He wants the women in our parliament to step up. They're doing that; they're having their voices heard. I love that. I love that strength. I love that determination. I want to be part of that movement for change. Yes, I know you're focusing on one appalling behaved MP, but let's look at everyone's workplace and the stories that we're hearing and the dissatisfaction that we know is there and the real resolve for change. So people in Parliament spent a lot of time talking about themselves, I understand that, it is important that we get our workplace right, but we need to get everyone's workplace right as well.

NATALIE BARR: Sussan Ley, we thank you for your time this morning.

SUSSAN LEY: Thank you.

Sky Afternoon Agenda with Kieran Gilbert – 29 March

Let's bring in now one of the Cabinet ministers, the Minister for Environment, Sussan Ley, joins me. The female presence in Cabinet expanded, the Foreign Minister and Minister for Women Marise Payne described as the prime minister for women. What do you make of the reshuffle? Do you welcome it?

SUSSAN LEY: Well, Kieran, I'm hoping you can hear on my Skype connection in my Albury office. I'm delighted that the women's agenda is now well and truly being run by women. And when you look at the list, you can see that talent. And it fits with their existing portfolios making it really clear that women want to see the decisions that affect their lives being made by women in positions of power. So, this is a great step forward.

KIERAN GILBERT: So in that sense, you're talking about Anne Ruston, Jane Hume, where the responsibilities for women's issues are spelt out and that Marise Payne becomes the leader of the women in cabinet. Is that a good structure?

SUSSAN LEY: Yes, indeed. In the same way that Marise Payne has been the leader of the women in our parliament - so, I have the advantage of seeing what happens and being part of what happens behind the scenes, and the way that Marise Payne brought together women across our parties on an ongoing basis since well before the last election, and we achieved great results with women coming into parliament at that election, makes her ideally suited not just to be a lead Minister for Women, but to bring together so many other initiatives that makes sense when it comes to women's policy.

Of course, every minister, including all of the men at our cabinet table, should have regard to women's issues. But this really does cover the key things that matter to women across the country. And as the only rural and regional woman in cabinet, well, actually, I'm delighted that Melissa Price is coming back to join me. But as a rural and regional woman in cabinet, I will always look at the particular circumstances of rural and regional women because they often are different. And certainly, when it comes to recent events, they've been having their say to me loud and clear out here in western New South Wales.

KIERAN GILBERT: We had more reminders of why the culture needs to change, Anne Webster saying she was harassed by one of her fellow Coalition MPs. Can you believe that? And should that individual be named?

SUSSAN LEY: Unfortunately, I can. Whether the individual is named is up to that individual and also to Anne Webster. So, I certainly shan't be asking her. I think she's dealt with it very well. And yes, I can believe it, Kieran, because across the Parliament, you can see people slipping back into their old ways just in their habits and conversation. And it does take someone to pull them up. It does take someone to say, well, hang on a minute, that's not how we should be speaking to each other. And that's not the way we should present ourselves as a professional workplace. We're not going to change overnight. But my goodness, after the Sex Discrimination Commissioner's review - and Kate Jenkins is doing an outstanding job - this is going to be a very different workplace. But, hey, that's not really what this debate is about. It's about every workplace across Australia, in the small corners of the small towns that I represent, in Indigenous communities, in places where women just haven't got a voice. It's about bringing their voice in whatever aspect it is needed to sometimes shout really loud, get that right. So, yes, we need to lead the way. But we also want to make sure that we have respect at work across Australia.

KIERAN GILBERT: Is Andrew Laming protected by the fact that the numbers are so tight in the parliament, because it seems to me the Prime Minister would cut him loose in an instant if HE had a few more numbers in the parliament?

SUSSAN LEY: Well, I think the principle of the Westminster system of democracy, which by the way, is the Westminster system that has given us an institution that is so clumsy when it comes to human resources - might be okay in other respects. But that institution means that a member of parliament is elected by their constituents. And I've got about 140,000 voters in my electorate, and I should first and foremost be accountable to them. Dr Laming is first and foremost accountable to his constituents. I expect that quite a few of them are calling his electorate office this morning and they- each and every one of his employers, and he should be listening very carefully to the messages that they're delivering.

KIERAN GILBERT: When you look at the optics of the Parliament - Andrew Clennell and I were just discussing those pictures in the Parliament - you can see the many more women on the Labor side for the Liberal side of the House of Reps. Is it time to say, look, enough's enough, you've got to do something structural, whether it be quotas or whatever else?

SUSSAN LEY: I've called for a 40 per cent quota. I actually called for that in 2018, and the dynamic that meant that we only had about 10 per cent of females in the Liberal Party in the House of Representatives, which was the thing that drove me to completely change my mind on quotas. We did very well at the last election, but that dynamic is still there. So, we have to do better. We have to do it in a way that starts early, that gives women who have a chance to shine in their local communities the recognition that they deserve and give them sort of the information, I guess, that Parliament works this way, the mentoring, the closeness, the cooperation, the support of another group of women and all of that leading in. But we've talked about that a lot, and state divisions have talked about that a lot. Ultimately, these are decisions for state divisions. But I think you do need at some stage a hard target to actually drive change.

KIERAN GILBERT: One of your parliamentary colleagues - a male, in fact - said to me, some of your colleagues, older males don't want to give up the power. Is that fair?

SUSSAN LEY: Well, power's an interesting concept, Kieran. I mean, we're not there to experience power, we're there to serve. We're there to serve the Australian people. Anyone who comes into Parliament and thinks about it in terms of the power they have, I mean, that really annoys me. Every day we get up and we should remind ourselves that we're there to serve the people. Now, that takes more than 24 hours a day. If you've got time to play games outside that, then good luck to you. But maybe you need a hard lesson about what we're really there for.

KIERAN GILBERT: I know you've got to run. I appreciate your time on a busy day. Minister for Environment, Sussan Ley, thanks.

SUSSAN LEY: Thank you.

Afternoon Briefing with Patricia Karvelas – 29 March

PATRICIA KARVELAS: The Environment Minister Sussan Ley joins me now from Albury Airport. Welcome to the Programme.

SUSSAN LEY: Lovely to be on the programme PK

PATRICIA KARVELAS: This new cabinet taskforce on women has been announced. What do you hope this will achieve?

SUSSAN LEY: I wanted to change the workforce and the working landscape for every single Australian woman who has experienced challenges in their workplace. I also want to see it give women the confidence. Too many times they've sat at the board room table, hey they may have even sat in a parliamentary committee in the building we work in. They may have thought something and not expressed it. I want this to give every woman everywhere the confidence to speak up. Because often what instinctively comes to mind is right for them, it's right for the Australian women that they represent, and it needs to be heard.

PATRICIA KARVELAS: What should be its reporting period?

SUSSAN LEY: It should be ongoing. It's part of our ministry, it's part of Government business, it's part of all the things we're doing. Now the first order of business is to respond to the Respect at Work report done by sex discrimination commissioner Kate Jenkins. And of course, she's looking at our workplace in parliament house as well, and she's doing that in a very detailed and thorough way. So, you will start to see broad responses across the Australians community as a whole. [Audio skip] what we do in our workplace, PK. Because what I've always said is at the end of Kate Jenkins process, it needs to look very different than it does now.

PATRICIA KARVELAS: The Prime Minister said Marise Payne would be like the Prime Minister for Women. Doesn't that risk him looking like the Prime Minister for Men?

SUSSAN LEY: Not at all. I think we do need an additional focus for women, an additional lens, if you like, on everyone's policy for women and the effect that the policy has on them. Now, we know that they're not isolated as a homogeneous group. You get a group of women in a room, and they don't all agree. Which is fantastic. But they all come to the point to view that they have from a female perspective. And it's that female perspective that's been lacking, and that we are amping up today. And I think that's fantastic. And remember, we've got amazing and talented and persistent women on our backbench, and they'll all be part of this as well. Everyone needs to be part of this. Everyone who has something to say about women's policy.

PATRICIA KARVELAS: Last week, the Prime Minister says- said that he'd heard of women being overlook and talked over by men in meeting rooms and cabinets. When he said the word cabinets I thought – has that happened at his own cabinet?

SUSSAN LEY: Well, I can't speak for anyone else. If there's something that I want to say in cabinet, I say it. It's that sort of environment. You sit at the table, you're with your colleagues and you work hard. But I can honestly say that there would have been forums in the parliament where I've thought something and not expressed it. Over the years that I've been there. Probably in the earlier years, more particularly. And looking back, I wish I had said more. And I think there are women now in positions in our party and in our parliament. And they're not just members, they

could be staffers in offices who aren't giving way, if you like, to more senior, perhaps, male staffers in those same offices. But we need [Audio skip] more importantly, their voice matters.

PATRICIA KARVELAS: The independent senator Rex Patrick has said that today's reshuffle is essentially just a meaningless exercise because it reshuffles everyone. Two key ministers have actually retained cabinet roles even if they've changed. That's Christian Porter and Linda Reynolds. Hasn't the Prime Minister just basically reshuffled an existing group of people?

SUSSAN LEY: It's an existing team that has delivered well for Australia both in terms of our economic recovery out of COVID, and the myriad of other challenges that we face. What, I believe, the Prime Minister has done today is lift the role of women more broadly across the ministry, and by extension more broadly across the parliament. Now that was clearly missing. Look at the last six weeks. We've heard loud and clear. The point is, this isn't about us in our buildings, so much as every woman in every workplace across Australia. And every woman having the confidence that we're there for them, that we have their back, that when it comes to sexual harassment in their workplace, sometimes bordering on worse, that we are there for them with the policies that count. So, you will see actions come out of today. And they've been building over the last few weeks as well. And you will see change. And you will see responses that women can relate to. And indeed, families everywhere. For my part, Patricia I live in rural and regional Australia. I've lived a lifetime in this environment. I've walked in the shoes, literally, of many of the women who've attended the marches. And I know what's in their heart, because I have felt it myself. And that's what I want to do. I want to bring that commitment to the table for rural and regional women.

PATRICIA KARVELAS: Have you been angry about the, sort of, sexism claims, sexual harassment, sexual abuse that you've heard. And do you feel it acutely on a personal level?

SUSSAN LEY: Yes, I have been angry. And I have been upset. And that has only served to make me more determined. [Audio skip] It should never be about ourselves and what we might have experienced. Even though those experiences do bear relevance and they inform our thinking. But for me, it's on behalf of the women that I talk to. You know, I have a platform. I have a voice. I have a level of influence. But I meet women all over Australia, in small corners and small country towns. I meet indigenous women who are so quiet, but – and I'm assuming – but could be so powerful. And I want them to get something out of the awful last six weeks, and looking forward. I want to do this for them.

PATRICIA KARVELAS: You mentioned the Kate Jenkins report being the, sort of, chief focus immediately. What other things would you like to be able to achieve say, within a year?

SUSSAN LEY: Well, we know that the conviction rate for sexual assault is about 1.5 per cent. We also know that those convictions take place in state parliaments. But there are other occasions where we have helped and supported when it came to family relationships, children's services. We've supported some of that activity at the state level, and I think we need to think about ways we can do that. And Senator Stoker is admirably equipped to undertake that work. And it will be a conversation with all of the women in the Parliament. But women who make their way to the courts system by themselves, unsupportive, with no advocate, with no one there for them, find it incredibly difficult. And, you know, the system, let's face it, is stacked against them. What about those women? How can we demonstrate how committed we are to doing something about sexual harassment and sexual violence? Well, we can be there for those women, and we can find ways to work with our state governments to be there for those women.

PATRICIA KARVELAS: So, does that mean law reform, in your view, is necessary?

SUSSAN LEY: Look, everything will make its way through the processes. And as I said, I'm very confident in Senator Amanda Stoker with her detailed legal background on these things. Of course, national summit, that's terrific, and that's overdue because of COVID. But it could already have happened had it not been for COVID. And the sorts of conversations at that summit will be, I'm sure, about how we support women who are victims of violence. And they are not some isolated group that no one sees or encounters. They are real and they are with us, and they walk everywhere we walk, and they want and demand action. And look, to be honest, a conviction rate of 1.5 per cent is—it's shameful. And that's one area of change. So, I hope I'm indicating that, Patricia, as something that I'm passionate about from what I see in my rural and regional communities. But there are many other aspects when it comes to women's economic security. Marise Payne provided a record package of funding in the last Women's Economic Security Statement, and that's starting to make a difference for women. And there's always more work to do.

PATRICIA KARVELAS: Why should Andrew Laming stay in the Parliament until next election when he's been accused of harassing multiple women, including an allegation of upskirting?

SUSSAN LEY: Dr Manning's behaviour has been disgraceful, it has been disgusting, and it shouldn't happen. And he has stepped right away from his current activities to reflect on that. He's made that very clear. He's employed by the people who elected him in the Electorate of Bowman. I suggest that if anyone is unhappy with his performance, they get on the phone as one of the constituents that effectively employs their local member, and has their say. You know, I'm in Albury where my electorate offices. People ring my phone every day, and I listen to them very carefully, because primarily, we are elected by the people who send us to Canberra; something we should never forget. And whose behalf we could take action.

PATRICIA KARVELAS: [Interrupts] Okay. So, if they want to by-election- if they contact him and say they want to by-election, should it happen?

SUSSAN LEY: Well, it's up to- I'm not going to step into their shoes say to Andrew: I'll pick up the phone and talk to him directly. I don't communicate with my colleagues over the media.

PATRICIA KARVELAS: [Talks over] Have you called him?

SUSSAN LEY: But I simply make the point- I haven't. I simply make the point that it's his electorate that sends him to Canberra, and his electorate ultimately has a lot of power over what happens next. Now, he's already acknowledged that his career is over and he's not contesting the next election. That's a pretty heavy price. He's going away to reflect on the things that he's done. Let's see what he says at the end of that.

PATRICIA KARVELAS: Well, I'll tell you what he said today. He's on mental health leave, but he did an interview, which is odd if he's on leave. And he says his online behaviour has been reinvented into harassment. What do you make of that?

SUSSAN LEY: Well, those are points that he's made.

PATRICIA KARVELAS: [Talks over] Do you agree with them?

SUSSAN LEY: What I don't want to do is get- well, on the face of it, no, I don't. But what I don't want to do is make any of these debates about one person or one set of events – important though they might be – I want to widen this, I want to broaden it, and I want to make everyone feel relevant

to the future in terms of how we deal with these issues, whether it be online, whether it be in the workplace, whether you be a child at school or an older woman struggling with our economic security and feeling dreadful about your circumstances. So, you know, all of these issues matter. But the most important thing we can do as Members of Parliament is focus on the people who sent us here to represent them and to do that in a way that works every single hour of the day for them.

PATRICIA KARVELAS: Sarah Henderson says she's not comfortable being in the party room with him. Do you agree? Do you feel comfortable being in the party room with him?

SUSSAN LEY: Well, I won't be in the party room with him, because we won't be sitting until the May session. And I'm sure that I will revisit my expectations after he comes back from leave and hear what he has to say.

PATRICIA KARVELAS: Okay, what do you mean by that? Like you need to- what do you think in terms of his shift to feel comfortable around him?

SUSSAN LEY: Oh, look, it's not a question of me being satisfied by his shift or what I might think. He's being given a chance to reflect on his behaviour. He needs to do that. And I think he'll report back to the party as a whole. Those are matters for him. I mean, they really are. And they're a matter for his constituents, because if they have strong feelings about this, they should call his office and they should express those feelings.

PATRICIA KARVELAS: Just finally, former Liberal staffer Rachelle Miller has engaged lawyers to bring a workplace harassment suit against the now Education Minister, Alan Tudge, who she works for, and Michaelia Cash, who has actually been appointed the Attorney-General. Is it appropriate she becomes Attorney-General if she's about to be essentially taken to court by this woman?

SUSSAN LEY: Well, I welcome Michaelia's appointment as Attorney-General, and I think she'll do a fine job. Issues relating to workplace harassment or claims within workplaces, quite rightly, I should not reflect on those. They belong in the court action. They belong in the workplace. They belong...

PATRICIA KARVELAS: [Talks over] But isn't it a conflict of interest?

SUSSAN LEY: ...in Fair Work Australia. No, I don't believe it is, Patricia. And as I said, I really welcome Michaelia to the portfolio. She would do an outstanding job. She has already, acting in that position. And she's going to be, I think, the second female Attorney-General we've had in our history. And I'm very proud of that achievement.

PATRICIA KARVELAS: Thank you so much for joining us, Minister.

SUSSAN LEY: Thank you.

The Conversation podcast with Michelle Grattan – 29 March

Sussan Ley, the Minister for Environment, represents Senator Marise Payne, who's Minister for Women in the House of Representatives. In opposition, Ley was briefly shadow minister for the status of women, and she's been in Parliament for two decades. So, she's seen the culture of the place at close quarters for a very long time. A former commercial pilot and air traffic controller with a masters in tax law and experience working in shearing sheds as a farmhand and cook, Sussan Ley had a broad life experience before she entered Parliament, for the regional seat of Farrer in southern New South Wales.

Sussan Ley, as a woman working in Parliament, how do you feel about the culture of this place of Parliament House and how did you feel when you first heard Brittany Higgins allege that she'd been raped and now claims of staff orgies and disgusting acts?

SUSSAN LEY: I feel overwhelmingly that the culture of this place has got to change. That everyone has to be part of that change, that what happened to Brittany clearly was appointed towards that. Other events and other behaviours that we've come to hear about are all part of that. I feel in many ways it was a wakeup call to every person in this building and, you know, I examined my own thoughts about this workplace very closely before reflecting further that I also have to be part of this change.

MICHELLE GRATTAN: Were you aware of any of these things happening?

SUSSAN LEY: Not at all, not at all and that's –

MICHELLE GRATTAN: [Talks over] I don't mean just the Brittany Higgins thing. You obviously weren't aware of that. But the whole bad behaviour?

SUSSAN LEY: It's not just the case that I was aware of the details. But of course, there is talk over the years of behaviour that you don't really want to know more about, even though it's talked about - it's never talked about directly to me, I want to make that very clear. I have always said to myself, I don't listen to gossip, I don't listen to people talking about other people in a derogatory way. It's a funny thing, Michelle, when I was Health Minister, I met a pharmaceutical company and the CEO said to me: if anyone speaks in a derogatory term about anyone else in the organisation, they get the sack. And I thought, wow, that's pretty big and I said, they get any warnings? No, he said, they get the sack. He said, our workplace culture has changed dramatically. But my view is I don't listen to derogatory conversation. I don't want to hear gossip. I don't tune into it. So, in a way, the gossip has become the reality. I didn't tune into it because I don't like it, but we all have a responsibility to interrogate what really has been going on and we all have a responsibility to say, what's the truth? Shine the light and then turn the corner.

MICHELLE GRATTAN: Because critics would say, if a politician says they don't listen to the gossip, you can see that or interpret that as walking the other side of the street, can't you?

SUSSAN LEY: No, I wouldn't agree with that, because if it was brought to my attention or it happened in my office or one of my staff came to see me about it, or one of my colleagues said: look, I want you to know this, totally different category. But the 'he said she said, of course', I'm not going to involve myself in being in the middle of trying to work something out that is unrelated to the work that I'm doing or the people that I encounter.

MICHELLE GRATTAN: Over the two decades that you've been a woman in Parliament, have you personally felt that you've been subjected to sexist treatment?

SUSSAN LEY: No, I haven't and I can honestly say that. But that doesn't mean I would invalidate the experiences of any of my colleagues or the staff or indeed, anyone who works in this building who says that they have. Because we know it happens. We know it happens in workplaces and I said earlier, I've questioned myself, my own response to things I may have seen and heard, my own understanding of what sexual harassment is and, you know, conversations I've had with constituents and family members and friends, because so many people are talking about this. And what I think is happening is that what used to be explicit in a workplace has now become implicit. So, it's been driven underground. When I started in male dominated industries, it was all very obvious - somebody would say something in front of the whole workplace to you and you just copped it or you didn't. Or, you know, somebody would make inappropriate physical contact and you just copped it or you didn't. But the fact that we don't see that so obviously around us doesn't mean it's not happening and that's one of the clear take outs from all of this, that younger women - and often it is younger women in this building - are not experiencing what I experienced. But the dynamic is still there, it's just not so clear.

MICHELLE GRATTAN: What about discrimination, though? Not acts of harassment or whatever, but do you feel that you've been subject to discrimination as a political woman?

SUSSAN LEY: I don't. I've always taken the view that my contributions from my head, I suppose, not anything else about me and my voice will carry me where I need to go in my professional life, and I think they always have. I've never thought about it in terms of how my gender or how I look or don't look and I don't know whether others have. I can't obviously say that, but I've never felt that. I felt confident that I can use my own abilities that have nothing to do with gender to achieve what I've wanted to achieve, which is not everything. But to the extent that I have achieved, that's what's got me there.

MICHELLE GRATTAN: What are people in your electorate saying about the last few weeks? What's the feedback you're getting, both about the particular issues affecting women and about the whole chaos that seems to have surrounded the Government in politics?

SUSSAN LEY: The message that is coming out of here is one of chaos and dysfunction, and I really, really regret that. But, what my electorate are saying is different. I mean, communities respond to these things differently. I represent and I don't like to use stereotypes, but conservative, middle aged, men who work in rural industries and some of them have expressed bewilderment to me. We don't want our girls out late at night. Why can't girls understand that they shouldn't be drinking too much or wearing dresses that are too revealing? What's wrong with that? And that sort of bewilderment and sort of trying to cover that gulf of, well, where I know we are and where, you know, the whole gender debate has moved so far on from that view. And yet, everyone in society sees this through their own perspective and their own life experience and their own community. So, there's a whole piece of work, I think, and work's probably not the right word, but there's - I'm glad of the conversations, put it that way, because when I say back to those fellows, you know, and of course they're my constituents and I respect them. Yes, but, think about what the actions of the other person are, don't think about what the actions of the woman are, think about what the actions of the man in this situation are. How can you possibly excuse any of that? And how can it really even relate to anything that the woman is doing? I actually think they'll look at it differently, but the conversation has never happened in their kitchen table. So, there's a good aspect of this, people are talking about it.

MICHELLE GRATTAN: But, of course, the other half of your voters are women and what are they saying down in Farrer?

SUSSAN LEY: Women have, if you like, tuned into the march, the conversation, the experience, and have really seen it as an opportunity to have their say. So, I'm not getting people ringing my electorate office, but I know people are talking about it. And I know when I see them, women, it's the first thing they say to me. They don't say it in front of anyone. They, you know, might see me in a corner, or might see me coming into the room, and they just might come up to me and they'll have something to say. And it often relates to their experience, and it often relates to them having started to think about things differently, just the way many of us have. And it always relates to gender based sexual harassment or sexual assault. I don't say it always does, but that's the prevailing comeback that people, women, in my electorate are talking to me about.

They understand it. You know, they understand sexual harassment. They understand sexual assault. They understand the difficulties women have faced for many years, put in difficult positions where they've sort of buttoned it all up, or swept it all under the table, or said to themselves, look, it really doesn't matter that much, you know, I got over it. Was it really a crime? Maybe it wasn't. These things just happen and we all deal with it. They're actually saying wrong, wrong, wrong. And I wish I'd spoken up, and I want others to speak up, and I don't want this to happen to women any more.

MICHELLE GRATTAN: Were there any marches in your electorate?

SUSSAN LEY: There was a small one in QE2 Square in Albury, it was very small. But I said this in the Parliament, you know, more than once that that march wasn't about the people who turned out on the day, it was about the people who were there in spirit. And there were many of them in many corners of my electorate - women on farms, women who are powerless in their relationships because they wouldn't even be able to talk about these things at their kitchen table. Or in some cases, you know, women who aren't allowed to leave the house because of the nature of their personal relationships. There were women silently cheering this from everywhere.

MICHELLE GRATTAN: Now, you've spoken up for Liberal party quotas. A number of people in the party, a majority, I think probably in the Liberal party, are still against quotas, and that includes some female MPs. Where do you think this debate stands at the moment?

SUSSAN LEY: Well, I think that it stands in a different place from where it's ever been. And I, in about 2018, spoke up about quotas when it was a journalist who said to me from the Press Gallery: Do you realise how odd your party looks on your side of the House. At that stage we had, you know, maybe three women - myself, Lucy Wicks, Julie Bishop. I don't know if there was even any more in the Liberal party, maybe a couple in the National party. But anyway, the overwhelming view was suits on that front bench.

And you can't be what you can't see. Can you vote for what you can't see? Can you accept that a political party represents your interests when the party doesn't look like you? I really, really took it on board then and started to talk about quotas - but not from the perspective of the states to be imposed, because our party divisions are the ones who preselect us and who actually have to implement this if they want to. So I said that then and I said: I'll take it to my party division elections, and COVID intervened. But it will come to various party divisions across the country, and I hope the women in our party organisations that have really wanted to see the debate on this - and in fact, I'm sure they will - will step up at that time and have the debate.

I mean, you can see both sides. Of course, I understand the, well, do you really want to be known as a quota woman? Do you really want to think that you only got there because you were a woman and that you had to be chosen over a man, and all that sort of stuff? But I think we- I mean, I've got responses to all that, but I understand that that's part of the argument. I think we've moved on from that. Nobody's

suggesting that incompetent women would ever come through the system - we've got plenty of competent women - they're just put off from putting their hand up if they see no chance for themselves.

And my point is now, I think it's interesting, when I was talking about quotas it was about representation. We've done very well at the last election, we had some- you know, almost half the intake of the class of 2019 were women. I, I am focussed now so totally on the outcome, not the mechanism, because it's about the building that we work in and the system that we work inside. And if we don't get that right, we won't have women - never mind the quotas, they just won't want to come here. So urgently, how do we change the culture of Parliament House and our workplace so we have women who say-

MICHELLE GRATTAN: [Interrupts] And the culture of politics more widely, surely?

SUSSAN LEY: [Talks over] And the culture of politics [indistinct]. Yes. Because it's not just about respect to women, it's about respect to people - it's about respect to people. And the fact that we run around this building, and we're all really busy, and you know, we're all busy. But things are said or not said that are unkind, that are unfair, and that are disrespectful - and it happened at all levels, and have done for a long time.

When I came in here - and this is the thing about culture - the whole building has to change it, everyone has to think differently. When I- When people come into this building and they think the culture is unusual because of the things I just talked about, someone says, oh, well, that's politics, you know - that's how things happen here. And you're new, and you don't say, well, actually, I don't like that. And if you do, you know, you probably don't say it for long because the culture overwhelms you - doesn't mean you have to ascribe to it. Like, I've never- I don't believe I've ever been one of those people who've - but I'm sure I have at times - but I don't tend to engage in that sort of debate in the Chamber, that sort of nastiness - I just found it wasn't me.

MICHELLE GRATTAN: Abuse you mean?

SUSSAN LEY: Yes, I just found it wasn't me. There was, there was a moment when I was in opposition where it seemed that all we had to be was nasty to each other across the Chamber. And Kate Ellis was my opposite number, and she wrote me a note I think at one stage that said- you know, highlighted how it's- We had this exchange of words, and then she wrote me a note and I, I thought, this is this is silly. I don't even feel this negativity towards Kate, I don't dislike her.

MICHELLE GRATTAN: [Interrupts] What was the note. What did she say in the note?

SUSSAN LEY: Why do we always make it about ourselves? Or something like that. And it was a genuine effort to reach out. And I wrote back and I said, you're right, it shouldn't be like this. And I think I crossed a bit of- I was trying to mould myself into what you should be as an opposition politician, continually attacking the Government. It was a bit of a turning point.

MICHELLE GRATTAN: And your behaviour changed?

SUSSAN LEY: I don't- Sometimes I sort of- shout's not the right word - raise my voice in in in the Chamber, but it's well known, I think, that I'm not one of those people who goes for the jugular, or makes it personal, or can't have a friendly chat in the corridor. In fact, one of the new members - and I don't want to make this about me, Michelle, because it's really not - but when you've been here a long time, you are pleased for the women who come in here and do well and make a good contribution. So the new Member - no, I don't know that she'd mind me saying this - the new Member for Dobell, we fought very

hard for that seat, made a very heartfelt speech on mental health. And I sent her a note in which I said there's a lot of rubbish spoken in this building, but what you just said was, was pretty incredible, keep that, keep that up. Then you realise you feel good about that and you don't have to take that negative-

MICHELLE GRATTAN: [Interrupts] And this is a Labor Member.

SUSSAN LEY: Yes. A Labor Member, yes. And that, that- perhaps that comes from being here a while. But, you know, that culture that we have to change means that there's so much of this to-ing and fro-ing that actually has to stop.

MICHELLE GRATTAN: Now, I just want to pin you down a bit on. on your idea about quotas. You said you were interested in the outcome, but in your mind, in general, how would a quota system work? Would this be a proportion of candidates for winnable seats? Or, how do you- how does it actually operate in practice?

SUSSAN LEY: In practice - and I'm just looking for something that, that you reminded me about the boardroom where one, one voice is a token, two voices is something, and three voices is actually going to change the culture. The purpose of that is that unless you get to thirty per cent, you really aren't there. So-

MICHELLE GRATTAN: Right? So, how do you get to thirty per cent?

SUSSAN LEY: Your party organisation accepts what we're starting to accept here, that we need to encourage women to step forward, and we need to find what I would call a smart quota system. Doesn't have to be a blunt instrument - I'm uncomfortable with something that would say, okay, your seats a woman's seat, your seats not. I mean, that doesn't make any sense to me.

MICHELLE GRATTAN: How does a smart system work?

SUSSAN LEY: It looks at the division as a whole and the number of seats in the state division as a whole and says if we want to get to 30 per cent, let's give ourselves a target and a date and say actually, we have to get there and that-

MICHELLE GRATTAN: [Interrupts] Because you've got targets already, haven't you?

SUSSAN LEY: We've got targets, but they're aspirational and they've not been adopted as hard and fast, and there's always an exit strategy or, you know, something. So the rules of the party organisation, which when they change, it's almost like the constitution of an organisation, has to change. Now, that requires the debate in the organisational wing, which is our Liberal Party organisation. So that's where it has to start. And then in that constitution, it will say we accept that we will have 40 per cent or 30 per cent of women candidates in our seats. It then has to say, not just women candidates, because sometimes candidates have a very small chance of winning in safe opposition seats. So you would have to say, we've got seats that we describe as winnable. We all know that we have that -winnable and unwinnable. And the ones that step forward in seats where there's not so much chance would get very well supported, so they wouldn't be left to fend for themselves because that, if you like, is a terrific training ground and a terrific experience. It really is. If you talk to women, and it's heartbreaking when you don't get across the line, but it's- but to feel that your party organisation supports you in that would be really good.

And then there's a link between that and the seats that are winnable. But the party organisation has to take this on. They're not going to listen- I mean, I love the fact that my party organisation is democratic.

I really do. You know, I go and sit in my branch meeting. I'm a member of the Albury branch, and they preselect me - they'll do that at the next election, they might choose not to. I mean, let's hope they don't. But, I mean, it's democratic. I don't get to say who's a member of my branch, and I don't get to say if my branch says to me when I meet them, we really don't like what you said about quotas and we're not going to support that. Okay, I'll have the argument and I'll always encourage women to step into those positions where they can influence. So there's a long lead up, of course, to coming in here. But we have to do it at organisational level.

MICHELLE GRATTAN: But the mood for the mood for change is here. And of course, it's complicated because in a sense of promoting democracy, rank and file pre-selections and so on, quotas goes against that, doesn't it? Can go against it?

SUSSAN LEY: It can go against that, but the alternative is that we don't get the reflection of the female voice that we need. And one thing I've really come to appreciate is, and I've got to know the women in this parliament on all sides, is that there are contributions they make that I don't think men would make, and they are contributions men make that I don't think women would either. It's not really a better, or worse, or either or proposition.

MICHELLE GRATTAN: If you're looking to appeal more strongly to female voters, is it also a policy issue? In other words, does the Government need to adopt policies that are more attractive to women? I'm thinking here perhaps of the augmenting childcare further.

SUSSAN LEY: Yes, we do. I would say that there is a women's lens in many policy areas so it doesn't all come out of one portfolio. And I would say that we have got specific measures in women's health, in rural and regional policy, in women's leadership that are dedicated to - I don't want to call them women's issues, but for want of a better expression, I will. And childcare, of course. I was a childcare minister for a while. One thing I'm proud of is that childcare is now much more affordable to lower income families. So we've, we've created a real early education facility in our early learning centres, that makes a big difference to some families that need that.

But I, look, I think that's happening. I'm seeing it. Again, you've got to have a critical mass of women to really speak up for that. Classic example, local government, when they've all left childcare, it's because they haven't- they don't run their own childcare. Often it's because they don't have women in their councils, or enough women to say, well, this is really important. Why aren't we doing it?

MICHELLE GRATTAN: Just finally, I want to turn to your environment portfolio. What are the two, or three, or four biggest issues on your plate at the moment?

SUSSAN LEY: Waste and recycling, and the way that plastic contaminates the oceans if we don't get it right. And the fact that every Australian wants to do more for recycling. And it's just a big agenda that the Commonwealth has never been in before. I'd probably rate that as number one. Species, because- before I want it to be a pilot, which was when I was very small, I did want to be a wildlife biologist and I love the unique natural landscape and our unique Australian animals-

MICHELLE GRATTAN: Retirement job, perhaps?

SUSSAN LEY: And while we're criticised for many of the challenges our animals face, we actually have biodiversity that very few other countries do. Because if you look at the long history of white settlement in Europe, it's pretty much move- removed most of the natural landscape. And since white European colonisation of Australia, we've lost what we have. So I really take seriously the need to do what we can to

protect that. And there are things we're doing that, particularly when you look at agriculture and environment being in the same portfolio, they get on the same page when it comes to controlling feral animals. As someone who's been a farmer for a large part of my life, I absolutely understand that. And I think knowing how to speak to farmers as an environmentalist is really, really important, and I think I want to bring that flavour to the environment portfolio - farmers manage 50 per cent of Australia's landmass, so that's critical.

And immediately and urgently is the reform of the EPBC Act, because that ticks a lot of boxes. And Graeme Samuel's review, it isn't, again, an either or proposition when it comes to streamlining, congestion busting, removing the inefficiencies of approvals and assessments and approvals under EPBC. Graeme Samuel hinged his report on two themes: harmonising and standards. The harmonisation is one set of approvals and assessments through the states, and the standards is the standards that we're starting with. So I- that that's a piece of work that's coming up soon via legislation that's on its way through the Parliament.

MICHELLE GRAT'TAN: Obviously, your portfolio intersects with the whole climate change debate at a number of points. Do you think, or do you hope that the Government will commit later this year to net zero emissions by 2050?

SUSSAN LEY: The Prime Minister's made it clear that when we can, we will. I've never been supportive of committing to something which you can't demonstrate exactly how you get there. The work that's being done with the five stretch goals in the technology roadmap will actually allow us to demonstrate how we will get there. So we're on the cusp of new technology that will show us the way, and then we'll be able to demonstrate to the community that what we are doing is acting in the national interest. But we'll also be able to say this is how we get to net zero.

Meanwhile, we're signing up to a lot of UN initiatives around climate adaptation, which is what's in my space - the other is in Angus Taylor space. But climate adaptation is something that Australians have been doing really well for a long time, particularly our farmers, because we've been living with a changing climate. What we're learning in this international engagement is the rest of the world really fascinated by how we're managing the Great Barrier Reef in the face of climate change; how we're managing our landscapes for increased long, dry periods in the Murray-Darling Basin, for example; how we've got plant breeding and crop and soil management that reflects the challenges that we're facing - all that come from climate change.

And everyone hasn't always looked at this as a top down, they've just know that these are things they have to do. And I think that work, I think we've got a good story to tell, and I'm certainly getting that feedback when I talk to international audiences, always online, of course.

MICHELLE GRAT'TAN: Sussan Ley, thank you very much for talking with us today, face-to-face. And that's all for today's podcast. Thank you to my Producer, Tom Glassie. We'll be back with another interview soon. But goodbye for now.