

Rape allegations throw doubt over future of Australian prime minister

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Allegations that a young female staff member was raped by a more senior male official inside a government ministerial office nearly two years ago suddenly erupted in the corporate media this week, raising questions about the political survival of Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

Morrison told parliament on Thursday that his office had no knowledge of the allegations until last week, and he was not informed until Monday. But leaked email messages were published yesterday purporting to show that a senior officer in his office was notified in 2019, soon after the alleged sexual assault on the Liberal Party staffer, Brittany Higgins.

If the prime minister is found to have lied to parliament, he could be forced to resign. Whether the incident is used for that purpose is not yet clear, but it certainly has become a possibility.

By Wednesday, the *Australian* said “the political crisis” was “engulfing the Morrison government.” *Australian Financial Review* political editor Phillip Coorey said the government was “reeling from the allegations,” writing: “The events of this week have highlighted just how quickly the government’s fortunes can run off the rails.”

There is a long history of sexual assault accusations, even if untested, being exploited for political purposes. That needs to be borne in mind while assessing the scandal that is wracking the Liberal-National Coalition government. Many questions remain unanswered about this affair, but underlying political agendas seem to be driving events.

High-level sources within the government are evidently leaking emails, and working closely with the media, to accuse Morrison of being aware within days of the alleged rape, which occurred in then-Defence Industry Minister Linda Reynolds’ office on March 23, 2019, less than two months before the federal election of May 18.

The *Australian* reported yesterday it had obtained a text message sent to Higgins by a fellow Liberal staffer on the

morning of April 3, 2019, within a fortnight of the alleged rape. In the text the Liberal staffer said he had spoken directly with a member of Morrison’s staff. Other media outlets later broadcast copies of the text.

“Spoke to PMO [Prime Minister’s Office]. He was mortified to hear about it and how things have been handled,” the text says. “He’s going to discuss with COS [Chief of Staff]—no one else.”

Morrison announced yesterday that the head of his prime minister’s department, Phil Gaetjens, would investigate the matter and check the phone records of his office. This is the fourth investigation into the affair that Morrison has announced this week.

Even before the publication of the leaked email, prominent figures in the political establishment had described as “implausible” or “unpersuasive” Morrison’s claim that he knew nothing about the incident until Monday, when the allegations were made public by news.com.au, a Murdoch media platform.

Among those casting doubt on Morrison’s denials were Malcolm Turnbull, whom Morrison replaced as Liberal leader and prime minister in August 2018; Kevin Rudd, a former Labor Party prime minister; and Peta Credlin, who was chief of staff to Tony Abbott, whom Turnbull had deposed in September 2015.

Questions have been raised also about the fate of Reynolds, whom Morrison elevated into cabinet as defence minister following the 2019 election. Photographs were broadcast of her in tears in the Senate on Thursday after publicly apologising for a second time for what she said was her failure to offer Higgins more support following the alleged rape.

On Tuesday, Morrison had openly criticised Reynolds, declaring that she should have told him about the incident. He told parliament it was not “acceptable” that Reynolds knew for almost two years but did not inform him. Later, Nine Media reported that at least five Liberal Party MPs

said Reynolds should resign.

On Wednesday, Higgins escalated the spotlight on Morrison. She alleged that Morrison's principal private secretary Yaron Finkelstein had called her to "check in" around the time an Australian Broadcasting Corporation "Four Corners" program into alleged sexual harassment in the Liberal Party was aired last November. And "sources close to Ms Higgins" said at least one other adviser in Morrison's office had been notified about the rape allegations as early as 2019.

Yesterday, Higgins issued a statement saying she was now asking the Australian Federal Police to investigate the alleged rape and lay charges, something she had declined to do in 2019. This announcement followed four days in which Higgins and her supporters had aired the accusations throughout the media.

These are methods pioneered by the "MeToo" movement, in which targeted figures are subjected to trial by media, with allegations widely reported as fact, overturning the principle of innocent until proven guilty.

Among the unanswered questions about the scandal are: Who initiated this public raising of the allegations nearly two years after the events? Who is advising Higgins? Who is leaking against Morrison?

What is known is that the scandal was launched by an apparently well-prepared dossier presented via news.com.au. The *Australian*, another Murdoch outlet, reported: "According to a detailed document that was provided by Ms Higgins—which includes a timeline of events, as well as emails and text messages between herself and Liberal Party staffers about the alleged rape—she claims that Senator Reynolds and her acting chief of staff Fiona Brown 'directly addressed' the alleged sexual assault with her once.

"Ms Higgins said she was given the option to go home to the Gold Coast during the 2019 election campaign—but was told that this would affect her ability to reapply for a future Liberal Party job or she could stay in Western Australia with Perth-based Senator Reynolds for the campaign, which she did."

After the election, Higgins was offered jobs by four senior government ministers, before ultimately taking a post in the office of Employment Minister Michaelia Cash, from which she resigned a month ago.

Increasingly, evidence has emerged this week of a protracted cover-up of the incident, involving Liberal Party figures, parliamentary presiding officers and official investigators.

Government sources said the former ministerial adviser

accused of rape by Higgins was sacked for "security breaches" on March 26, 2019, three days after the incident.

A parliamentary inquiry later secretly examined the rape allegation after parliamentary security guards raised concerns. A guard said that Higgins was found half-naked and disoriented in the ministerial suite, indicating that an incident had occurred, but the room in which the rape was allegedly committed was steam-cleaned the next day, potentially destroying evidence.

Yet House of Representatives Speaker Tony Smith and Senate President Scott Ryan reportedly accepted a report last October that found the evidence did not substantiate claims that senior officials had asked the guards to amend incident reports to minimise the event and remove key information.

Among the four investigations that Morrison has announced in an effort to smother the allegations, is one proposed by the Labor Party opposition Anthony Albanese. This supposed independent review into parliament's "workplace culture" is a diversion that amounts to another effort by Labor to shore up the government and the parliamentary order, as it has done throughout the bushfire and COVID-19 disasters.

How far this affair goes remains to be seen, but it has further punctured the media-created myth of Morrison's government being strong or stable. It confronts a historic economic and public health crisis, and concerns that deepening working class discontent will erupt.

All week, the Murdoch media has continued to promote the information throwing Morrison's conduct into doubt, with the evident intent of either forcing his resignation or disciplining his government. An *Australian* editorial on Wednesday criticised the government's response and warned: "The political ramifications of the drama are potentially enormous."

Both the *Australian* and the *Australian Financial Review* (AFR) have expressed mounting frustration with the government's refusal to more aggressively pursue "industrial relations reform" to further attack workers' jobs and conditions amid the "biggest health and economic crisis in generations."



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