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PM 'sickened' as second Liberal rape allegation emerges



Brittany Higgins.

EXCLUSIVE

By MICHAEL MCKENNA and ROSIE LEWIS

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Scott Morrison has welcomed an AFP probe into the alleged rape of former Liberal staffer Brittany Higgins, saying it was always the government's preference for it to be pursued by

police.

The Prime Minister said he was left “sickened” after a second woman came forward to allege she was sexually assaulted late last year by the same former Morrison government adviser accused of raping a junior female colleague in the Parliament House office of Defence Minister Linda Reynolds.

Mr Morrison said he only learned of the fresh allegation after it was revealed in The Weekend Australian today, and did not know the woman involved, but he welcomed a further investigation into the matter.

“I think we have a problem in the parliament and the workplace culture that exists there that we must continue to improve,” Mr Morrison told a press conference in Sydney on Saturday.

“These events truly sicken me (and) I am seeking to try and address this as swiftly and as effectively as we possibly can.”

Mr Morrison said there was “significant work” to be done about the culture at Parliament House.

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“I think we would be naive to think it’s not a challenge that other workplaces face all around the country.

“But I agree the parliament should be setting the standard.”

The second woman, a former Liberal staffer who spoke on condition of anonymity, said she would not have suffered her alleged assault if the government had supported the original complainant over her alleged rape. “If this had been properly dealt with by the government in 2019 this would not have happened to me,” she said.

“I am telling my story because I want to support Brittany (Higgins) and I want to help shine a light on this awful culture.”

A family friend of the woman told The Weekend Australian that the woman had made the same allegations to her in the weeks after the alleged incident.

Ms Higgins publicly disclosed the alleged March 2019 rape on Monday, and said she felt she was forced to choose between reporting it to police or keeping her job.

She has since accused Scott Morrison of “victim blaming” and on Friday said she had asked the Australian Federal Police to proceed with a complaint against the alleged perpetrator.

An internal inquiry into whether anyone in the Prime Minister’s office knew about the alleged rape before February 12 has narrowed to focus on three of his most senior aides, including his chief of staff and principal private secretary.

The Prime Minister has also asked Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet secretary Philip Gaetjens to look into an explosive text message, revealed in The Australian, that cast doubt on his claim his office first found out about the alleged sexual assault on that date.

Mr Gaetjens is expected to question at least three senior staffers who Ms Higgins claims had prior knowledge of her alleged rape or who had been “broadly in proximity” to the matter.

The staffers are Mr Morrison’s chief of staff, John Kunkel, his principal private secretary, Yaron Finkelstein, and senior adviser Julian Leembruggen.

Ms Higgins claims Mr Finkelstein called to “check in” around the time the ABC’s Four Corners program into sexual harassment in the Liberal Party was aired in November. That phone call has been denied by the PMO and Ms Higgins has not suggested the alleged rape was discussed, only that it was strange for such a senior member of Mr Morrison’s team to contact her.

The second woman, who asked not to be identified, said she had met Senator Reynolds’ former adviser during the 2016 federal election campaign. Following Ms Higgins’ alleged

rape, the man was sacked and employed in the private sector. But the pair had kept in contact and met again last year.

“We went out to dinner and he kept buying me drinks, and I’m a lightweight when it comes to that,” she said. “We went back to my place and we were kissing ... we were going to have sex and I said he had to wear a condom. He refused and we argued and I told him five or six times that we couldn’t have sex unless he wore a condom. I was drunk and he just got on top of me, I said no, and then he was inside of me and I kept saying no.”

The woman said the man left in the early hours of the morning and she later consulted her doctor.

The Weekend Australian could not reach the alleged perpetrator on Friday.

‘Beyond belief’

Federal Opposition leader Anthony Albanese on Saturday described the new allegation as “shocking” and pushed for an independent review of the handling of Ms Higgins’ complaint and who knew what inside the Morrison government.

“Unfortunately, some of the statistics show that if someone is likely to commit the very serious crime of sexual assault, it’s likely to not be a one-off.

“My heart goes out to the person concerned.”

Mr Albanese said the idea that the Prime Minister’s office only found out about the alleged rape of Ms Higgins last week was “simply not credible”.

“It is beyond belief that the reported sexual assault happened just metres from the Prime Minister’s Office, people in the Prime Minister’s office were told... but there were no discussions in the Prime Minister’s office about this.”

“Ms Higgins deserves answers,” Mr Albanese said. “I believe Ms Higgins. She has been extraordinarily brave in the way that she has acted this week.”

“The Prime Minister needs to say exactly what the real time-line is.”

The Prime Minister’s office has denied that any staff members knew about Ms Higgins’ alleged rape until last week.

“If there was anything different here, I would like to know,” Mr Morrison said on Friday.

“That is why I have asked the secretary of my department to actually test that advice that I received.

“I can tell you I knew about it on Monday. Frankly it shattered me, it absolutely shattered me. Of course there are many ramifications of this but, frankly, the one that shattered me the most was just the sheer humanity of what has occurred here.”

A text message from a former ministerial staffer to Ms Higgins on April 3, 2019, says he had spoken to a colleague from the Prime Minister’s office.

Ms Higgins alleges she was sexually assaulted in Senator Reynolds’ office on March 23.

“He was mortified to hear about it and how things have been handled. He’s going to discuss with (Mr Kunkel) — no one else,” the text states.

The “mortified” staff member referenced in the text has vehemently denied the content of the message or that he was told anything about an alleged sexual assault.

Government sources said he was asked to help find jobs during and after the federal election campaign for Ms Higgins and the ministerial staffer who approached him.

Five days after she went public with her story, which has embroiled the Morrison government this week, Ms Higgins said she expected the AFP would handle her complaint “in a timely manner”.

She demanded she be able to participate in drafting the terms of reference for an independent review in parliament’s workplace culture.

“The Prime Minister has repeatedly told the parliament that I should be given ‘agency’ going forward,” she said.

“I don’t believe that agency was provided to me over the past two years but I seize it now and have advised the Prime Minister’s office that I expect a voice in framing the scope and terms of reference for a new and significant review into the conditions for all ministerial and parliamentary staff.

“It is important that the reform is real and drives change beyond dealing with just what happened to me, and how the system let me down.

“I was failed repeatedly, but I now have my voice, and I am determined to use (it) to ensure that this is never allowed to happen to another member of staff again.”

Federal parliament’s human resources system — run by the departments of Finance and Parliamentary Services and which dealt with Ms Higgins’ alleged rape — is due to be overhauled.

Fiona Brown — Senator Reynolds’ chief of staff at the time of the alleged rape, who now works in Mr Morrison’s office — handled the matter and instigated support for Ms Higgins but did not pass information on to the Prime Minister’s office in order to protect the alleged victim.

Ms Higgins said at the time she did not want to pursue a police complaint.

Employment Minister Michaelia Cash, who employed Ms Higgins after the 2019 election, said she offered early this month to go with her to the police and to the Prime Minister’s office after learning about the alleged rape but Ms Higgins did not want to.

Anthony Albanese said the April 3, 2019, text message “completely contradicts” what Mr Morrison told parliament.

“Here you have text messages clearly indicating that it was raised with the Prime Minister’s office, and the response from the Prime Minister’s office saying that he would raise it with

the chief of staff,” the Labor leader said.

[Read Brittany Higgins' full statement here](#)

Additional reporting: Nicholas Jensen

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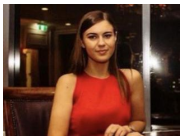
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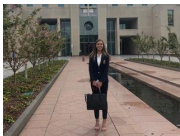
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