

## Scott Morrison's ministers call it quits



Prime Minister Scott Morrison. Picture: AAP

Simon Benson, National Affairs Editor, 12:00AM March 2, 2019

565 Comments

Linda Reynolds has been sworn in as Defence Industry Minister to replace Steven Ciobo, who has quit the ministry immediately as he joins Christopher Pyne in deciding against running again in the likely May federal election.

Scott Morrison, who was at Saturday's swearing-in by Governor-General Sir Peter Cosgrove, is battling to put a brave new face on his government after the two veteran ministers announced they would not contest the election, prompting Bill Shorten to claim the government has "given up".

The decision to quit federal politics by Mr Pyne, who is the Defence Minister, and Mr Ciobo comes hard on the heels of the announced departures of Jobs Minister Kelly O'Dwyer, Human Services Minister Michael Keenan, Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion, and former foreign minister Julie Bishop.

Mr Ciobo resigned from the ministry yesterday and has been replaced quickly by Senator Reynolds of Western Australia, who has been promoted from assistant minister for home affairs, to ensure continuity in the critical defence portfolios.

Mr Pyne will remain Defence Minister and Leader of the House until the election.

Liberal MPs privately conceded to The Weekend Australian yesterday that the “optics of an exodus” would be damaging for the government. It is expected Senator Reynolds will replace him if the Coalition is returned to government. “In both of their cases, of course, if they wished to continue I would have welcomed that,” Mr Morrison told reporters in Canberra on Saturday. “But particularly in Christopher’s case, I mean 26 years is a long time [to be in parliament].”

Senator Reynolds’ elevation makes her the seventh woman in Mr Morrison’s cabinet, overtaking the record of six women under the Rudd and Turnbull governments. “To every woman in the Liberal Party today ... you don’t need to be a quota. If you are good enough, you can get in,” Senator Reynolds told reporters.

Former Nationals leader John Anderson warned in January that the Coalition would ensure the election of a Shorten government if a cascade of ministers and MPs rolled out the door before the election. However, a Liberal source said the exodus of ministers could be a positive for Mr Morrison as it allowed the party to begin the renewal process earlier than expected.

Mr Morrison played a dead bat when questioned early yesterday on widespread speculation that Mr Pyne and Mr Ciobo were poised to announce their departures. As news of their resignations spread, the Prime Minister was forced to address the issue, saying My Pyne was doing the “responsible” thing by staying in the critical Defence portfolio up until the election.

“It is the responsible course of action for Minister Pyne to continue to steward our management of these issues though the election period,” Mr Morrison said.

Labor Opposition Leader Shorten said the latest resignations represented a loss of confidence in the government. “The Morrison government is divided, it’s unstable and now we see people just simply giving up on the government,” the Opposition Leader said. “I say to Australians, if the ministers in the government are giving up on the government then you should too. Labor, by contrast, is united and stable.”

However, Mr Shorten's own "retirement list" includes five members of his frontbench — Kate Ellis, Jacinta Collins, Jenny Macklin, Gai Brodtmann and Doug Cameron — and four other Labor MPs.

Mr Ciobo told The Weekend Australian yesterday he had informed the Prime Minister of his decision several weeks ago. He said Mr Pyne's decision to stay on as Defence Minister until the election would ensure continuity in the defence industries portfolio, which is overseeing a \$200 billion procurement program.

"Once I knew that Christopher and I were both not recontesting the election, I indicated to the Prime Minister that continuity in this portfolio was critical," Mr Ciobo said.

"Chris was Leader of the House, so the honourable thing to do was offer my resignation."

Mr Pyne's departure means only four ministers who were appointed to cabinet when Tony Abbott became prime minister in 2013 are set to contest this year's election. Other remaining ministers, including Treasurer Josh Frydenberg and Attorney-General Christian Porter, entered cabinet under Malcolm Turnbull's prime ministership or when Mr Morrison took the reins in August last year.

Of the ministers expected to contest the election, expected to be held in May, Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, 48, and Health Minister Greg Hunt, 53, have been in federal parliament the longest, having been elected in 2001. Mr Dutton, Mr Hunt, Mr Morrison and Finance Minister Mathias Cormann have the most experience at the cabinet table, having been cabinet ministers since September 2013, for the duration of the Abbott-Turnbull-Morrison governments.

Mr Pyne, a senior moderate Liberal MP and the government's chief tactician, is the longest-serving parliamentarian in Mr Morrison's current cabinet, with 26 years of experience in federal parliament.

The elevation of Senator Reynolds means the Morrison cabinet now has the greatest representation of women in the senior ministry of any government. Senator Reynolds, currently the Assistant Minister for Home Affairs, would replace Mr Pyne as defence minister should the Coalition be re-elected.

Former South Australian senator Nick Minchin, who was a cabinet minister under John Howard, said all governments faced the issue of ministers deciding to move on as an election approached and insisted the current exodus was not unusual.

Mr Morrison said of Senator Reynolds: “When you can call up a brigadier, in the form of Linda Reynolds, to take on the role of defence minister, it shows we have a lot of talent on our bench to draw from. Linda will be the second - female to serve in a cabinet-ranked defence portfolio. She will bring the number of female members in the cabinet to seven. “This is the highest number of any cabinet since federation.”

The Weekend Australian asked 10 cabinet ministers if they planned to run at the election and commit to serving out another term if Labor formed government.

Energy Minister Angus Taylor, Social Services Minister Paul Fletcher and Small Business Minister Michaelia Cash declined to comment. Senator Cormann, Foreign Minister Marise Payne, Mr Hunt and Education Minister Dan Tehan also did not respond to the questions.

Mr Dutton and Industry Minister Karen Andrews confirmed they would run and serve out a full-term if re-elected, while Trade Minister Simon Birmingham told ABC Radio he would be sticking around.

Additional reporting: Rosie Lewis, Richard Ferguson