**A man`s world**

BY M A H I R A L I 2021-03-31

IT wasn`t a particularly sensitive choice of words when the Australian prime minister, Scott Morrison, declared on Monday that his government would henceforth look towards women through a `fresh lens`.

Not just because the male gaze, with or without the benefit of any kind of lens, is a huge part of the problem when it comes to women, but also since an accusation against one of his MPs involves taking inappropriate photographs of women.

Several other accusations have been made against the MP, who has agreed not to contest further elections. But Morrison has resisted calls to dump him right away, because were he to do so, the ruling LiberalNational party coalition would lose its parliamentary majority.

If that`s a lame excuse for clinging on to Andrew Laming, the prime minister has other related woes to countenance. He announced a cabinet reshuffle on Monday, demoting but not sidelining two of his most prominent ministers. One of them, former attorney general Christian Porter, faces an allegation of rape as a teenager. The other, former defence minister Linda Reynolds, has apologised for belittling a staff member who was allegedly raped by a colleague in Canberra`s parliament house.

Not surprisingly, the response to these allegations has focused on political management of the consequences. And Morrison`s clumsy reactions have tended to underline his discomfort with such matters. In responding to the rape allegation by the former Liberal Party staffer, for instance, he claimed to have been alerted to its enormity by his wife, who apparently asked him to contemplate the consequences if something like that had happened to one of his daughters.

The implication was that a man needs a wife and daughters to grasp the gravity of such situations. When women across Australia, including outside parliament, were agitating for their rights, the prime minister compounded his faux pas by celebrating the fact that in Australia protesters at least weren`t being shot in the streets.

What an amazing concession. By the same token, one could conclude that women in Australia should consider themselves fortunate not to be in the same predicament as women in, say, Saudi Arabia or, for that matter, the subcontinent. Ladies, count your blessings. It ought to go without saying that some of the issues highlighted in Australia are by no means exclusive to it.

Misogyny and patriarchy are common to cultures across the world. And, by some standards, their manifestation in Australia is mild compared with other countries.

That can hardly serve as a valid excuse, though, for trying to brush the issue underthe carpet. Australia was very much a part of the first wave of Western feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and significant advances in women`s rights have been registered since Gough Whitlam`s game-changing government in 1972. It has equally been clear since that legislation does not necessarily change very much. Almost a half century on, even basic advances made back then, such as equal pay for equal work, remain unimplemented in a meaningful sense.

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Obviously, there are vast differences between, say, Saudi Arabia where women have only recently been afforded(bymen)the right to drive cars and Australia.Nonetheless, the fact that Australia`s latest woes in this sphere have emerged amid the highest echelons of political power provides cause for a pause to ponder all that has gone wrong in the past 50 years.

The biggest risk is that while a few heads might roll although even that seems dubious nothing will substantially change in the way women are treated in parliament and in homes and workplaces across the nation, beyond occasional lip service and hand-wringing by the very same people (again mostly, but not exclusively, men) who help to perpetuate the status quo.

Sure, there has been progress over the decades, but never enough to eradicate centuries of sexist prejudices, let alone to clearly illuminate the intersections of class, race and gender that continue to guide the destiny of individuals. My granddaughter turned two yesterday, and I would like to think she will come of age in a very different Australia and a world substantially changed for the better, for all human beings.

There are depressingly few grounds, though, for imagining such a future. m mahir.dawn@gmail.com