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EXCLUSIVE

Young staffer Brittany Higgins says she was raped at Parliament House

A young Liberal Party staffer alleges she was raped at Parliament House and claims she felt forced to choose between reporting it to the police or keeping her job.

Samantha Maiden



@samanthamaiden 10 min read February 15, 2021 - 8:00AM



Brittany Higgins claims she was sexually assaulted in Senator Reynolds' private office by another Liberal staffer after a night out.

A Liberal Party staffer has alleged she was raped at Parliament House in Defence

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Minister Linda Reynolds' ministerial office by a colleague, and claims she felt forced to choose between reporting it to the police or keeping her job.

In explosive allegations detailing the Morrison Government's handling of the incident, media adviser Brittany Higgins has told news.com.au that she spent the last two years "internalising the trauma".

She has also revealed that she was brought to a formal employment meeting about the incident in the room where she was allegedly raped — [a decision the Morrison Government has now accepted was an error by the then Defence Industry Minister Linda Reynolds](#).

Ms Higgins was just 24 at the time of the incident and only months into her "dream job" of working at parliament.

She said the horror night quickly emerged as a crisis to be managed by her successive chiefs of staff, cabinet ministers and even staff in the Prime Minister's office.

Brittany Higgins claims she was raped by a colleague in Parliament House.

The alleged sexual assault occurred in the early hours of March 23, 2019, just weeks before Prime Minister Scott Morrison called the election on April 10, 2019.

After a night of drinking with colleagues, Ms Higgins alleges she was assaulted in her own office by another Liberal staffer who she says was regarded as a "rising star" in the party.

She remembers the man buying "lots of rounds of drinks" at the event before it was

suggested he lived in the same direction and his taxi could drop her home on the way.

Instead, he took her to Parliament House.

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“I didn't have a pass. I was in a cocktail dress,” she said.

“At that point I was very intoxicated. I thought, ‘Well, I am well and truly done. I need to go.’ And so there were only four of us left. We were going the same way.”

Ms Higgins said she was so affected by alcohol and did not have her security pass that the Liberal staffer needed to sign her in with security officers.

From that moment, CCTV vision tracked the pair's every move in Parliament House towards Senator Reynolds' office.

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After arriving at the office, Ms Higgins said she remembers sitting on a window ledge that overlooked the Prime Minister's courtyard.

She began to feel unwell and lay down on the couch. It was then she woke up to the Liberal staffer having sex with her.

“All of sudden he was on top of me and I physically couldn't get him off of me,” she said.

“I woke up mid-rape. I told him to stop. I was crying. He wasn't even looking at me. It felt like I was sort of a body that was there. It didn't feel like it was anything about me.”

Ms Higgins said it felt like there was pressure on her leg during the alleged assault, and has photographs of a bruise on her leg that she says was from that pressure.

Brittany Higgins took this photograph of her bruised leg while in the Parliament House bathroom.

“The first thing I remember was being in pain. My leg was being crushed.”

Ms Higgins said the man who was having sex with her did not speak to her during the incident.

“And I was crying. And then it was just happening. I couldn't get him off and I couldn't stop it. I remember just being stuck inside my body. As it was happening,” she said.

She says the man got up, leaving her on the couch in a state of undress with her cocktail dress “up around my waist” and left the building.

The next morning, Ms Higgins said she was discovered by a parliamentary security guard.

“I was in shock,” she said.

She was still wearing the cocktail dress she had been wearing the night before and tried to slip out of the building to an Uber.

But the security guards and the Australian Federal Police stationed at Parliament House had noticed the young woman.

Brittany Higgins has made explosive allegations detailing the Morrison Government's handling of the incident.

When she returned to work on the Monday she ran into the Liberal staffer she said assaulted her but he did not make eye contact. He never contacted her or spoke to her again.

"I didn't process, 'You had sex, You didn't consent. You were crying'," she told news.com.au.

"It's kind of like the impact of a car crash and the whole world goes fuzzy. I felt like that whole day I just wasn't connected to what I was doing."

Within days of the incident, the Department of Finance reported to Senator Reynolds'

office that Ms Higgins had been found half-dressed in the office after entering the building on the Friday night, a matter that was regarded as a serious security breach in an office that contains highly classified information.

The office was also informed that an ambulance had been offered to Ms Higgins. But at that stage Senator Reynolds' office said they still did not regard it as a potential sexual assault.

Brittany Higgins with Scott Morrison.

Brittany Higgins and Linda Reynolds at a Liberal Party event.

On the Tuesday, Ms Higgins was brought to a formal employment meeting about the security breach from her acting chief of staff, a senior Coalition staffer who now works in Prime Minister Scott Morrison's office.

Ms Higgins learned from the chief of staff that the Liberal staffer who had signed her into parliament that night, had agreed to resign that day, on the spot.

This related purely to the security breach and being in the office after hours.

"She sat me down. She said, 'I know there was an incident that occurred on the weekend.' She said she knew it occurred after hours. The tone of it was like a disciplinary meeting. I knew I was about to be in trouble. She had a copy of the code of conduct,"

Ms Higgins said.

It was in a second meeting that the chief of staff says Ms Higgins disclosed an alleged assault.

"I said that he was on top of me. I think for the longest time I was really weird about actually saying it was rape. I don't know why. I was very delicate about it. I think from our exchange she understood the inference," Ms Higgins told news.com.au.

Despite reporting the incident to the Australian Federal Police within days of it occurring, Ms Higgins ultimately chose not to make a formal complaint, a decision she said was driven by her desire at the time to protect the Liberal party and her "dream job" on the eve of the election.

"It was just about my job. If it had happened on a street corner away from parliament there was no doubt in my mind. Of course. Of course," Ms Higgins said.

Brittany Higgins and Linda Reynolds at a work function.

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Brittany, pictured with Julie Bishop, said she was in her 'dream job'.

By the Friday, Senator Reynolds' chief of staff had outlined her concerns it was an alleged sexual assault to the Department of Finance and received advice on whether or not they should go to police themselves. The advice suggested this should be left in Ms Higgins control.

It also included a checklist of things that needed to be done such as offering to expand the number of EAP sessions Ms Higgins could access — something Ms Higgins insists never happened.

The advice also suggests that the chief of staff and Senator Reynolds had repeatedly encouraged her to go to police, something that did not occur until several days later.

Senator Reynolds' chief of staff contacted Ms Higgins to set up an opportunity to discuss the matter in her office. This meeting was conducted in the room where Ms Higgins says she was raped.

A spokesman for the Morrison Government conceded this was a mistake.

“The Government takes all matters of workplace safety very seriously. No one should feel unsafe in a workplace,” a spokesman said.

“On Tuesday, March 26, senior staff in Minister Reynolds’ office became aware of an incident that occurred in the Minister’s office outside of work hours. This incident involved two staff. It was initially treated as a breach of the Statement of Standards for Ministerial Staff.

“After further consultation with one of the staff members over the following days, it became clear to senior staff that there were elements of the incident that may be of a more serious nature.

“The staff member was notified that should they choose to, they were able to pursue a complaint, including a complaint made to the police, and that to do so was within their rights. They were informed that they would be assisted and supported through that process.

“During this process, the Minister and a senior staff member met with the staff member in the Minister’s office. Given the seriousness of the incident, the meeting should have been conducted elsewhere.”

“The Minister encouraged the staff member to speak with the police in order to assess the options available to them. At this meeting, the staff member indicated they would like to speak to the Australian Federal Police, which the Minister supported and the office facilitated.”

Brittany Higgins on her first day at work at Parliament House.

During the meeting, Ms Higgins says that Senator Reynolds expressed her horror at what had happened but also wanted to be clear whether she intended to go to the police or not.

“Standard lines. She said ‘I felt physically ill,’ All that sort of thing. And then it kind of turned to, ‘As women, this is something we go through’,” Ms Higgins said.

“She said, ‘If you choose to go to the police we will support you in that process, but we just need to know ahead of time. We need to know now’.”

Ms Higgins had worked for Senator Reynolds for all of four weeks.

“So she didn’t know me. I was just this sudden problem for her. That’s what I felt like.

“I felt like they were ticking a box. That they had to have this conversation with me in order to say on the record ‘We told her she could go to the police’.”

Senator Reynolds is based in Perth as a WA Senator and the option was to essentially work out of Western Australia for the duration of the election.

“But as soon as Linda Reynolds had that meeting, she never brought it up with me again. And then everyone else (in the office) just started kind of going, ‘Well, you can go to the Gold Coast? You can go home. You can take a payout and go home or you can come with us to WA’,” Ms Higgins said.

Brittany moved to Michaelia Cash's office after the election.

Brittany with Employment Minister Michaelia Cash.

With an election looming the pressure was building to make a decision. Ms Higgins said she felt those decisions were to go back to the Gold Coast where they would continue to pay her until the election or stay and keep her job.

“And I asked them. I said, ‘Well if I got to the Gold Coast, opposition or we win, what happens then?’ They said, ‘You won’t come back’.

“You just don’t question it. Everyone is kind of broadly your boss. You know how easy it is to get rid of you.”

After the election, Ms Higgins went to work for Employment Minister Michaelia Cash who also learned of the incident after concerns a journalist had lodged questions about the incident.

Despite several meetings over this and how to handle it, Senator Cash says she never knew it was a sexual assault until recently.

“The Minister and chief of staff (COS) were not aware of any alleged staff incident occurring in Ms Higgins' previous employment,” a spokesman for Senator Cash said.

“In October 2019, a journalist made a media inquiry that involved Ms Higgins and her previous employment.

“The Minister and COS said that they would respect Ms Higgins wishes for privacy but if she needed anything she should come to them. The COS and Ms Higgins discussed the Employee Assistance Program and Ms Higgins confirmed she accessed it.”

Ms Higgins has confirmed to news.com.au that she never accessed it.

At the end of January this year, Ms Higgins advised the Morrison Government she could no longer deal with the emotional fallout from the alleged assault and she wished to resign and leave Canberra.

Brittany Higgins resignation letter dated January 29.

“Both the Minister and COS advised that they wished for Ms Higgins to stay on in her role as she was good at it and they would do whatever they could to support her including relocating her job to Queensland, if she wished. Ms Higgins was grateful for the offer but declined,” Senator Cash's spokesman said.

Ms Higgins said she hoped telling her story would drive change in the parliamentary work culture.

“I was ashamed before. I kind of internalised it,” she said. “I felt like I wanted to leave parliament. It's not a place I want to stay.

“I don't think what happened to be is remarkable. It happens all the time. It is devastating and soul destroying and I think about it everyday but the only thing that I know made people care about it was where it happened and who it was connected to. They didn't care about me. They cared about the party.”

The ACT Police have revealed they have an “open” investigation into an alleged rape in Defence Minister Linda Reynold's office.

Despite the decision of Liberal staffer Brittany Higgins not to pursue the matter after Prime Minister Scott Morrison called the 2019 election, police say the investigation can be reopened at any time.

“Policing received a report in April 2019 in relation to an alleged assault at Parliament House. ACT Policing investigators subsequently spoke to the complainant who chose not to proceed with making a formal complaint,” a spokeswoman said.

“ACT Policing’s investigation remains open but did not progress at that time as a result. As part of initial enquiries, ACT Policing also liaised with Department of Parliamentary Services.

“Victims always have a say in how far a police investigation goes, can determine that a matter not proceed to prosecution, and can withdraw from the process at any time. It is not uncommon for an investigation to halt, not proceed to prosecution, or to be recommenced at a later time, at the request of a victim.

“ACT Policing has continued to engage with the victim throughout the investigation and also provided details of support services such as Canberra Rape Crisis Centre. If the victim wishes to proceed, ACT Policing will assess the case and make a decision about whether there is sufficient evidence. This is done in accordance with the ACT Director of Public Prosecutions guidelines and often in consultation with the Office of the ACT Director of Public Prosecutions.”

Editor's note: Bruce Lehrmann commenced defamation proceedings claiming that this article accused him of sexually assaulting Brittany Higgins. These proceedings were discontinued and settled on terms satisfactory to Mr Lehrmann and the publisher of this website. [News.com.au](https://www.news.com.au) notes that a criminal charge of sexual assault was brought against Mr Lehrmann and later dropped. [News.com.au](https://www.news.com.au) does not suggest that he was guilty of that charge.

Where to find help

If you or someone you know is experiencing sexual abuse or family violence contact:

- National Sexual Assault, Domestic Violence Counselling Service 24-hour helpline **1800 RESPECT** on **1800 737 732**
- 24-hour Emergency Accommodation helpline on **1800 800 588**
- Safe At Home helpline on **1800 633 937**
- National Violence and Abuse Trauma Counselling and Recovery Service on **1800 FULLSTOP (1800 385 578)**. They also have a specific line for the LGBTIQ+ community called the Rainbow Sexual, Domestic and Family Violence Helpline on **1800 497 212**
- SHE (free and confidential counselling and support) on **6278 9090**
- Sexual Assault Support Services on **6231 1811**, or after hours **6231 1817**
- Family Violence Crisis and Support Service on **1800 608 122**
- Bravehearts – Sexual Assault Support for Children on **1800 BRAVE 1**
- Kids Helpline is for young people aged 5 to 25 on **1800 551 800**

Don't go it alone. Please reach out for help by contacting **Lifeline** on **13 11 14**

- Men who have anger, relationship or parenting issues, should contact the **Men's Referral Service** on **1300 766 491** or the **Don't Become That Man** helpline on **1300 243 413**

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