

Women lawyers back Libs scheme

CHRIS MERRITT THE AUSTRALIAN AUGUST 23, 2013 12:00AM

THE newly elected national president of Australian Women Lawyers has endorsed the Coalition's paid parental leave scheme as a way of overcoming some of the factors that encourage women to leave private practice.

Amy Challans, who took office last weekend, said the Coalition's proposal for six months leave paid at normal rates up to \$150,000 appeared to be a significant advance on the the current scheme that offers the minimum wage.

She said many women were leaving private law firms in pursuit of better parental leave on offer in the public sector.

"The private sector is haemorrhaging to the public sector," said Ms Challans, who is a solicitor with the South Australian Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources.

"My employer provides paid maternity leave, a phased-in return to work, negotiated part-time arrangements of up to two years and then further negotiated flexible arrangements until the child is of school age," she said. "That is an industrial entitlement. But in the same profession - but in a different sector - the contrast is stark with the private sector," she said.

While most of the large private firms offer six months leave at normal rates, this is not the case with many of the nation's smaller and regional firms.

Ms Challans said one of the possible effects of the Coalition's policy might be to help smaller firms attract and retain women lawyers who might otherwise consider moving to the public sector. "This policy gives women choice and we strongly support the fact that it also includes the payment of superannuation.

"For women in the private sector, this is a significant step forward," Ms Challans said.

She said she hoped her term as president would be accompanied by moves to improve the prospects of women lawyers who were considering going to the Bar.

She said the number of women barristers who are briefed in commercial matters was very low. "It makes it hard for women to develop a career at the Bar in terms of court appearance time," she said.

Because relatively few women were going to the Bar, this diminished the pool of available female candidates for appointment to the bench, she said.

She believed the profession needed to re-examine the reasons behind the the difficulties experienced by women lawyers and identify systemic problems. "We need to identify the cultural biases and be honest about what is needed to fix it.

"If we don't provide an environment that supports and promotes women, we simply won't get the best talent."



Amy Challans said the Coalition's proposal appeared to be a significant advance on the current scheme. Picture: Kelly Barnes Source: News Limited