



Patrick Gorman MP
Federal Member for Perth

Tuesday, 17 August 2021

Ms Kate Jenkins
Sex Discrimination Commissioner
GPO Box 5218
SYDNEY NSW 2001

Dear Commissioner,

Submission to the Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces

Parliament House and the political culture of Australia needs to change.

I love Parliament House and the opportunities that working there has afforded me. Equally the opportunity to make a positive contribution to our nation.

Throughout my working life I have been so lucky to work across a range of roles in the parliamentary system. As a staffer to a backbencher, adviser to Prime Minister Rudd, Party Secretary and now as a member myself. My wife Jess and I met when we were both advisers to Foreign Minister Rudd.

The reports of this year show that minimal change is not enough. I believe that no single hotline, investigatory process or behavioural standards will fix cultural problems.

In many ways Parliament House in Canberra becomes a meeting point of the different cultures of the state political parties. This can at times be toxic. We even have in our political lexicon “the NSW disease” reflecting the perceived poor culture of the NSW Parliament.

Therefore, this submission proposes some ways we can improve the professionalism and culture of Parliamentary workplaces.

Structured management of staff

The current arrangements for the management of staff are quite loose. Implementing a structured staff management system where annual performance reviews are one of the many forms and processes that members must complete.

An explicit expectation of mentoring and coaching of staff should not only normalised, but also built into our regulatory systems.

Training and investing in our staff

A career in politics is a good career, and Australians, especially young Australians, should be encouraged to take up such a career.

Allocating specific training resources to the Parliamentary Political Parties would assist. Training will never be prioritised in small staffing pools, but if specifically allocated this would improve the culture of the workplace. This could be done on a similar process to the Australian Political Parties for Democracy Program.

A greater commitment to lifelong learning

Ensuring that staff continue to grow and learn is also important. I was fortunate to complete half of my Master of Business Administration while working as a staff member. Undoubtedly, this has assisted in my work now as a Parliamentarian.

While staff have access to study assistance, there is no compensation for a member who provides study leave. Providing additional relief staff in compensation for staff who are taking study leave would reduce pressure on staff and encourage increase in skills of Parliamentary workplaces.

Compulsory inductions

A proper, full day, compulsory induction program should be implemented.

You can't walk onto a mine site in Western Australia without undergoing at least a basic induction. Parliamentary offices have a range of staff who work from a day a week for a few months to staff who work in the parliamentary system for decades.

A universal induction program across harassment, discrimination, ethical behaviour combined with practical induction and how-tos would be a great improvement. This would be particularly valuable following elections or change of Government where there are large numbers of new staff.

In person human resources and assistance support

Some in office human resources support should be provided as a standard. This could involve a fortnightly visit from a Finance Department human resources and assistance officer to every electorate office.

It is human nature to trust people you work with more regularly. Having an independent but known person who regularly attends parliamentary workplaces, especially electorate offices, would assist.

Again, this is common in larger offices where someone can easily schedule a meeting with the Human Resources department in person.

Additional permanent staff for all electorate offices

The last major staffing upgrade for these offices was during the Howard Government when staffing increased from three to four full time staff. Prior to that it was 1985 when these offices grew from two full time staff to three.

I have been concerned that the nature of our political debate has become more toxic. On a daily basis now electorate staff are subject to inappropriate language and abuse delivered to electorate offices through the telephone, email and the management of social media accounts for members. The workload has increased over the last two decades.

Further, these offices also only employ in a comparatively narrow band of salary points when compared to ministerial and shadow ministerial staff. This creates power imbalances and draws experience away from the electorate office level.

Providing a more senior and appropriately remunerated chief of staff position for these offices would assist in retaining and recruiting people who can ensure positive, safe workplaces.

This appears to have worked well with the offices of the Independent Members.

Making Parliament more engaged with the community

As a member from Western Australia I am concerned that the Parliament is particularly separated from my community. I believe that one of the best ways we can improve parliamentary culture is to improve scrutiny.

I have always found that parliamentarians are on their best behaviour when school groups are around. More people seeing the Parliament in action will lead to a stronger parliament.

One way this could be achieved are by increasing the The Parliament and Civics Education Rebate so school groups truly can afford to visit their democracy. This will have the added benefit of encouraging more people to take an interest in this career and workplace.

Another is to have Parliament sit outside of Canberra on a rotating basis. This would build a more accountable democracy and engage more citizens in the positive work of the Parliament.

Public register of harassment and other policies of political parties

The complexity of the Parliamentary workplace where there is also a separate party structure for dispute resolution needs to be formally acknowledged. One simple step would be to require parliamentary political parties to submit to the Department of Finance their policies on preventing harassment and these documents being publicly available.

Clear pathways for the ending of employment

My first job was at McDonalds where we had a big yellow pad that had a template form for providing written warnings to employees. It is hard to understand why there is no such systems built for parliamentary offices.

A clear system for written warnings and process for the ending of employment should be outlined. This will provide more certainty for staff and for Members.

Endorsement of the Thwaites submission

Finally, I wish to endorse the ideas put forward in *Enough is Enough* by Kate Thwaites MP and Jenny Macklin. A strong and firm stand against poor behaviour is necessary if we are to truly improve culture.

Thank you for taking on this important task and I wish the review well in your deliberations.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Patrick P. Gorman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Patrick Gorman MP
Federal Member for Perth