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PART C: Submission

1. How would you describe the workplace culture(s) of the Commonwealth parliamentary workplace(s) where you work/have worked? Please outline specific strengths and/or weaknesses in terms of workplace culture(s), based on your experiences, as appropriate.

As a staffer, this workplace culture was very intense. I was forewarned about this by the staff members employing me and, having worked in [REDACTED] beforehand, fully expected it. Still, the job was all-consuming, felt very high-stakes (for my organisation, rather than for me personally) and left no room for a coherent life outside work. Personal life was expected to come second, and while we desired work-life balance for the community at large, we did not feel resourced enough to practice this ourselves. From the outset there was little expectation that any staff member would stay more than a few years - the [REDACTED] role in particular was known to burn through people quickly. For all staff there was a sense that this job wouldn't be forever, so we had to just give it our all while we were there.

Similarly, when I worked in Parliament House as a [REDACTED] I generally found the environment collegiate but competitive. Working on budget night and election night meant strange hours, in a very fast pace, with a huge array of personalities and a lot of people that I knew (or knew me) only a little.

2. Based on your experiences, what are the factors that already do, or could contribute to a safe and respectful environment in Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces?

Common purpose was a binding factor. All of our staff and MPs were there with a shared vision of what we wanted to achieve, and we respected each other for the parts we each played. I had managers who I felt were my advocates - I could confide in them about difficulties with the job or interpersonal challenges. Like in any job, after some time settling in and proving myself I felt I could ask for support and some leniency, like sharing very demanding tasks and taking a day off when I was thoroughly exhausted. [REDACTED] I believe I am speaking for more than just myself when I say we treated most people we came into contact with in the building the same - we would engage politely and professionally with security, cafe staff, MPs, cleaners, public servants and each other. As some of the only political staff who worked in Parliament House during non-sitting weeks, my colleagues and I also formed a close relationship, so we could ask each other for advice and support.

3. Based on your experiences, what are the factors that may contribute to workplace bullying, sexual harassment or sexual assault in Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces?

Political offices are so outward facing - so concerned with influencing voters and other decision-makers - that internal matters come a very distant second. I believe that some MPs and senior advisers would not recognise that part of their job is leadership within their offices, caring for junior staff and contributing to a safe workplace. I certainly believe most MPs, and staff who manage other staff, would not know what to do if an employee came forward with a report of sexual misconduct, or if they became aware of it some other way.

The employing MP's temperament, and the tone they set, can strongly influence how staff model their behaviour - how they treat their colleagues and other people around the building. If MPs don't recognise that they have a duty of care to staff, this could easily take a back seat for the Chief of Staff and other managers who believe they have 'more important things' to work on. There is no common metric for success as an employing MP, other than political achievement and re-election. Some MPs would include supporting staff along their career path, having a cohesive office, and individual wellbeing, but not all.

Contact with the employing MP can also be very limited. As a [REDACTED] this was not my experience, but I was surprised to hear, during the [REDACTED] election year, that some of my colleagues hadn't seen or spoken to our boss for weeks at a time. This means that even good bosses, who are kind and appreciative, do not necessarily get to set the tone in the office. The staff team can become very fragmented - sometimes physically isolated from each other - with very little oversight, support, or opportunity to raise their voices.

Hierarchy and a lack of transparency stand out to me as making workers vulnerable. Information is tightly controlled - sometimes with good reason, but sometimes to the detriment of staff. I think this is possible in any workplace, but when senior advisers/managers are accustomed to holding more information than they commonly share, they don't always recognise when it would be more professional or reassuring to be upfront with information. As a staffer it is common to half-know something, or be aware that something is happening but not know the detail. This makes all staff susceptible to not offering help even if you know a colleague is suffering, or believing (like in the old days of domestic violence) that, "It's none of my business so I won't get involved". To this day I am still not sure if a close friend, who was made to feel very uncomfortable by one of our male colleagues, wanted to do anything about it, or if she did do anything, or even exactly what happened. Our contact was so fleeting during the frenzy of the election campaign, the days going so fast it was hard to find time to eat or sleep. I only know that our Senator approached her to talk about it, which also made her uncomfortable as she hadn't been the one to raise it with him. The male staffer seemed to get a serious talking to, and nothing else.

The cult of personality is very intense when you're working for an MP. It is your job to advance them, promote them and protect them, and I did find myself defending our boss, even to my colleagues. I wasn't quite unable to see fault, but I almost reflexively dismissed or minimised any gripes my colleagues would have, justifying my boss' behaviour and always seeing things first and foremost from his point of view - how he was busy and tired and stressed, and he probably meant to say hello or happy birthday to you but he was distracted. That kind of thing. Our boss was genuinely kind and well-meaning so I do think some of my colleagues were a bit hard on him (as any staff tend to be about any boss) but I see how, in a more serious situation, a staff team or senior staff could reflexively protect and defend their MPs. The MP is the reason the staff have an opportunity to be there, and our most crucial asset if we're to achieve the reforms we

came to Parliament to advance. Regardless of who is involved, any allegation of bullying, harassment or assault would be seen as a serious threat against the existence and efficacy of the entire workplace, and the victim/survivor could easily be seen as the problem to be managed.

I would also say the risk factors would be very different depending on the classification of the office you're in. Ministerial offices at APH have a combination of political staffers and public servants sitting in them. Backbench offices are probably like crossbench offices, with very small teams and sometimes only one staffer accompanying an MP to Canberra for sitting weeks (due to their limited travel budgets). In any Leader's office in the building [REDACTED] Leader of the Opposition, Leader of the Government in the Senate etc) there are more staff who have different allowances, and any range of combinations of Canberra-based or electorate-based staff. In my personal experience, Senator [REDACTED] had staff split across three locations - the [REDACTED] electorate office, the Canberra Senate suite and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Offices in [REDACTED]. Senator [REDACTED] similarly had a [REDACTED] office, until a [REDACTED] office became available, staff in the Canberra Senate suite and staff at the [REDACTED]. In principle I think the flexibility is good, but in practice I think there is a big risk around isolation, particularly when small teams are split into even smaller teams. Any rules that apply intra-office will need to apply inter-office to be effective, as often staff members spend more time with people from other offices than their own. For example, [REDACTED] [REDACTED], I'd interact more with members of the Press Gallery than I did with electorate office staff employed by my senator.

"Out of hours work" is obviously a huge issue as well - the 'work adjacent' nights in Manuka that are so valuable in the long-run, building relationships and getting to know people better outside of the rush of sitting days, but are also intertwined with alcohol, under-fed, over-tired and over-excited people. This was the case as both a staffer and a journalist - the parties after the [REDACTED] election and the [REDACTED] budget were an intermingling of politicians, staff, media and probably lobbyists and others. These did not take place at Parliament House but featured all/most of the same people, and I would be surprised if anyone considered that any existing code of conduct requirements applied there. I strongly believe they should.

There being no nominated "work hours" would definitely lead to some of this unprofessional behaviour inside the workplace. Staff have an allowance in lieu of overtime, so we're effectively always on. MPs have no leave entitlements, they just work or don't at any time on any day. This could easily lead to confusion, or more likely just a relaxing of conduct across the board. If you're never officially off the clock, more casual behaviour would seep in to your everyday behaviour. Your workplace is also essentially wherever you go - on a plane, waiting at the airport, in a hotel room, in a car, at a desk in this city, at a desk in that city, wherever you are when a journalist calls you or your boss calls you on your work phone - so it is very hard to draw a line about where your personal life ends and work begins. I understand how people end up drinking with their colleagues who double as their friends, or behaving unprofessionally inside Parliament House, when the whole world and the whole week, every week, is a workplace.

4. Are you familiar with any Commonwealth parliamentary workplace policies, processes and/or practices in relation to staff and worker safety and wellbeing, workplace bullying, sexual harassment or sexual assault? If so, please outline your understanding of how these policies, processes and/or practices operate.

I believe there was a MOPS code of conduct, but if there was one applying to MPs I wasn't familiar with its contents. I would not have known what to do about bullying, sexual harassment or sexual assault other than speak to a trusted colleague, in the first instance.

5. During your time working in a Commonwealth parliamentary workplace(s), have/did you receive any education or training in relation to worker safety and wellbeing, and/or how to prevent or respond to workplace bullying, sexual harassment or sexual assault? If yes, please outline your experience of the training and whether it was useful in increasing your knowledge and/or skills in relation to preventing and responding to workplace bullying, sexual harassment or sexual assault.

No. We didn't even do a fire drill until my final year there! We did an 'active shooter' exercise, only after the Ministerial wing had already done one, which (without exaggeration, in the time of machine guns being stationed outside Parliament House and some threats made against the building) gave us in the Senate wing the sense that our lives were considered to be less important than those people who worked in the Ministerial wing. This is an example of the

hierarchy that I consider to be the biggest risk factor at APH. The full-time population at Parliament House is not that big - we could have done this exercise simultaneously, and we all deserved access to the same resources and training. Until that time I hadn't known there was a panic button under our office's front desk.

6. Are you aware of how you and/or other people working in Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces can report workplace bullying, sexual harassment or sexual assault (either formally or informally)? If yes, please specify what reporting options exist, and outline your experience with accessing and/or using those reporting options if applicable.

No. My only awareness of workplace bullying came through gossip and media enquiries. Bullying behaviours are so common (look at Question Time) that I think people accept some level of behaviour that would be obviously inappropriate in other professional contexts.

7. Are you aware of any supports available in Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces to people who experience workplace bullying, sexual harassment or sexual assault? If yes, please specify what supports exist, and outline your experience with accessing and/or using those supports if applicable.

No. I imagine I would have asked MOPS though, and we did have access to an EAP. The EAP was promoted quite well, from memory.

8. Based on your experiences, do you have any suggestions or recommendations on how to improve the prevention of and responses to workplace bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault in Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces?

Having been a Canberra-based staffer for the entire time of my MOPS employment, and an occasional worker in the [REDACTED] at APH, I am mostly focused on APH rather than other parliamentary workplaces. My primary recommendation would be to level the playing field and strip away the implicit hierarchy at Parliament House. In short, I would recommend that all people who work at Parliament House are provided with the same information and training, are required to adhere to the same code of conduct, have access to the same complaints procedures and dispute resolution processes, whether they're an MP, political staffer, departmental staff, media, security, cleaners, or other.

In working together we are all exposed to the same risks - anyone could be felt up by a drunk staffer, politician or journalist - and people shouldn't feel less empowered to respond simply due to the position they hold. I know of an MP who demanded their staff walk a certain amount of steps behind them. I know sometimes the chamber attendants are exposed to the foul language of MPs on the floor. We all probably saw the 4 Corners report where a female security guard didn't feel it was 'her place' to ask a naked Brittany Higgins if she was okay. This should not be the case. Any person should be able to expect a certain standard of conduct at their workplace, to know when something is wrong and know what they can and should do about it. Those expectations should be clear and shared whether you are the highest or lowest paid, employed under this agreement or that, elected or appointed, permanent or temporary.

There are many different employers with staff at Parliament House: Department of the Senate, Parliamentary Education Office, Department of Finance (MOPS), contract cleaners, every media organisation with a worker in the Press Gallery, etc. It would be very hard for a million different HR policies across all these employers to interact effectively, so I would suggest that by virtue of being in the building, there is one overriding policy/framework that should apply. This way, a shared knowledge and understanding will develop over time, the sense of isolation for lone staff of an employer will decrease, a workplace culture will develop with shared expectations and ultimately, improved accountability. The exceptionalism that MPs apply to themselves and everyone else gifts to them should end - this will flow down to badly-behaving senior staff and improve culture and accountability from the top.

For this to happen there will probably need to be some specific 'Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces' body formed, to be responsible for developing and consulting on the code of conduct, processes and procedures; updating them as needed; rolling out appropriate training and; managing the reports of conduct breaches. This could be based at APH or elsewhere. There should probably be a register where all employers at Parliament House are required to sign on to the code in order to place any employee at Parliament House or a Commonwealth parliamentary workplace, and a register for all employees to ensure they not only read the code but agree to be held to its standards, with a clear understanding of the repercussions for any breaches. This could form part of a standard APH induction process, that could cover worker safety and wellbeing, bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault responses, as well as basic

things like the fire doors, evacuation procedures, internal threat procedures, how to access and appropriately use the meditation room, how to access the APH childcare, etcetc. I really think all employees, in a management role or not, should know how to deal with a serious allegation (bullying, harassment, assault) so that they know what to do if one is ever disclosed to them, but also so they know what to expect of their manager/confidant if they ever make a report themselves.

9. Is there anything else you would like to tell the Commission?

Thank you for conducting this inquiry and for being open and respectful in your engagement. I have heard only positive things about others' engagement to date.

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