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- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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.

The workplace culture in the electorate office where I worked was one in which the staff all lived and worked in perpetual fear of being terminated by the MP. We were constantly reminded of the MP's power in this regard, with one or other staff member regularly being threatened with dismissal (in one instance [REDACTED] people were simultaneously threatened with dismissal). Initially we all found this very distressing, because we really wanted to do well in our respective roles, although gradually the effect of the repeated threats lessened.

Alongside this constant threat of termination in the office, was a culture of blame by the MP where any problem that arose required somebody to take responsibility. Far more time was taken in determining which staff member was guilty than in finding a solution to the problem. With the constant threat of dismissal in the air, staff members would throw each other under the bus rather than admitting to their own mistakes, which led to considerable ill-feeling between colleagues.

Those staffers who were found guilty by the MP of some minor incursion were then treated so harshly by him that in many instances they were unable to concentrate on their work and had to go home for the rest of the day – or the rest of the week. This resulted in a reduction of office efficiency and lesser support to constituents in need.

The MP's bad mood was not limited to threats of termination, and when in Parliament House on one occasion he lost his temper with a staff member so badly that he [REDACTED]. The staff member left Canberra immediately and went on sick leave for several weeks whilst deciding what to do next, which created further upheaval and staff shortages for the office.

The office culture was based upon priority being given by the MP to fundraising at the expense of constituent support. When I was first appointed to the electorate office there was no mention of any fundraising work being required of me, however, it quickly became apparent that there was an unspoken expectation on the part of the MP that I would carry out this role along with other colleagues. Staff members who delivered fundraising activities were deemed more valuable than those who worked very hard to secure the best outcomes for constituents and the electorate as a whole; this latter group of staff occupied lower paid, temporary positions in the office and were generally treated by the MP as expendable. However, those staff who successfully fundraised, or were considered to have the connections necessary to achieve this aim, were promoted and well-rewarded.

There was an underlying lack of trust between staff in the electorate office for the first [REDACTED] [REDACTED] that I was there, because the then [REDACTED] used to set staff up to spy on each other and then inform back to him. He also attempted to coerce the [REDACTED] into spying on me after hours, as I used to do a lot of evening work by myself which the office manager wanted to try and monitor without having to be there himself. There would have been no point expressing any concern to the MP about this, given his lack of interest in personnel issues.

The culture of the office was also one where the workloads were very unequal. The office was initially burdened with a [REDACTED] who was appointed by the MP because he was a personal friend. The new [REDACTED] had never worked in [REDACTED] or an electorate office before or for any level of government and had taken on the position for a free ride on the back of his friendship with the MP. Consequently, the rest of us had to do all his work despite being paid less than him, and this led to constant ill-feeling in the office which the MP was determined to discount and ignore. The rest of us were made to feel like trouble-makers for bringing the [REDACTED] non-performance to the MP's attention. The staffer remained a millstone around all our necks for [REDACTED] until he was finally performance managed out.

In [REDACTED] the MP was appointed as an [REDACTED], and once again he recruited a person to an [REDACTED] position on the basis of his friendship with him, and this person also had no relevant experience, qualifications or skills. He also created disharmony within the office due to his lack of ability and lack of motivation, and arising from his incompetence there was significant conflict amongst the staff which the MP was not prepared to acknowledge or manage. Apparently the MP had learned nothing from his previous unsuccessful recruitment of a mate to a senior position.

After [REDACTED] in the office I was promoted to the position of Office Manager, and found that, among other tasks, the MP expected me to terminate the staff who had incurred his wrath. He directed me to do his dirty work, and I was very unpopular with him when I inevitably disagreed and put the onus back on him to do the sacking.

The negative culture of the office in which I worked is, I believe, illustrated by the fact that [REDACTED] one staff member [REDACTED]

I continued to work for the MP because the electorate office was only a short distance from [REDACTED], and because I enjoyed the involvement with the constituents and wider community. If it were not for these advantages I do not believe I would have remained there for more than a few months.

If I were still employed at the electorate office, I would be unable to make these comments – even anonymously - for fear of reprisals, however, I can provide this submission because

I no longer work for the MP. I am convinced that no current employee in that office would be prepared to speak the truth for fear of retribution.

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?

A safer and more respectful environment could be created by removing the MP's right to dismiss staff without due discussion and liaison with the relevant staff member and without showing very strong and validated reasons for taking that step.

Another factor would be working for an MP who has undertaken training in personnel recruitment and management at least once during every Parliamentary term and who is trained to take a keen interest in the well-being of staff, and who does not simply view them as workhorses with the sole purpose of getting the MP re-elected.

A respectful parliamentary workplace environment is also where the electorate office manager is able to hear and act upon concerns of subordinate staff and take those matters up with the MP without putting their own position at risk.

A safer and more respectful environment could be created by having suitably skilled and qualified staff appointed to work in electorate offices who have participated in an appropriate recruitment and selection process before being appointed to work according to a comprehensive job description. This provides a greater likelihood of appropriate workloads and a suitable level of pay in return, which results in greater harmony and respect amongst colleagues.

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

Factors that may contribute are:

- A belief on the part of many staffers that there is nobody they can turn to, and a fear on the part of a staffer that any reporting of bullying or harassment will result in being labelled a trouble-maker and/or the loss of their job with no reference to support their necessary future quest for alternative employment.
- The MP's right to terminate a staffer's employment without warning or due reason, which makes the employee unwilling to speak out about unjust treatment either by the MP or by another staff member for fear of being sacked.
- The MP's right to employ staff on the basis of a pre-existing friendship without due investigation and consideration of their suitability for the tasks required. Inappropriate staff can then avoid doing work by virtue of being mates with the MP, and can use their friendship with the MP to bully other staff (particularly younger personnel) into taking on work for which the MP's mate has no skill or interest.
- The lack of compulsory training for MPs in personnel recruitment and management matters. The MP whom I worked for was elected without ever having had any experience in or exposure to personnel issues, and his approach to staff management was to ignore personnel problems until they became really serious. Then he would lose his temper spectacularly and threaten to sack everybody involved, which was a real disincentive to speaking out about any personnel problems, let alone those relating to bullying or

harrasment.

- The lack of regular compulsory training for office managers in personnel recruitment and management matters. For ██████████ I reported to an office manager who thought he was suitably trained in personnel issues after being ██████████, and he did not attend any of the office manager info sessions offered by the Department because he believed he could apply the same techniques in an electorate office as had applied in a ██████████. According to him (and the MP who was ██████████), ██████████ in disagreement were sent out to the ██████████ to sort out their issues by themselves, and the same processes were applied to the staff in our electorate office.

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.

During my ██████████ as an Office Manager, I attended every single training session for Office Managers that was provided in ██████████ by Parliamentary Services. However, I am not familiar with any policies or processes in relation to bullying or harassment that have a practical application when MPs can terminate a staff member without reason or justification.

Likewise, none of these policies have a practical application if the MP is just not interested when these concerns are raised.

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.

Ditto above.

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.

Ditto above. Any form of reporting would be very risky, because in order for any change to be effected the MP would have to become aware of the report, which would be most unpopular with the MP and in the situation I have experienced it would very likely result in immediate dismissal.

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.

Ditto above.

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?

The ability of an MP to terminate a staff member without due grounds should be significantly reined in, as I believe the fear of being sacked is fundamentally what prevents staff from reporting workplace bullying and harassment. MPs should only be able to sack a staffer after due discussion and agreement with the Department of Finance.

In [REDACTED] I successfully lodged a claim for unfair dismissal and received a financial settlement, however, the outcome of my unfair dismissal claim did not teach the MP a sufficiently effective lesson, because there were no consequences for him. In [REDACTED] the MP for whom I had worked dismissed another completely blameless staff member without any due grounds, which resulted in another successful claim for unfair dismissal and more expense to the taxpayer.

I believe that MPs who terminate a staff member which results in a successful unfair dismissal claim should be required to pay the resulting settlement out of their own pockets. This would act as a disincentive for them to sack staff on a whim, and would reduce the burden on the public purse.

There should be compulsory training for MPs and office managers in personnel recruitment and management matters. These should be held at the start of each Parliamentary term, and each MP should be required to participate every time.

Senior electorate office staff should only be appointed by the MP after consultation with the Department of Finance, and after it has been demonstrated that the position has a job description, has been advertised, applicants have been interviewed and reference checked.

A better workplace culture that focusses more upon constituent support could be fostered by removing the ability of MPs to force staff into constant fundraising and campaign activities whether they wish to undertake these roles or not.

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

As mentioned above, in [REDACTED] I successfully lodged a claim for unfair dismissal from my role as Office Manager for an MP. The termination occurred in [REDACTED] because the MP was unhappy about a [REDACTED]. Before I was even aware of what been [REDACTED], and before he had any discussion with me, the MP [REDACTED].

He then tried to bully me into resigning in order to provide credibility to [REDACTED]. I refused to resign, because [REDACTED] was only an unsubstantiated and incorrect allegation which I have never had the chance to respond to. I had lengthy discussions with personnel in the Department of Finance to try and find a resolution. However, when I continued to refuse to resign the MP formally terminated me [REDACTED].

I believe I was competent at my job, the constituents appreciated my efforts and the other staff were well supported by me, which makes the MP's actions all the more futile and upsetting. I was then [REDACTED] and have not been able to find any paid work since.

This experience underpins my recommendation that MPs should not be able to sack staff without showing very strong cause.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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