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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.

The workplace culture in Parliament House is relatively intense, particularly during sitting weeks. There is lots to be done, high stakes, tight deadlines, and plenty of people lined up for your job if you err. I was fortunate to work in a relatively stable [REDACTED] office (with one or two exceptional periods), with consistent staffing arrangements and well-established procedures. Interpersonal disputes happened from time to time, usually during times of high stress, but nothing I would consider out of the ordinary for a workplace. We were encouraged to take training courses (and given the budget and time off as well) and to improve our skills and experience. Young staff were given encouragement and opportunities to grow and mature.

The [REDACTED] office was more difficult. The [REDACTED] came from a public service background with a very hierarchical viewpoint, which is not conducive to a functional ministerial office in my opinion. Such a small team should not be arbitrarily divided by job titles and ranks - this insistence by the [REDACTED] caused issues. There was little in the way of training or support - it was sink or swim. This is somewhat understandable - once an MP becomes a minister they are expected to perform at 100% from day one, and their staff are too.

The line between personal and professional was particularly blurred in Parliament House (the [REDACTED] office was very different - much more like a 9-5 environment). I was fortunate to have a wife and children, which kept me grounded. But rumours were rife about hook ups between staffers, MPs, Senators, and Ministers, and there were times I witnessed encounters between staff and office holders that could be considered flirty or inappropriate, particularly if you were a co-worker (favouritism was a genuine concern at times). I never witnessed any encounters that appeared to be unwanted or non-consensual.

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

Alcohol abuse and power structures. Almost any incident of inappropriate behaviour I witnessed in Parliament House involved copious amounts of alcohol. Stop the excess alcohol consumption, and 99% of these issues will disappear. When my former boss first entered Parliament, he was told by an experienced senator "if you pay for your own drink around here, you're not doing it right!" He was correct - free alcohol flows around Parliament House every night, plus in restaurants and offices nearby, and it leads to most of the issues.

The other major issue is that power is concentrated in too few hands with too little accountability. By definition, ministers must have a lot of power, but they also have a lot of accountability and responsibility for their decisions. Senior staff however also hold lots of power, but have little responsibility. Because ministers have so many responsibilities, chiefs of staff tend to be able to hire and fire, or make life for a particular staffer horrible, with little oversight. There is not really a viable way to complain either. In my case, I was close to my former boss, having done the hard yards with him since he was a [REDACTED] so I was somewhat protected. But some of the newer staff were not treated well by senior staff - criticised openly, ideas dismissed out of hand in front of coworkers, overlooked for trips and opportunities for no apparent reason, etc. This will happen in any power-stratified workplace, but I feel that it's particularly bad in Parliament House.

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 never really looked up any policies or procedures. I just worked on the basis that I should treat my colleagues like I would want someone to treat my sister.

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.

Not that I recall.

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

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

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?

Severely limit alcohol consumption - potentially introduce random breath-testing for staff and MPs each morning.

Address the cultural issues of people staying late at Parliament House and blurring personal and private lives. Encourage people to leave at 6pm instead of 10pm. Make the working conditions friendly for staff with families - more mature and grounded staff would help the workplace mix, which is mostly young people without families or partners.

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