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# Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces

Dear Commissioner Jenkins,

Our Federal representatives should set the standard for workplace culture, being the legislators of important work health and safety laws - but unfortunately, we have seen of late a toxic environment exposed in our national capital.

Allegations of abhorrent sexual abuse, sexual harassment, sexism and internal office bullying are disturbing and disappointing to hear from Parliament House.

Before embarking further on this letter, I wish to note that I am writing this as a straight, white male, who has not experienced sexual harassment, abuse or sexism experienced by others.

This submission seeks not to draw attention away from those critically important cases, but rather add support to the need for their voices to be heard.

After joining the Electorate Office team of [REDACTED] Federal Member for [REDACTED] as a [REDACTED] [REDACTED], I have made roughly a dozen trips to Parliament House. At the beginning of [REDACTED], I was appointed [REDACTED] responsible for the small team of [REDACTED] staff.

My experience in our nation's capital has often been an exciting one, for such a "political geek" to work in the heart of our national democracy.

But beneath the allure of public service and giving a voice to those in our community lies a monstrously toxic work environment: long hours, short deadlines, stressful work, a disconnect from home and family, and a building where its occupants are obsessed by networking and taking the next step on the ladder.

There is also the problem of isolation within Parliament House suites separating Members and staff from inter-office colleagues. The only time when people tend to gather is with a problematic amount of alcohol.

While I acknowledge this inquiry will largely be focussed on the culture within Parliament House and the Ministerial offices, there are contributing factors which stem from the early days of a Member of Parliament at the Electorate Office level.

I would like to thank Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins, and the support staff of the inquiry for running this process and shining a light into our workplaces. The work you are undertaking and questions you are asking will set the standard for how our offices operate.

Should the inquiry wish to follow up any of the comments I have made below, please feel free to contact me on [REDACTED] or via email at [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]

## OFFICE SETUP AND CULTURE

A Member of Parliament's office culture will start when they are first elected and set up the office. Both conscious decisions, such as the choice to establish a positive office culture, or subconscious decisions such as selection of staff members or who to send to Canberra.

Difficulties for any oversight body are clear. Offices are structured and work according to the needs of the Parliamentarian, as the employer. All Ministerial and Electorates are different. When first setting up an office, there is no "how-to" book for MPs setting up or structuring their offices.

As one of the first members of staff employed for [REDACTED] office, I was able to play a unique role in the initial set up of the team, as well as working with the team to set up a healthy office culture.

One unique factor in the Electorate Office is all [REDACTED] staff members were employed from outside the standard Parliamentary and party networks - in the team currently we have a [REDACTED] who worked in local community services, a [REDACTED], an [REDACTED] from the private sector and a former [REDACTED].

Bringing work experience from outside the staffing "bubble" and from non-political workplaces has made our office culture positive and strong. One temporary staff member told me the culture and sense of camaraderie within [REDACTED] office was so positive, it had highlighted the need for her to quit her previously held job in a toxic environment.

***Suggestion: Encourage all Members of Parliament to employ staff members from outside standard Parliamentary or party networks. This could take the form of mandatory advertising for all fixed positions in Electorate Offices.***

## AN INDEPENDENT EMPLOYER

Developing an employment structure for Members of Parliament is a complicated task, given the dual pressures; ensuring the Member has the right to hire their own members of staff, while maintaining a consistent employment framework and conditions across more than 250 separate electorate and ministerial offices.

This is further complicated by maintaining the external employment body as a structure of Government, causing concern for staff of both Government and Opposition members that any complaint made against an MP or Senator could be used politically.

The democratic voice of an electorate to choose its elected representative also presents a hurdle, given complaints made against a Member or Senator, in this case, one half of the employing authority, can hardly be enforced with any form of employment termination or sanctions, given the choice is ultimately for the voters to make.

As a result of this unique employment structure, all standard employment support services, including human resources and payroll, property management and IT support, are centrally located in Canberra, with insufficient resources allocated to State-based offices.

This is especially difficult in [REDACTED], where the more than 80 electorate and ministerial office staff are supported by fewer than [REDACTED] staff in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Offices in [REDACTED].

To ensure proper oversight, as well as an appropriate process for receiving and addressing complaints raised by employees, this inquiry should consider an independent employment model, outside of Government.

One such body which could provide the housing for such is the Independent Parliamentary Expenses Authority. Currently tasked with running the ruler over the spending of MPs and their staff, this body could be used to set up an independent employment and human resources structure.

This new body could also take responsibility for all employment and entitlement needs for MPs and Senators, including the approval process for travel and communications entitlements, services currently provided the Ministerial and Parliamentary Service Centre, as well as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Offices.

***Suggestion: Establish an independent “one-stop shop” for MPs and Senators employment and entitlement needs, housed within the current structure for IPEA, and appropriately funded by Government.***

## **INDUCTION PROCESS**

New staff are not required to take part in any form of induction and are sometimes simply placed at their computer and told what to do.

While there is difficulty in creating an induction program that covers the varied nature in which offices operate, this is not a reason for there to be no standardised program.

Between the Department of Finance, the individual offices and the political parties, a program of several days could be developed which allows the new employee to be inducted in the internal processes of the office, any complaint systems policies managed by the political party, and the human resources component of Department of Finance.

This induction process could detail how employees can access services such as the Employee Assistant Programme, apply for leave and assist office managers in ensuring all correct forms have been signed off on.

***Suggestion: Mandate an induction process for several days for new staff, either in Canberra or in the nearest capital city which covers off internal office, party political and Department of Finance processes.***

***Suggestion: Encourage all Members of Parliament to create an internal “office guide” to provide all new staff with a go-to guide of operations within the office.***

## WORKLOAD OF ELECTORATE OFFICERS

There is a simple trick an Electorate Officer can use to calculate the cost their job is having on their life: each year spent in the role is the equivalent of two years in any other standard role.

Politics is an incredibly stressful environment where the high standards often bring staff members undone. While a toxic approach, failure is often viewed as not acceptable.

One major point I believe the inquiry needs to consider when making findings or recommendations for Electorate Offices is the sheer workload required. Each MP is entitled to four FTE staffing positions, a level which has not changed since 2007.

Staff are required to offer constituent support; correspond with Federal Government departments regarding issues; maintain a “shopfront style” presence in the community; respond to emails and phone calls (leading to long conversations with constituents, who sometimes seek a form of counselling through these correspondence); maintain a diary of events and meetings with stakeholders and constituents for the Member; staff the Member at meetings and events, including follow up tasks; handle and ensure an annual office budget of more than \$250,000 a year, the Member’s electorate allowance of \$32,000 p/a and an Electorate Support Budget of more than \$100,000 p/a are spent within the guidelines set out by the regulations and the expectations of the community; draft speeches for Parliament and community events; work on policy papers; provide research services; support the Member’s committee work; run outreach events in the community; prepare and organise mailouts and printed materials for distribution in the community; maintain a presence on social media and through email contact lists; take and edit photographs and create video content; and more.

At the time of the decision to increase the staffing resources to four FTE, the Hon. Gary Nairn MP, Special Minister of State, said:

*“Senators and Members of the House of Representatives will be allocated an additional electorate officer to assist with the workload brought about by improved communications and new technology in recent years. In particular, the advent of e-mail and heightened awareness and availability of government services have raised community expectations. Constituents now have open and direct communication with their MPs and therefore expect prompt replies.”<sup>1</sup>*

Since then, the wide-spread rollout of internet connectivity has dramatically increased the demands on Electorate Officers. Social media means Members of Parliament are seen to be “available” 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

This is exacerbated by legal requirements of staff to monitor comments on social media websites such as Facebook or Twitter so as not expose the Member of Parliament to any risk of defamation action, as per *Voller vs Nationwide News Pty Ltd (et al)*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Media Release, “MPs Staffing Boosted to Meet Community Demands,” 11 January 2007

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.caselaw.nsw.gov.au/decision/5d0c5f4be4b08c5b85d8a60d>

The pace of change, and the advent of email on smartphones have made staff accessible for work at all hours, often leading to Electorate Officers having the stress of their workload compounded while at home.

***Suggestion: Staffing resources should be lifted to five FTE for all Members of Parliament.***

This matter is complicated with the Electorate Support Budget (ESB) used for both the travel requirements of staff and relief staff when Electorate Officers are required to be temporarily supported.

Electorate Officers need the support in the form of extra staff during peak times of constituent engagement, and relying on untrained and irregular staff members weakens the team's ability to meet those constituent demands.

The ESB does not allow for the Member of Parliament to be adequately staffed while fulfilling their Parliamentary duties. It also creates a dangerous work environment where just one staff member is responsible for the full support of a Member of Parliament while in Canberra for Parliamentary duties.

The burden and the blame for the Member's performance falls at the feet of one staff member.

***Suggestion: The Electorate Support Budget should be increased to allow for two staffers for each Parliamentary trip, as well as additional relief support.***