

To: Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces
Australian Human Rights Commission
Level 3, 175 Pitt Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

From: Helen Cooney

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Dear Commissioner Jenkins,

I give permission for this submission and my name to be published on the Commission's website.

I seek to be involved in this review because [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] am now a person with direct experience in the areas under Review.

Yours sincerely,



Helen Cooney

Where have I worked?

Here is a quick history of my link to Parliamentary Workplaces:

- [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
- I am now in a role that requires me to engage with a range of Members of Parliament and their staff on a range of issues, as I am working in the national office of a union.
- Having grown up and spent formative years in Canberra, my friends work in and around Parliament, including on the Hill facilitating the operations and in central and portfolio departments and agencies.

- I have professional expertise in organisational culture – as a former strategy adviser and a former CEO, and as a coach. I am a practicing, qualified, registered and insured organisational coach, with membership of the International Coach Federation. I provide support to clients working through changes and challenges in their professional life.
- My clients have worked in a range of environments, including politics. Their discussions with me are confidential, and I am subject to a code of conduct which includes adhering to that confidentiality.

What was/is it like?

I see the culture of the Commonwealth Parliament for MaPS Act staff as:

- a values driven workplace, where the values differ. It is characterised by social and professional groupings by alignment of values and socioeconomics, and
- staffed by people who are highly skilled, highly motivated, and highly paid. It is characterised by people who want to make the world a better place and are working for that cause - but their version of a better place can be different to the very people they are working with on that goal.

What I would like to say:

In my experience, good workplace cultures come from the top, and in this environment, the top is the Chamber and each member of it.

The offices that were the most successful at achieving their MPs objectives for their constituency and for their MP were led by MPs who were skilled at, or delegated to a CoS skilled with:

- good people management (how to motivate and support staff) and
- industrial and employment knowledge (an understanding of legal obligations).

These were the offices I felt safest to send team members unaccompanied. They were also those I felt comfortable joining for dinner whatever their politics may have been.

The leaders in these offices consistently had experience in industry that included people management and/or learning from mistakes about their obligations. They were self-reflective or had been required to be so early in their career.

Often the MP has great professional experience and has been an advocate. Perhaps they were a lawyer, an adviser/consultant, or a schoolteacher. The best of these understood their role as employer and their knowledge gaps and chose a CoS who knew about people management and their obligations. Sometimes the MP had excellent experience and guided their CoS well.

I did see offices that failed to deliver safe workplaces. I saw people bully MPs, my colleagues and members of my team. It was often let go or gossiped about it so that future victims could prevent the situation, rather than naming it or holding the person to account.

Part of the reason people – including me – didn't deal with it better is that we were tired. I would reach for 'flight' or 'protection' rather than 'fight' or 'hold to account'.

That was in part because all my amygdala energy got used in the other part of my role – public speaking, arguing the case, interviewing witnesses, getting across my brief. Being 'on' all the time with others who judge you, including – and necessarily – the constituents and pre-selectors.

This exhaustion is seen as a given and the impact is entirely accepted and underacknowledged – despite all the brain research about sleep.

During sitting weeks, people don't get much sleep.

If the sitting hours were reasonable (say 9.30am-5.30pm with a lunch break or 9.30am-10.30pm with a lunch and dinner break), the preparation meetings and work-related events would be contained to between 8.30am and 10.30pm. The 'good' people in the workplace could make a better contribution and help clean up the culture.

There is some resistance to this, based on assumptions. The first assumption is that more weeks in Canberra are needed for reasonable hours to work. 2020 has taught us you do not need to be in Canberra all the time and the use of the Federation Chamber has taught us you can change the agenda and how much work can fit into it. The second is people will still start at 6am and finish at 1am. During lunch and after work, people would still be working at dinners and events, but they can start earlier and that allows the 'good' people to be rested for their day ahead.

What should change?

There should be *mandated training in people management* for MPs every 12 months from a panel of providers across the country so that they can be somewhat anonymous but get an industry standard of training.

There should be *mandated training in employment obligations* for MPs every 12 months from a panel of providers so that they can be somewhat anonymous but get an industry standard of training.

Together, this would mean MPs get training every 6 months on how to manage their team. They might not choose to do it well, but bringing the whole culture to one of treating staff with respect will make the recalcitrant more noticeable and more likely to be responded to and deal with.

People need rest – *Sitting days should include a lunch break, start at 8.30am, with the parliament starting at 9.30am and finishing at 5.30pm.*