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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 Parliamentary Departments were focussed on serving members of parliament, and their executives were extremely sensitive to levels of satisfaction expressed by members and senators. This sensitivity sat alongside an internal frankness about the variable qualities and personal attributes of the elected representatives. The departments placed a high premium on discretion and confidentiality. They also projected themselves as places of importance: ones in which it was a privilege to work, serving a cornerstone institution of democracy.

These aspects of culture combined to create a workplace that saw itself as set apart from typical public sector workplaces. In some ways this was an accurate assessment: parliament was an operating environment different to most, with different hours and different dynamics. However, the combination of self-importance, discretion and proximity to political actors who were not subject to the same rules as us, and who had enormous power, created what I thought was an unsafe environment. It was not a problem that was easily perceived or described. I still struggle to articulate what was wrong about it. Most of us working there felt so privileged to be there, and cared about parliamentary institutions with great passion. Our own values made it hard to critique anything.

I remember a staff meeting once. I cannot even recall the subject, but I think it was to do with enterprise bargaining, or something to do with how the place was organised. I recall one staff member speaking in a way that was critical of the organisation. What was most clear was how isolated she was in the room; not because her views were not shared by others, but by how she broke the unwritten cultural rules by expressing a negative view.

On another occasion I recall a discussion about whether some aspect of our procedures might be done differently. I suggested maybe we should look at how other parliaments did that thing. This was dismissed, on the grounds that we were the superior institution, the largest and the best, so had nothing to learn from others.

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

The biggest issue is power imbalances, and I am pessimistic that this inquiry will come up with anything that can address them. There have been many inquiries, articles or essays about the power wielded by parliamentarians and ministers,

without commensurate responsibility. No matter what the issue is, political parties and governments always say these things are ultimately matters either for parties to manage internally, or for the electorate to be able to address at the ballot box. And yes, occasionally members of parliament have lost preselection, or party endorsement or, very rarely, ministerial status because of their errors of judgement. But it is never managed systematically, it is all viewed through the filthy lens of partisan politics, and as a system, it is completely inadequate.

What would make the environment safer would be if the power balance within the workplace were systemically re-balanced, reducing the autonomy and power of the most powerful: meaning ministers, members of parliament, and their senior staffers. For example, if there were legislated protections for staff who 'outed' MPs for their behaviour. Could the parliamentary service act contain clauses legitimising employees speaking to media about anything that was not conduct within the range of professional responsibilities and interactions? Do the parliamentary service values and code of conduct foster a culture that does not put MPs on a pedestal, but instead places them under constraints consistent with the great power they have?

Until the lack of capacity of non-political operators in parliament to have any leverage against MPs, ministers and senior staffers is corrected, it is unlikely that parliament as a workplace can improve. The power is overwhelmingly on one side of that balance. It is formally one-sided, because of the sovereignty of parliamentarians - they cannot suffer any penalty than those administered by their parties or their electorates. And it is culturally one-sided, because of the culture of obsessive loyalty within political parties, and of commitment to the institution within the parliamentary departments.

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.

Yes, there was basic stuff of this kind, where it concerned staff within the parliamentary departments. But there was no clarity or, as far as a i could tell, even any policies, if the problem came from the conduct of a MoPS staffer or MP. I'm not saying there were no mechanisms at all: there was a genuine desire on the part of at least some senior executives to protect their staff. It would be exercised in private channels: the kind of thing where a clerk would go and talk to a party whip, telling them that something was 'not on'. But there was no transparency around this, no consistency, and above all absolutely no guarantee that it would have the required outcome.

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.

What I remember is that we received little if any education or training on these matters. The parliamentary departments were small and overwhelmingly focussed on training people in their jobs, not in maintaining a safe workplace.

The training needs to be grounded in real-life scenarios and the complexities of the job, and no-one wants to talk openly about what these can be, because they risk painting MPs in a bad light. As a consequence, i don't see how realistic training can be officially offered. Even after this inquiry, by the time the recommendations filter into the parliamentary departments, and then get tested with the HR departments and the Department of Finance's lawyers and everyone else runs their anodyne eyes over them, it will all get watered down to principles and 'good practice' and no-one will be allowed to, on the record, officially, run training that puts people through a scenario like 'you are called to an MPs office and find them there in a bathrobe, wanting to sit down and work on a draft paper you supplied. You don't feel safe doing this. What do you have the right to do? What should you say?'

I will always remember the times we travelled with MPs on committee business. They were extraordinary trips, a great privilege to meet people around the country and take parliament's work to the people. But they also created difficult situations with MPs. There was the time when one of the MPs and the staff were eating dinner at a restaurant. He wanted to buy us all dinner. The rules said we weren't supposed to accept this. But that is easy to say on paper, and more difficult to implement in practice, without being rude. I remember improvising: [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] It was a ridiculous situation. It didn't occur to me until years later: the rules said I wasn't to accept the hospitality - but where were the rules that prohibited the MP from offering it? They were the one with the greater power: the rules should have been focussed on them, not on me.

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.

None beyond what I have written 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?

Reform the MoPS Act, breaking the party loyalty nexus between MPs and ministers as employers, and the right to remove those employees when they behave inappropriately. Bind MoPS staff to the same kinds of standards as Parliamentary Service Act employees. Make MoPS staff able to be fired by a public service overseer for breaches, regardless of the views of their MP employer or the PM.

Get all major parties to sign an agreement that they will expel any MP found to have breached a code of conduct, and take the assessment of that conduct out of the hands of the MP's own political party. Without that second element, the process will be useless and just collapse back into the calculus of partisan politics. Getting the assessment of conduct out of the hands of the political parties should be a non-negotiable and bluntly expressed part of any recommendations of this inquiry.

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

I did not experience sexual harassment or assault myself. Bullying was the modus operandi of a minority of members of parliament, against parliamentary departmental staff, and my experience of that was also that it was not widespread. But it was also not spoken about. We weren't given the chance to learn from each other or from our managers about who the 'problem people' were, and to be ready for it. After I left the parliamentary departments, I would occasionally hear stories from colleagues of events that occurred while I worked there, that I hadn't the slightest idea had occurred.

We weren't trained, the female staff were often in absurdly vulnerable situations with male MPs and with hindsight, the thing that strikes me most, is how it was sheer good luck for most of us that situations weren't worse. Now that I have seen and heard stories such as those in the media, and those of one or two friends, I realise that there are those who didn't happen to have good luck. Instead they were failed by a system that offered no real protections. I don't think your inquiry will have much trouble realising how poorly the place was - perhaps still is - run; how weak the leadership is, how pathetic the processes are. But I have almost no hope that this inquiry can produce results that will work in the face of the unwillingness of political parties and MPs to be subject to rules that could cost them their autonomy or power.

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