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## PART C: Submission

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

I provide the attached brief submission in order to outline my experiences of working in parliament house over a number of years. I would be more than happy to talk further about potential solutions or provide more in depth information on the changes I have noticed.

Upload a file

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Parliament House has been a significant part of my work environment on and off since 1988/89.

Over that time, I have worked for a number of members of the Senate and House of Representatives, worked as a Whip's Clerk, served as a Senator for Western Australia and now have returned as a Canberra based member of staff for a Senator. In between working as a staffer and entering the Senate I was a senior elected party official for the WA Branch of the ALP.

I have also worked as a senior ministerial adviser for the WA State Government.

Over the decades I have noticed a marked deterioration in the workplace culture within the federal parliament.

Although there is greater (although not complete) gender equality in the workplace, the workplace environment has not improved.

For many years when I was employed as an electorate officer, the Department (Administrative Services and then Finance) offered an extensive and ongoing program of training for electorate officers. I was somewhat surprised to discover that these programs had been discontinued, only then to read the announcement that there was to be special training offered. As I said to one of my colleagues at the time – yes, we should be pleased that the training is in place, but we also need to be aware that at some time someone took a deliberate decision to discontinue the previous training opportunities.

The design of parliament house does lend itself to an incredibly hierarchical and isolating work environment. Staff can become very isolated in their own offices. There is very little mixing between the House, Senate or Ministerial Wing.

When I worked as Whip's Clerk, I did interact a lot more with other offices, including socially.

Governments, and therefore those working in the ministerial wing, are renowned for their hierarchies. Neither side of politics is immune to petty status based behaviour, but in my view, there has been a marked deterioration.

Of course, many offices reflect the personality of the politician at the helm. Some are much more professional, inclusive and approachable than others.

I remember when I was in the Senate and phoning more than one minister's office (using an internal call) to be greeted by the receptionist and asked, "who are you and what is your particular interest in this issue?". I mention this as a way of highlighting the division between the executive government and the remainder of the parliament.

The manner in which political staffers in ministerial offices address public servants is legend in this town these days. The lack of professionalism and respect that has crept into the relationship between the two is something that my previous employers would not have tolerated.

The attitude is often described by those that are subjected to it as "a sense of entitlement". It does not surprise me therefore that that sense of entitlement could well spill over into interactions (both professional and social) between work colleagues.

To my mind this sense of entitlement takes hold very quickly when a large number of staffers know no other work-place structure or culture than the one that they participate in parliament house.

The large number of staffers, advisers and even politicians whose sole professional workplace experience is in politics helps make for a challenging culture. In considering the operation of the building one always needs to remember that of the thousands of occupants, only 226 of them are politicians. Many of the other occupants invoke the name of their member/senator in order to achieve a result.

My experience working in a ministerial office in state politics was completely different to that talked about federally these days. A small unified respectful team worked openly and professionally with the Department, other members of parliament and their offices and the community. On coming into Government, the Chief of Staff in the office was thoroughly briefed on the roles and responsibilities of both the CoS and Minister as an employer. (As an aside I would add that a friend, who was ██████████ to a Senior member of ██████████ says no such briefing was provided to him as the head of an office of up to 20 people.)

While I mention that no side of politics is immune from accusations of poor workplace culture, I would hasten to add that more widespread and higher number of women in decision making, or positions of authority does make a real difference. When a political party reaches the point where it is just as normal for a woman as a man to occupy the most senior positions in their parliamentary ranks, respect rather than resentment becomes the order of the day. To my mind, this has been one of the real benefits from the ██████████ Affirmative Action requirements.

Although there is no doubt that gender, and respect, plays a significant role, one should never be so naïve as to assume that women in senior roles are not perpetrators of workplace bullying or other

forms of abuse. There have been a number of serious concerns about the workplace culture in the offices of some present and past female members and senators as well.