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PART C: Submission

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Submission to the Independent Review into the workplaces of Parliamentarians and their staff

Name Withheld submission

I was [REDACTED] an employee of [REDACTED]. I have, for months, debated whether or not to make a submission to this review. I feel that I have come so far on my personal journey towards healing since my time in [REDACTED] that I am not sure whether it is worth the risk to retell and therefore relive the toxic environment in which I worked for [REDACTED].

I have, however, decided to submit to this inquiry, fired up by witnessing the ongoing detrimental effects of sexual harassment that occurred years ago against one of my former colleagues by this individual's boss, as well as the appalling [REDACTED] response both at the time and as recently as [REDACTED]. These detrimental effects are a direct result of the harassment and [REDACTED] response, and include the deterioration of this individual's mental health, perception of self worth, career prospects within [REDACTED] and relationships with colleagues. I knew this former colleague from before the perpetration of this sexual harassment, and the idealistic, enthusiastic worker, devoted to [REDACTED], could not be more different to the same individual that I call my friend today. This individual has consented to me sharing these reflections.

I would like to outline two specific events that I personally experienced in my time at [REDACTED]. These are by no means the only experiences of bullying, sexual harassment or negligent management practices that I experienced, but I recount them because of the profound effect they had on me and my career path. I will then turn to a brief commentary on:

- current supports available to enable a safe and respectful workplace;
- drivers in parliamentary workplaces;
- legislative, cultural, structural or other barriers to reporting incidents in parliamentary workplaces; and
- current response and reporting mechanisms in parliamentary workplaces.

Bullying #1

Prior to joining [REDACTED], I had wanted to work for the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] for some time. I held this [REDACTED] and its work in high esteem, and wanted to make positive change [REDACTED] by working for this committee. I went so far as to send my CV [REDACTED] and at the time was advised that no positions were available. I was called a few months later about a short-term position, and following an informal recruitment process I was offered a temporary contract [REDACTED].

In taking this position, I quit my job in a [REDACTED] where I had just been promoted [REDACTED] in recognition of my skills and expertise. I made what could be seen as a risky change because [REDACTED] was where I could see myself working for many years to come.

It became apparent to me within days of commencing in the [REDACTED] that there existed a culture of bullying. I witnessed unreasonable demands of junior staff and passive-aggressive behaviour. It also became apparent to me that my boss was not fit to fill the role as [REDACTED] and could not manage the workload, let alone manage junior staff. Instead of reviewing my work directly, my boss delegated the responsibility to my at-level peer on the basis that my boss lacked subject matter expertise. From that point on, not only was my knowledge of [REDACTED] criticised by my at-level peer—directly to me and presumably directly to my boss during one of the countless closed door meetings they held each day, often after an interaction by one or the other with me—but I was told that Australian universities, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] did not know how to educate people in [REDACTED]. My capacity to perform in my role was constantly the subject of closed-door conversations and knowing exchanges of looks in my presence. I was not told about meetings I was required to attend, and was not offered the same development opportunity as my at-level peers to travel to the same number of interstate [REDACTED]. I was physically excluded in walks to meetings, and in meetings themselves. I was taken off my work, work that was subsequently given to other staff that had no work experience or education in [REDACTED]. Their work was returned few changes, while mine was comprehensively re-written. It was implied that my incompetence was to blame for the increased workload of others.

Towards the end of my time in [REDACTED], rather than being managed by my boss I was managed entirely by a [REDACTED] of another [REDACTED] who had subject matter expertise.

This poor conduct and culture did not go unnoticed by some of my peers [REDACTED]—these colleagues recognised that I was being bullied, and tried to comfort me with words of sympathy and/or encouragement. I was told I wasn't the first to be bullied [REDACTED]. However, I was reluctant to speak of the bullying to my peers, my boss, senior management or Human Resources (HR) for a number of reasons. Some of these included that my boss was one of the perpetrators or at the very least an enabler of my at-level bully; I was not sure who I could trust; I was not sure who had been informed that I was 'incompetent'; and I was on a temporary contract and feared losing my employment.

My reluctance to speak about the bullying is best illustrated by two examples. First, one morning, [REDACTED] (saying nothing to my colleagues) for fear of further criticism and the risk posed to my tenuous employment. Second, during an exit meeting with a senior manager—who encouraged me to be very frank about my experience [REDACTED]—I said nothing about my experiences because I was unsure how honest I could be at a time when my future employment in [REDACTED] was in question. Further, this senior manager suggested to me that while I may be able to perform at the [REDACTED] level in other Commonwealth agencies, [REDACTED] was different, and I probably wasn't up to the role.

I subsequently moved from my role [REDACTED] to the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] prior to the cessation of my temporary employment. I was, again, employed on a non-ongoing contract.

The experience [REDACTED] profoundly changed my life. I had decided to study [REDACTED] as an undergraduate with the view to being a [REDACTED]. I was passionate about [REDACTED] [REDACTED] in particular for as long as I can remember. I had been working [REDACTED] [REDACTED] for almost three years prior to taking the role [REDACTED], had acquired [REDACTED] in the subject matter, had published one of the major assignments from [REDACTED] as an article in a peer-reviewed journal and had represented an [REDACTED].

At the end of my time [REDACTED], I was diagnosed with depression, was placed on anti-depressant medication and decided to step away from a career as a [REDACTED]. I thought—and to this day still think—that I am, despite the achievements listed above, not smart enough to perform the job that I was once sought after to fulfil.

Bullying #2

The above experience was so damaging to me that [REDACTED] later, when I was again temporarily promoted to an [REDACTED] role on the recommendation of my first boss in the [REDACTED], and was subsequently bullied by my new boss from the first day that I set foot in the office, I decided I had to speak up. By this time I was on a permanent contract, so I was not afraid that I would lose my job, although I was concerned that my speaking up would potentially affect my future career prospects within [REDACTED]. This concern proved to be well-founded.

I was promoted to this particular role as part of a merits-based process. At the time, I was a part-time employee, [REDACTED]. My ability to perform my role despite this part-time arrangement was never questioned by my former boss, who often commended me on my efficiency and encouraged me to go for the promotion. One of the senior managers who interviewed me and subsequently offered me the job had signed off on this part-time arrangement. After being offered and having accepted the position, I was subsequently called into another senior manager's office and encouraged to pick up an extra day of work, because my part-time arrangements were not favourable to my new boss. I decided to [REDACTED] pick up an extra day of work (making me [REDACTED]), hoping that this flexibility would stand me in good stead with my new boss and senior management.

Below is a non-exhaustive list of examples of the bullying behaviour I endured. I note that prior to working for this new boss, I was warned by my former boss as well as other colleagues that I could experience some difficulties. I was even coached on how I may handle my new boss's potentially questionable behaviour.

Despite my agreement to work an extra day, my part-time arrangements nevertheless proved to be problematic for my new boss, whom I had never met before the first day of my role in that [REDACTED].

On my first day I introduced myself to my colleagues and then knocked on my boss's door to introduce myself. My boss replied with words to the effect of 'I don't have time to talk right now'. A few hours later, my boss gave me some work. Later that afternoon my boss called me into a private meeting, leading with words to the effect of 'I didn't want a part-time worker', and queried whether my day off was flexible in any way.

Throughout the short time in that [REDACTED], my boss gaslighted and bullied me. My boss would come into the suite and say hello and speak to my other colleagues about their weekends and sometimes even about the inquiry that I was working on, while pointedly ignoring me the whole time. My boss would ignore me if we chanced upon each other in hallways and lifts. I was not given a sufficient amount of work, and was asked why my work output was so low. I was not permitted to take on the responsibility of someone at the level I was acting in, presumably because my boss did not trust my work, despite seeing very little evidence of it. I was told there was no work for me arising from a [REDACTED], despite work relevant to [REDACTED] arising from that meeting. I was excluded from meetings that concerned [REDACTED]. An idea of mine was dismissed and later re-socialised by my boss as someone else's great idea. I was told it was a shame an early election wasn't called because my boss would need to continue to work with me. I was told that my junior colleagues were burdened with extra work because of my part-time arrangements, and that these arrangements were against the policy of [REDACTED] [REDACTED] (they were not, and the majority of at-level employees in the [REDACTED] were part-time). I lived these and similar experiences multiple times, every single day I was in that [REDACTED]. Many of these actions by my boss had the effect of undermining my ability to perform at this level as well as my authority within the team as the next senior employee in the secretariat after my boss.

When I first complained to my boss's manager about my boss's conduct, it was dismissed. I was told that the manager had no such knowledge of this type of conduct or other complaints against my boss. I noted that this was surprising, as I was warned about my boss's bullying nature by multiple people in the [REDACTED] before moving to the role, and that I had heard that people had even left [REDACTED] as a result of bullying by this individual. It was also surprising to me that this manager had never witnessed such behaviour, because [REDACTED]. I was told that my boss wasn't the right manager for everyone, that my boss was retiring soon, and that I should try to make it work.

This manager then told a senior manager. That senior manager immediately met with me, noted that there had previously been complaints against my boss and suggested that it would be best if I move [REDACTED] rather than make a formal complaint, which would be a lengthy process. At that point in time, all I wanted was for my immediate situation to be resolved. I was moved to a new [REDACTED]. My boss got a full-time replacement for me, and later retired from the [REDACTED] with a celebration of service.

My colleagues witnessed this conduct, and after leaving the [REDACTED] I later found out that they were subject to similar treatment in their early days. Not one of them spoke to me about this conduct, or called it out at the time. I continued to act as an [REDACTED] in another [REDACTED], where my acting arrangements were extended and where my new boss commended me on my work. My new boss encouraged me to apply for [REDACTED]. I expressed my reluctance to this new boss, my at-level colleague and junior colleagues, stating that perhaps I wasn't ready. Indeed, it was a feeling of self-doubt that had settled within me as a result of my two previous experiences of bullying in [REDACTED]. I was encouraged by all of these people to apply—all of these people were confident of my ability to perform the role I was acting in. I applied for [REDACTED]. One of the panellists was my former boss's manager, to whom I had made the original complaint. Not only was I not offered the permanent role, but I was not even offered an interview.

Summary of bullying experiences

Both bullying experiences worked to undermine my belief in myself, my intelligence, my education and my abilities. I have still not recovered from these experiences, and still question if what I experienced was even bullying—perhaps I was just being sensitive. I was once so passionate about [REDACTED] and it was also a dream of mine to work in [REDACTED]. These experiences caused me to give up my career in my chosen field, and later my career in [REDACTED] and the public service in general. I would categorically recommend against employment in [REDACTED].

Current supports available to enable a safe and respectful workplace

The [REDACTED] is a place where idealistic and well-intentioned people enter, and a place that they exit burnt out, and sometimes broken. This may seem like an exaggeration, but this happened to me. I have also recently witnessed it happen to a friend—the individual I discussed at the beginning of this submission. Other friends working at [REDACTED] are, without fail, highly stressed and distressed from their experiences at work each time I meet with them.

The [REDACTED] in particular is under resourced, and this combined with the often traumatic subject matter of inquiries leads to a high rate of burn out and staff turnover. For example, the training staff receive to deal with abusive, traumatised or mentally unstable members of the public is woefully inadequate—it seems that all staff, [REDACTED] included, are unaware of how to deal with such callers. Junior staff are told that they can escalate calls, but continue to take the calls for fear of being perceived as unable to perform in their role.

Counselling or debriefing services are similarly inadequate. In my time at the [REDACTED] it was not uncommon for me to have vivid nightmares about some of the highly distressing subject matters I was working on, or panic attacks when the phone rang lest it be another abusive caller. I also became the defacto counsellor for more junior staff traumatised by the nature of our everyday work because they found our boss unapproachable. In so doing, I absorbed the trauma of my peers. The response from my bosses varied from suggestions to take breaks between processing submissions, to escalate a call, or to use the EAP service. During my time in my last [REDACTED], I suggested to my boss that the team undergo a regular debriefing due to the stressful nature of our work. This boss had previously taken multiple months of stress leave as a result of a combination of the nature of the inquiry and inadequate response by management to requests for more resources. When on stress leave, this boss was not backfilled, leaving an already vulnerable team with additional work and responsibility. We had one debriefing session over the course of several months.

These problems could be resolved by ensuring adequate staffing for larger inquiries, requiring all current staff to undergo comprehensive training in how to deal with difficult callers—similar to that for people working in first responder services, the same training for all new employees, and additional training for managerial staff. Furthermore, where subject matters include traumatic issues, weekly debriefing meetings should be made mandatory for all staff.

Drivers in parliamentary workplaces, including the workplace culture

One of the drivers of the poor culture in [REDACTED], as well as the characteristics and practices that may increase the risk of bullying/ sexual harassment/ sexual assault, is the inability of senior management to perform their roles as managers.

In my experience, at the least egregious end of the spectrum, my direct bosses—while nice people—lacked interpersonal and/ or management skills. At the most egregious end of the spectrum, my direct bosses were either enablers or perpetrators of bullying.

Of the [REDACTED] managers I had in my time at [REDACTED], I would characterise two as having good interpersonal skills. However, one of these individuals was not a good manager and often relied upon me for advice on how to perform in the role of [REDACTED], and how to manage the team.

How can this be? Because the people who hire [REDACTED] are they themselves lacking in interpersonal and management skills. The bad culture in [REDACTED] trickles down from the most senior staff [REDACTED]. It is allowed to exist because senior managers—whose core responsibility it is to manage their staff—actively ignore the problem of bullying/ sexual harassment/ sexual assault, or fail to address the problem. Poor behaviour is effectively given the green light. The only people who suffer are the people who complain. It is they who are moved, it is their career prospects that are jeopardised.

These problems could be resolved by an independent, inquiry into the suitability of the senior management of [REDACTED] to hold their roles, where the anonymity of submitters is protected, and a report of which is made public. Additionally, the prerequisite of excellent people skills should be the highest priority when employing a manager.

Legislative, cultural, structural or other barriers to reporting incidents in parliamentary workplaces

As noted above in the discussion of my experiences of bullying in [REDACTED], I was reluctant to report incidents of bullying and sexual harassment that I experienced to my bosses. There were several reasons for this. My boss was the perpetrator, and was potentially a friend of senior managers. I was worried about losing my job. I was worried about leaving a job without a reference, and being unable to be employed elsewhere. I was worried about my future career prospects in [REDACTED]. I was worried about being perceived by managers as a trouble maker, or not tough enough, not good enough to perform in the role. I knew that if I moved, I would be replaced by someone else who would have to perform the same work in the same environment, thereby exposing that person to the same situation. I knew from other colleagues that HR rarely took action when complaints were made.

These problems could be resolved by the establishment of an independent complaints process, where victims of bullying, sexual harassment or sexual assault can make an anonymous complaint. These complainants should be offered counselling while the complaint is being investigated, and an option of ongoing counselling should be made available.

Current response and reporting mechanisms in parliamentary workplaces

As outlined above with respect to my second account of bullying in [REDACTED], the current response and reporting mechanisms in [REDACTED] to allegations of bullying/ sexual harassment/ sexual assault is negligent. Complaints are played down, minimised. The response does not follow the policies of or legislation applicable to [REDACTED].

The current response shields the perpetrator from facing the appropriate consequences of their behaviour. Instead, the victims bear the psychological and/ or career-limiting consequences.

These problems could be resolved by serious investigation of the perpetrator. It would have the benefit of dismissing managers who bully their staff, and retaining enthusiastic and capable staff.

Conclusion

Please note, I welcome the opportunity to anonymously participate further in the review, and provide additional examples of bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault that I experienced, and/ or that I am aware of former colleagues experiencing. I would also consider sharing my story publicly.