
Problematic Working Conditions for Female Political Staffers: What Can Be Done?*

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Abstract Many of the thousands of political staffers who work for federal Ministers, MPs and Senators in Australia are women. Parliamentarians' offices are important sites of women's political engagement and influence in Australia. Yet their employment is precarious and they can experience unacceptable levels of bullying and sexual harassment. This article explores the causes of problematic working conditions for staffers, which are both structural and cultural, based in formal rules and informal norms. It argues that while men and women are affected, there is an important gender dimension to the problems, which are accentuated for women. It uses interview and biographical data to shed light on the presence of women in political staff roles and their experiences at work. It suggests some possible solutions to the problems. None of these are straightforward and all face the issue of vested interests.

INTRODUCTION

In Australia, large numbers of staff are employed in political offices, working for Members of Parliament, Senators, Ministers and shadow Ministers, at both state and federal levels. In March 2021, there were 2,020 staff employed under the federal

Members of Parliament (Staff) Act (MOPS Act).¹ Many of them are women. There is a high turnover of staff in these positions, indicating there is a significant number of people who currently work, or have worked, as political staffers.² Yet we do not know the names of these people, and it is only recently that we have begun to hear their voices. The stories they tell are of poor working conditions, at times marred by sexual harassment and bullying. Finally, it appears they are being heard and something might be done.

When former staffers Rachele Miller and Brittany Higgins spoke publicly in 2020 and 2021 they were driven by anger at how they were treated and the fact no one was held accountable for what they experienced. They recounted a toxic culture, bullying, unfair treatment and sexual assault.³ Such stories are not unusual. Bullying and sexual harassment of political staff have been reported in other jurisdictions, suggesting it may be endemic to parliamentary workplaces and the causes may be structural and cultural. The White inquiry in the UK found MPs' staff experienced jokes and accepted workplace 'banter' that made people feel uncomfortable, bullying and sexual harassment, unwelcome sexual advances, sexual and sexist comments and derogatory comments about women.⁴ The Francis inquiry into the New Zealand Parliament found staff reported a bullying climate, command-and-control behaviours, unreasonably aggressive behaviour, shouting, abusive calls and texts, and belittling and character assassination in front of others. They also reported unwanted touching and sexual advances and sexual violence.⁵ *A Review of Harassment in the South Australian Parliament Workplace* reported unwelcome sexual behaviour such as sexually suggestive comments or jokes that made people feel offended, humiliated or

¹ Commonwealth of Australia, *Review of the Parliamentary Workplace: Responding to Serious Incidents*. Canberra: Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2021, p 20.

² Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee, *Staff employed under the Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984*, Canberra, 2003 p 11-12; Nicholas Horne, *The Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984 Framework and Employment Issues*. Parliamentary Library Research Paper, 4 August 2009, pp. 9-10.

³ 'Inside the Canberra Bubble'. Four Corners 9 November 2020; Samantha Maiden 'Parliament House Alleged Rape: How Brittany Higgins' Horror Night Unfolded' news.com.au 15 February 2021.

⁴ Gemma White, *Bullying and Harassment of MPs' Parliamentary Staff Independent Inquiry Report*. 2019.

⁵ Debbie Francis, *Independent External Review into Bullying and Harassment in the New Zealand Parliamentary Workplace, Final Report*, 2019.

intimidated, and leering, close physical proximity, and unwelcome touching.⁶ While men could also be subject to sexual harassment, all three inquiries found that most of the staff who reported experiencing it were women and most of those described as engaging in it were men.⁷ Despite this, it is rare that a gender lens is applied to the analysis of the workplace experiences of political staff. This paper, while considering fundamental causes and possible solutions, explores some of the gendered dimensions of the workplace problems faced by federal political staff.

As well as bullying and sexual harassment, inquiries also found female staff in parliamentary workplaces can face gender-based discrimination. In New Zealand, unconscious or actual bias against women and sexist behaviours were prevalent.⁸ In South Australia, discriminatory behaviour towards women was found to be commonplace.⁹ One of the few times this was recognised federally was in 2018 when Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull referred to the ‘very serious issues about the culture ... of this Parliament’ and the need to create a workplace ‘where women are respected’, saying:

I think many women ... who work in this building understand very powerfully what I am saying ... I recognise that respect in workplaces is not entirely a gender issue, of course. But the truth is, as we know, most of the ministers, most of the bosses in this building are men and there is a real gender perspective here.¹⁰

The *Review of the Parliamentary Workplace* by Prime Minister and Cabinet’s Stephanie Foster, launched in response to the allegations by Brittany Higgins, focused on the policies and procedures needed to respond to what were described as ‘serious

⁶ South Australia Equal Opportunity Commission, *Review of Harassment in the South Australian Parliament Workplace*, February 2021.

⁷ Francis, *Bullying and Harassment in the New Zealand Parliamentary Workplace*, p. 53; White, *Bullying and Harassment of MPs’ Parliamentary Staff* p. 24; South Australian Equal Opportunity Commission, *Review of Harassment in the South Australian Parliament Workplace*, p. 23.

⁸ Francis, *Bullying and Harassment in the New Zealand Parliamentary Workplace*, p. 52.

⁹ South Australian Equal Opportunity Commission, *Review of Harassment in the South Australian Parliament Workplace*, pp. 26-28. Discrimination also occurred on other grounds such as age, marital status, sexual orientation and race.

¹⁰ Malcolm Turnbull, Press Conference, 15 February 2018. Accessed at: <https://www.malcolmturnbull.com.au/media/press-conference-15-february-2018>

incidents'. Her recommendations included improved support services for staff and an independent complaints mechanism.¹¹ While these are important and welcome initiatives, the deeper causes of the problems and the gendered context in which the problems arise are not discussed in the report. This paper argues that the problems caused by power differentials and lack of professionalism in the working culture are accentuated for female political staff. The gendered context in which they work must be considered.

The situation is not simple. Federally, staffers work for a variety of principals, subject to different forms of regulation and scrutiny—sometimes arbitrary, sometimes private, sometimes non-existent. Staff can be both the victims and perpetrators of poor conduct. Staff employed under the *Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984* (MOPS staff) may work as electorate officers for MPs and Senators, or as personal staff for Ministers, shadow Ministers, or other office holders. They are also found in many different spaces. The majority of MOPS staff work for parliamentarians in electorate offices, in small offices distant from Canberra, far from scrutiny and regulation, subject to the whims and demands of the MP or Senator who employs them. Electorate staff, who assist parliamentarians with their constituency work, represent 68 percent of all MOPS staff and are predominantly female.¹² The other large group of staffers work for Ministers in offices inside Parliament House, often away from home, in a building where the mix of long hours, alcohol and after work socialising breeds risky and unprofessional conduct.

There is a body of academic research and reports critical of MOPS employment frameworks and the regulation of staff behaviour, but it has not focused on the issue of staff welfare or gender. A 2003 Senate inquiry into MOPS staff noted the lack of accountability, weak management structure and poor regulation of staff employment. It made a number of recommendations, including that there be a code of conduct, better training and mandatory induction, but many of these recommendations were not implemented.¹³ Tiernan has been highly critical of the governance frameworks for

¹¹ Commonwealth of Australia, Review of the Parliamentary Workplace: Responding to Serious Incidents.

¹² Commonwealth of Australia, Review of the Parliamentary Workplace: Responding to Serious Incidents, p20; Senate, Answers to Questions on Notice Additional Estimates 2020–21 Finance Portfolio 23 March 2021 Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee, 2021

¹³ Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee, *Staff employed under the Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984*.

MOPS employment, seeing the staffing system as having outgrown its regulatory environment. She has called for reform to address problems of training, performance management, accountability, and staff conduct.¹⁴ Ng argues that regulation of staff behaviour is inadequate, with no legal compulsion to adhere to rules of conduct.¹⁵ However, this research is mainly focused on integrity issues and regulating staff conduct in relation to officials. Oversight of staff behaviour is recommended to contain the unrestrained use of executive power, rather than to address the misconduct seen in bullying and sexual harassment. Tiernan argues that more robust governance of MOPS staff will improve the quality and integrity of advice that staff provide to Ministers. The adequacy of employment frameworks for protecting staff from misconduct by other staff or by parliamentarians is not the focus of this literature.

The research in this article draws on material obtained in November 2020–August 2021 from ten interviews with former staffers and six emails from current and former staffers detailing their experiences of bullying and sexual harassment in the workplace. These were largely unsolicited contacts made after an opinion piece was published about the bullying of political staffers in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Ten of the staffers were female and six were male. Six of the 16 described experiencing sexual harassment while ten recounted instances of bullying. The research also draws on a biographical dataset of 1,275 federal ministerial staff from four Governments (2010–2017), using names in communication directories for 2010, 2013, 2014 and 2017.¹⁶

POLITICAL OFFICES AS GENDERED SPACES

Many studies have established that parliaments are male spaces, dominated not only by male actors, but by masculine ways of operating underpinned by formal rules and

¹⁴ Anne Tiernan, *Power Without Responsibility? Ministerial Staffers in Australian Governments from Whitlam to Howard*. Sydney: UNSW Press, 2007; Anne Tiernan and Patrick Weller, *Ministerial Staff: A Need for Transparency and Accountability?* Submission to the Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee Inquiry into Staff Employed under the Members of Parliament Staff (MOPS) Act 2003.

¹⁵ Yee-Fui Ng, *The Rise of Political Advisors in the Westminster System*. London: Routledge, 2018, pp. 137–139.

¹⁶ For further details about the data collection, see Maria Maley, 'The Powers and Perils of Women in Ministers' Offices' in Katrina Lee-Koo and Zareh Ghazarian (eds), *Gender Politics: Navigating Political Leadership in Australia*. Sydney: UNSW Press, 2021. The staff in the dataset have the following titles: assistant adviser, adviser, senior adviser, principal adviser, research officer, policy adviser, senior policy adviser, chief economist, deputy chief of staff or chief of staff.

informal norms and practices.¹⁷ Yet while Australian parliaments have traditionally been, and still are, spaces dominated by men, the political office is a space that has always been heavily populated by women. Historically this was because they occupied the administrative and clerical positions supporting parliamentarians and Ministers.¹⁸ In 2021, women comprise the majority of staff employed under the MOPS Act (57 percent), and as many as 61 percent of electorate office staff are female.¹⁹ Women are more likely to be found working in political offices than sitting in the federal Parliament or in the Cabinet. In December 2020, women comprised 37.9 percent of federal parliamentarians and 27.3 percent of federal Cabinet Ministers.²⁰

In this sense, political offices are important sites of women's political engagement and influence in Australia. Women are significantly present in a leadership space where important decisions are made and where politicians and citizens interact. Their work can be impactful, though invisible. The status of staffers as auxiliaries to powerful actors resonates with the traditional female role of the 'hand maiden'—an assistant who plays a subsidiary role to the principal, sublimating her own ambitions to advance the interests of the power holder. The supporting and ancillary role of the staffer means that women can occupy these roles without disrupting traditional power relations.²¹ Being hidden from public view, the political office is a space where women may assume powerful roles in political life, free from the scrutiny and criticism often faced by female parliamentarians. Yet while this space is open to women it remains

¹⁷ Mary Crawford and Barbara Pini, 'The Australian Parliament: A Gendered Organisation'. *Parliamentary Affairs* 64, 2011, pp. 82–105; Karen Ross, 'Women's place in 'Male' Space: Gender and Effect in Parliamentary Contexts'. *Parliamentary Affairs* 55 2002, pp. 189–201; Josefina Erikson and Cecilia Josefsson 'The Legislature as a Gendered Workplace: Exploring Members of Parliament's Experiences of Working in the Swedish Parliament'. *International Political Science Review* 40(2) 2019, pp.197–214; Cheryl Collier and Tracey Raney 'Understanding Sexism and Sexual Harassment in Politics: A Comparison of Westminster Parliaments in Australia, the United Kingdom and Canada'. *Social Politics* 25, 2018, pp. 432–455.

¹⁸ Roy Forward, 'Ministerial Staff of the Australian Government 1972–1974: A Survey', in Roger Wettenhall and Martin Painter (eds), *The First Thousand days of Labor*, Vol II. Canberra: Canberra College of Advanced Education, 1975; James Walter, *The Ministers Minders*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1984; Marija Taflaga and Matthew Kerby, 'Who Does What Work in a Minister's Office?'. *Political Studies* 68(2) 2020, pp. 463–485.

¹⁹ Commonwealth of Australia, *Review of the Parliamentary Workplace: Responding to Serious Incidents*, p. 20; Senate, *Answers to Questions on Notice*.

²⁰ Anna Hough, 'Women in Leadership: International Women's Day 2021' *Parliamentary Library FlagPost* 5 March 2021.

²¹ Maley, 'The Powers and Perils of Women in Ministers' Offices'.

problematic. There are strong limitations on the power staffers wield and their position is an inherently vulnerable one. As is evident from reports of bullying and sexual harassment, they are subject to masculine hierarchies and cultures.

WOMEN IN ELECTORATE OFFICES AND MINISTERS' OFFICES

Women in electorate offices

There are no academic studies of electorate office staff in Australia and more research is needed on the work they do and the issues they face in their employment. However, we do know they are a workforce dominated by women: in 2021 61.4 percent of federal electorate office staff were female. Women also dominate the position in parliamentarians' offices with the highest classification (Electorate officer C): 61.8 percent of staff at this level are female.²²

Women in Ministers' offices

Women have a strong presence in key positions in federal Ministers' offices, but distinct recruitment patterns. In March 2021, 45 percent of MOPS staff working in Ministers' offices were female.²³ Biographical data was collected about 1,275 ministerial staff who worked in federal Ministers' offices between 2010 and 2017, in the Rudd, Gillard, Abbott and Turnbull Governments. By excluding the administrative and media staff, it was possible to determine how many women worked in the political and policy advisory positions and as chiefs of staff. While they did not reach parity with men, 43 percent of advisory staff in these years were women. In the senior positions—heading up offices—women were underrepresented, comprising 35 percent of chiefs of staff to Cabinet Ministers. However, women were equally likely as men to lead lower status offices, as 49 percent of chiefs of staff to junior Ministers and parliamentary secretaries were female.²⁴

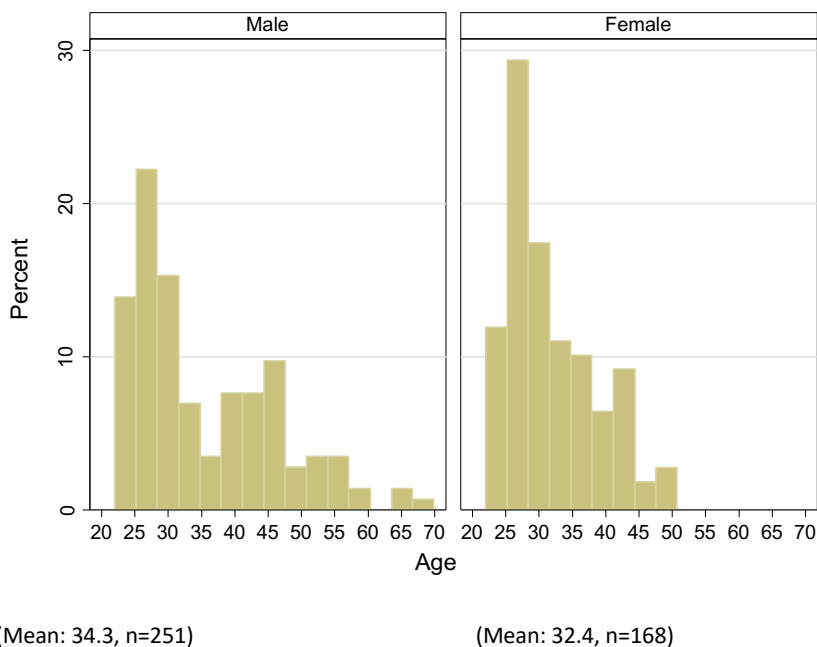
²² Senate, Answers to Questions on Notice.

²³ Senate, Answers to Questions on Notice.

²⁴ Maley, 'The Powers and Perils of Women in Ministers' Offices', pp. 86–87.

Female staffers in the study had a different age profile to male advisers and chiefs of staff (Figure 1). More women were recruited at younger ages, mostly under the age of 30, and few were recruited after 40. By contrast, men kept being recruited in large numbers into their 40s and beyond. At ages when men are being selected for senior roles, it is possible that women find such demanding and unpredictable work incompatible with family responsibilities.²⁵

Figure 1. Age when recruited as an adviser or chief of staff (2010–2017)



There may be several reasons for the age difference, but the overall result is that female advisers in Ministers' offices tend to be younger than the men. They are also generally younger than the Ministers they work for. The relative youth and more junior status of female advisers reveals that though women populate political offices in greater numbers than men, it is not a female dominated space. The differences in age

²⁵ Melinda Ritchie and Hye Young You, 'Women's Advancement in Politics: Evidence from Congressional Staff'. *Journal of Politics* 83(2) 202, pp. 421–438.

and seniority may play a role in the exploitative consensual sexual relationships that are reported between senior male staffers and junior young women.²⁶

CAUSES OF A PROBLEMATIC WORK ENVIRONMENT

Common themes emerge in inquiries, suggesting the problems staffers face are endemic to political workplaces and employment relationships. The causes are both structural and cultural, and include formal rules and informal norms and practices. While these dynamics are present for all MOPS staff, their effects are particularly adverse for women.

Formal rules

The dynamic of dominance/submission and power/powerlessness is hardwired into the employment relationship for political staff. This is because the MOPS Act frames it as personal employment, and does not define what the work of staffers should be. The Act empowers the parliamentarian to define what work is to be done. Serving their needs and demands becomes the goal of every office. One electorate officer struggled with her job because she was given no job description by her MP. This meant the MP could always ask her to do more and could always criticise her for not meeting expectations. She said 'I just kept thinking, if I work harder, if I do more, she will be happy. But she was never happy, it was never enough'.²⁷ A Minister's diary manager recalled being yelled at by her Minister and 'slammed' in front of other staff, on an 'incessant' basis. This drove her to work harder and harder to avoid criticism, and a health crisis.²⁸ The untrammelled power of the parliamentarian in the relationship is buttressed by the fact that under the Act they are the only party who can take action regarding a staffer's employment, even where there is misconduct in the office.

²⁶ See Anna Jabour, 'Former Political Staffer Anna Jabour Speaks of Sexual Misconduct in Parliament House'. *news.com.au* 10 March 2021.

²⁷ Interview, November 2020.

²⁸ Interview, February 2021.

Studies have found that significant power disparities and climates which permit incivility are risk factors for workplace harassment.²⁹

There is a paucity of rules regulating the work environment. Unlike in other jurisdictions, there is no code of conduct for federal MPs and Senators or their staff.³⁰ The standards of conduct for Ministers and ministerial staff are articulated but not legislated, nor enforced formally or publicly. They do not prohibit sexual harassment and bullying. However, Ministers may not employ 'close relatives and partners' in their offices and must not engage in sexual relations with their staff.³¹ The Prime Minister's Office and the Government Staffing Committee are tasked with implementing the standards of conduct for ministerial staff; however, the processes of inquiry appear arbitrary and the operation of the Committee is secret.

There are extreme differences in the tenure of political staff and parliamentarians. MOPS staff are in a vulnerable position, with virtually no employment security beyond the general protections of employment law. Their employment ceases automatically when the MP, Senator or Minister leaves or changes their job or dies. Their employment can also be terminated at any time by the parliamentarian by notice in writing. Staff can be sacked if they 'lose the confidence' of their employer.³² Yet parliamentarians appear to be 'untouchable' in that they are elected by voters, and their continued tenure is the main interest of the political parties they represent. Ministers enjoy tenure at the pleasure of the Prime Minister, yet this power is exercised using political calculation. The anger felt by women interviewed was largely driven by the lack of accountability of parliamentarians for their poor conduct and the lack of consequences they faced when their misconduct was well known. Their precarious tenure means female staffers face high stakes decisions about making complaints and invoking the workplace protections that exist for them. One woman who did complain

²⁹ South Australian Equal Opportunity Commission, *Review of Harassment in the South Australian Parliament Workplace*, pp. 49-58.

³⁰ Electorate officers employed by ministers are covered by the Standards for Ministerial Staff but electorate officers working for MPs and Senators do not have a code of conduct.

³¹ Statement of Ministerial Standards. Accessed at:

<https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/statement-ministerial-standards-3.pdf>; Statement of Standards for Ministerial Staff. Accessed at: <https://www.smos.gov.au/statement-standards-ministerial-staff>

³² Department of Finance 'Ceasing Employment: Termination by the Employing Parliamentarian', 2021. Accessed at: <https://maps.finance.gov.au/pay-and-employment/mops-act-employment/ceasing-employment>

commented: 'At the end of the day, if your behaviour threatens a politician, they will sack you and cut you out. The government is always acting to protect the politician and the party'.³³

Informal norms and practices

One of the major problems for staffers is the definition of political offices as private spaces. Ministerial advisers are designated as 'personal staff' and Ministers refer to their 'private offices'. The identities and conduct of MOPS staff are seen as part of a private world, not a public world. This can breed a sense of entitlement amongst parliamentarians to treat staff as they wish and to act with impunity, outside rules and regulations. It also promotes secrecy, as what happens in each office is framed as only the concern of the employing principal. Yet these are publicly-funded positions and MOPS staff are Commonwealth employees; staffers undertake public, not private, work and are subject to general employment laws. This is particularly a problem in Australia where the names of MOPS staff are kept secret, by agreement of all political parties. This began in 2002 when the names of ministerial staff were removed from the Commonwealth Government Directory. A Communications Directory containing the names of political staff working inside Parliament House was discontinued in 2010. Now each political party holds its own telephone directory which must not be distributed outside the party. This extreme secrecy is quite different to the openness about the identities of staffers seen in many other countries such as the UK or Canada.

This secrecy contributes to the acceptance and normalisation of poor conduct. Senior staff and politicians can be complicit in covering up misconduct by known serial offenders. One female staffer wrote that 'the minister's groping was awful but his bullying and abuse of power was much worse. His chiefs of staff were dedicated to ensuring no one else found out'.³⁴ Being shrouded in secrecy, inside a 'private' office, staffers have no public voice to raise concerns about their work conditions. Women who experience sexual harassment are expected to remain loyally silent.

Another norm that contributes to the powerlessness staffers experience is the constant reminder they are given that 'it is a privilege to work here'. Implicitly encoded in their

³³ Interview, December 2020.

³⁴ Personal communication, January 2021.

working status is the idea they did not gain the job through a merit-based process, so they should not expect to be treated fairly. Merit and objective standards do not seem to have currency in a world underpinned by patronage. Some women reported that senior positions are often not advertised, people are 'tapped on the shoulder' for promotions, and senior jobs are filled through private contacts and networks. Women reported feeling outside these largely male networks, often not being aware that senior jobs were vacant until they heard a male colleague was promoted.³⁵ Patronage and 'boys club' networks could make it hard for them to thrive in their careers. Some also said it was hard to complain that they were not sacked on the basis of merit, when they were not employed on a merit basis. The culture of patronage undermines norms of professionalism.

There is a serious lack of professionalism in the culture of some political offices, with staffers describing a 'highly sexualised atmosphere' and the constant presence of alcohol. There is a hard-drinking culture, in which after-hours bar hopping is seen as a way to wind down and deal with stressful days. One staffer said she kept drinking on some nights to ensure her boss stayed out of trouble, helping him into a taxi at the end of the night.³⁶ Lobbying events in Parliament House and other networking opportunities are always accompanied by free alcohol, creating risky and often unpleasant situations for female staff. Some didn't complain about unwelcome sexual advances because the perpetrator 'was a nice person when not drunk'.³⁷ A young male staffer complained about sexual harassment while socialising, but the senior male staffers involved 'laughed it off as a joke'.³⁸ He observed his female colleagues experience worse harassment but, instead of complaining, they left events early or managed their attendances to avoid interactions with certain people or potentially compromising situations.

A final norm which disadvantages female staffers in their ability to call out misconduct is found in the nature of their career patterns. When they are no longer needed or deemed useful to the party or the parliamentarian, they can feel 'cast aside'. This is because there is no natural progression out of an MP's office into another career.

³⁵ Interview, July 2021.

³⁶ Interview, December 2020.

³⁷ Interview, February 2021.

³⁸ Interview, July 2021.

Some struggle to find their footing in the job market. Others find their experience is a very valuable commodity, an asset to public relations firms, lobby groups and businesses. But they rely on the reputation and contacts they have back in politicians' offices. One former senior adviser said 'without a personal reference from your office it would be very, very, very difficult to land somewhere after politics'.³⁹ This means women cannot afford to cruel these relationships by making complaints or leaving under a cloud of conflict, which prevents them raising concerns. One woman observed that when her female colleagues complained about harassment or bullying the victims were themselves disciplined, ostracised or denied promotions, and then resigned.⁴⁰ This can explain why someone might tolerate sustained bullying by an MP, as to leave the job means leaving the career entirely, creating a career 'dead-end'. A woman who worked for ten years in the offices of Ministers, shadow Ministers and MPs had to start again at the lowest rung of the public service when she left her MP's office. She had experienced serious bullying but did not complain. She said of her ten-year staffer career, 'I regret it immensely'.⁴¹

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Addressing some of these factors may improve the professional culture of political offices, making it safer and fairer for women.

The untrammelled power and lack of accountability of parliamentarians in the employment relationship can be addressed by establishing powers in the MOPS Act, to mandate actions and establish consequences if those actions do not occur. Currently parliamentarians employ staff 'in accordance with arrangements approved by the Prime Minister' and 'subject to conditions as are determined by the Prime Minister'.⁴² Yet the Prime Minister has limited authority over legislators; and it means Parliament itself has no role in setting conditions for its workforce or in oversight of its Members as employers. An independent parliamentary office holder or a cross-party parliamentary staffing committee could be empowered under the Act to mandate

³⁹ Personal communication, August 2021.

⁴⁰ Interview, July 2021.

⁴¹ Interview, November 2020.

⁴² *MOPS Act* s 13(2) and s 20(2).

conditions of employment, such as that no staffer can be employed without undergoing training in prevention of bullying and harassment, or that no MP can employ staff without undergoing such training. Parliamentarians could lose the entitlement to employ staff under the Act, should they breach bullying and harassment policies or not take action on problems of misconduct in their office. Such an approach would need cross-party commitment to the wellbeing of staff for the use of parliamentary authority in this way.

Standards of conduct cannot be established, and people cannot be held accountable for their behaviour, without rules. Codes of conduct focused on eliminating bullying and sexual harassment must be created for all those who work in Parliament and political offices, similar to those in the UK, Canada and New Zealand. The Government has now created the Parliamentary Workplace Support Service, an independent body to which staffers can take 'serious' complaints.⁴³ However, such a body cannot operate effectively without codes of conduct that bind parliamentarians, Ministers and staffers to standards of workplace behaviour.

The critical issue then becomes enforcement. In some countries cross-party committees examine the conduct of parliamentarians. In the UK, an Independent Expert Panel (with no parliamentarian members) makes determinations about whether MPs have breached their behaviour code, and recommends sanctions. This avoids the situation of parliamentarians judging their peers, and sends the message that the conduct of parliamentarians is a matter for the whole community not just those who are in Parliament.⁴⁴

Broadening the range of players involved in staffers' employment will give them greater protections. In other countries ministerial staff are employed as temporary civil servants inside the department their Minister leads, framing their employment as a type of public sector work. In the UK, for example, Special Advisers are employed within departments, and complaints by staffers therefore go not only to their employing Minister but also to the head of the department they work in, as well as the Primer Minister's chief adviser.

⁴³ Accessed at: <https://pwss.gov.au/>

⁴⁴ Accessed at: <https://www.Parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/standards-and-financial-interests/independent-expert-panel/>

Another way of broadening the basis of staffers' employment and assisting their careers, would be to employ them as a group of workers serving a political party, not just an individual MP, Senator or Minister. This would frame them as resources of the party, rather than a private resource of an individual politician. While this understanding may informally exist to some extent, formalising it would force parties to take greater responsibility for careers of their female staffers, and how they are treated. It might strengthen their tenure, enabling redeployment, and embolden parties to take action against MPs who are known to treat their staff poorly. The larger political parties would then be required to report on their workforce profiles under the *Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012*, since they would be employers of more than 100 staff. Registration of political parties could be linked to evidence of good employment practices and gender equity policies.

A major change is needed in the way MOPS staff are seen, bringing them out of the 'private' sphere and into the public sphere. This does not mean that they should become public actors, but as public sector employees their work must be subject to broader scrutiny than at present. The conduct of ministerial staff should not be a matter for private examination by the Prime Minister's Office or a shadowy internal committee whose work is kept secret. A cross-party standards committee could confidentially examine the work of staffers and promote standards of conduct. The current secrecy around them, in which all parties are complicit, is corrosive. Rather than protecting them, it enables the coverup of poor conduct.

Staffers may always face difficulties in making complaints and therefore prevention of misconduct is their most effective protection. Female staffers in the study not only call for independent bodies to handle their complaints but for proactive scrutiny of political offices. One woman said 'I want to know, and I want my MP to know, that someone is watching what they do inside the office'.⁴⁵ Regular audits of offices or surveys of staff by an independent body may be one answer. Making chiefs of staff and office managers responsible for professional practices within offices, and required to report regularly and publicly on this, might be another.

Female and male staffers said it made a difference to the workplace culture when there were women in senior positions in an office. It could restrain the blokey banter and at

⁴⁵ Interview, November 2020.

times openly sexist atmosphere.⁴⁶ Former female staffers have called for open recruitment and gender quotas for senior staff, suggesting the presence of more senior women would create a safer workplace but also ‘an inclusive and positive culture where women can thrive’.⁴⁷ They also recommend there be alcohol-free networking events.⁴⁸ Offering flexible work opportunities, currently rare, may help women to sustain staff careers through times when they have heavy family commitments. By increasing the diversity of people who occupy senior political staff jobs, these measures may be powerful in changing the culture of parliamentary workplaces from within.

There is an important gender dimension to the problems faced by political staff at work. The structural and cultural factors that lead to problematic working conditions affect all political staff, but are especially impactful for women. It means they work in environments which contain many of the risk factors for sexual harassment. The culture of patronage can exclude and disadvantage them. The lack of professionalism which tolerates sexist comments and unwelcome sexual advances in work settings creates an environment which can be particularly toxic for women. They can face gender-based discrimination. The gendered nature of the problems must be recognised.

Parliamentary offices are an important site of women’s political engagement and influence in Australia. Women have long occupied the political office space but have been subject to masculine hierarchies and cultures. Improving the culture of parliamentary work has the potential to increase the participation and impact of women in public life. It is only when political offices cease to be seen purely as a ‘private resource’ that more professional behaviour and scrutiny of conduct can occur. However, there are vested interests amongst politicians in keeping this space private, not to protect staff but to protect their own power. The broader community interest in good conduct and safe working conditions needs to be affirmed beyond the self-interest of politicians.

⁴⁶ Interview, July 2021; interview, July 2021.

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Reid Network, ‘Executive Summary’ *ERN Submission to the Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces*, 2021, p. 2.

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Reid Network, ‘Executive Summary’, p. 2.