

Scrolling Towards Silence: Social Media, Cognitive Overload and the Attrition of Democratic Representation

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ABSTRACT

Social media is conventionally treated as a communication tool for parliamentarians: a means of engaging constituents, projecting messages and defending records. This paper argues that it must now also be understood as something else entirely — a chronic workplace hazard that systematically consumes the attentional, cognitive and emotional resources on which effective democratic representation depends. Drawing on cognitive load theory and the job demands–resources model, and synthesising recent empirical work by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Local Government Association and contributors to this journal, the paper advances three claims. First, the digital demand placed on members and their staff — constant triage, reactive monitoring, defensive management of disinformation and the absorption of abuse — constitutes a structural risk to the quality of deliberation and decision-making. Second, the burden is not evenly distributed: women members, particularly those who are younger, from minority backgrounds or prominent on contested policy questions, face targeted, gendered and racialised online violence that is deliberate in design and democratic in consequence. Third, the problem is tractable: parliaments can embed prevention and psychological protection at the individual, office and institutional levels, beginning by measuring a demand that current parliamentary staff surveys render invisible. The paper concludes with a research agenda for the Australasian parliamentary community. The argument is addressed equally to members, senior parliamentary managers and researchers: protecting the attention of those who represent us is not a matter of personal resilience but of institutional design — and it is, ultimately, a matter of protecting the quality of thinking on which democracy depends.

INTRODUCTION

Consider the first hour of a sitting day. Before a member of Parliament has read a single committee paper, several hundred notifications have accumulated overnight: constituent messages threaded through direct messages and tagged posts; commentary on yesterday's division; a doctored image of the member circulating on two platforms; three messages containing threats explicit enough that a staff member has quietly diverted them into a folder to report to security and advise the member of when they find the "right time". The staff member has read every one of them. The member then walks into a deliberative meeting on a complex bill, carrying — whether they know it or not — the cognitive residue of all of it.

The theme of this conference, *Parliaments when democracy is under challenge*, is usually approached from the outside in. The challenges are framed as external forces bearing down on the institution: disinformation, declining trust, the disruptive implications of new technologies. This paper turns the lens inward. It asks what those forces are doing to the working conditions of representation itself — to the daily attentional, cognitive and emotional experience of the members and staff whose thinking *is* the institution. Democracy is not sustained by chambers, standing orders and mace-bearers alone; it is sustained by the quality of human deliberation that occurs within them. If that deliberative capacity is being systematically depleted, the challenge to democracy is not at the gates. It is already inside the building.

The paper advances three claims. The first is that social media now constitutes a *structural risk* to parliamentary work: the volume of digital engagement demanded of modern parliamentarians — triaging constituent correspondence, monitoring commentary, managing disinformation and defending against abuse — amounts to a chronic drain on attention and emotional reserves, with predictable consequences for the quality of legislating, scrutiny and representation. The second is that this burden is *unevenly distributed*: women members, particularly those who are younger, from minority backgrounds, or vocal on contested policy questions, face a qualitatively different threat in the form of targeted, gendered and racialised online violence that is deliberate in design and democratic in consequence. The third is that this is a *solvable problem*: parliaments can embed prevention and psychological protection at the individual, office and institutional levels, and the emerging evidence base — including recent contributions to this journal — points to where to begin.

Throughout, ‘social media’ is used as shorthand for the broader ecosystem of platform-mediated digital engagement, including messaging services and algorithmically curated content feeds. The argument concerns members of all Australasian parliaments and, critically, the electorate-office and parliamentary staff who share — and frequently absorb the worst of — the digital demand. Part One reframes social media from communication tool to workplace hazard. Part Two supplies the theoretical architecture, drawing on cognitive load theory and allied research on attention. Part Three examines the gendered and racialised dimension of online political violence and its consequences for the pipeline of democratic representation. Part Four turns to the parliamentary workplace and identifies two institutional blind spots documented in recent scholarship. Part Five sets out a three-level prevention architecture, and Part Six proposes a research agenda.

PART ONE — FROM TOOL TO HAZARD: THE DIGITAL DEMAND ON PARLIAMENTARY WORK

The orthodox account of social media in parliamentary life is instrumental and broadly optimistic: platforms lower the cost of communicating with constituents, allow members to bypass media gatekeepers, and open new channels for civic engagement. All of this remains true. But the instrumental account describes only the outbound half of the relationship. The inbound half — what the platforms demand of members and their staff, hour by hour — has grown into a workload category of its own, and it is this half that has largely escaped institutional attention.

That inbound demand takes at least six forms, each with a distinct cognitive signature. It is *constant*: constituent correspondence now arrives through direct messages, comment threads and tagged posts as well as email and letter, and must be continuously triaged. It is *reactive*: offices monitor mentions and commentary for criticism, misrepresentation and emerging crises, a form of vigilance that never resolves into completion. It is *defensive*: identifying and countering disinformation about the member or their party requires sustained analytical effort directed not at governing but at reputation repair. It is *protective*: in many offices, staff screen and filter abusive content before it reaches the member, absorbing its psychological impact first-hand. It is *strategic*: maintaining an authentic presence across multiple platforms simultaneously is now treated as a professional obligation. And it is *unbounded*: abuse and commentary continue outside business hours, across weekends and through recesses, with no natural off-switch.

The scale of the most corrosive component of this demand — hostility directed at elected representatives — is now well documented across comparable democracies. The Inter-Parliamentary Union's 2026 global report on political violence against parliamentarians records a marked rise in intimidation and harassment of members by the public, both online and offline, with 76 per cent of women members surveyed reporting experiences of violence compared with 68 per cent of men.¹ In New Zealand, Every-Palmer, Barry-Walsh and Pathé's survey of members of Parliament found harassment to be a near-universal experience — 98 per cent of members by their 2024 follow-up, 96 per cent via social media — and framed it explicitly as an occupational mental-health issue.²³ At the local government level, where representatives typically face the public with the fewest institutional protections, the UK Local Government Association's 2025 *Debate Not Hate* survey found that seven in ten councillors had experienced abuse or intimidation in the previous year, that 73 per cent felt personally at risk in their role, and that the figure rose to 84 per cent among women and 84 to 85 per cent among ethnic minority, LGBT+ and disabled respondents.⁴ Australia's own reckoning with parliamentary workplace culture, the *Set the Standard* review, documented how normalised harmful conduct had become within Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces and how weak the systems for preventing and responding to it were.⁵

Read together, these findings support a reframing. Under Australia's model work health and safety framework, employers are now expressly required to manage *psychosocial hazards* — including high job demands, exposure to traumatic content, and harassment from clients or the public — with the

¹ Inter-Parliamentary Union, *When the Public Turns Hostile: Political Violence against Parliamentarians*. Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2026.

² Susanna Every-Palmer, Justin Barry-Walsh and Michele Pathé, 'Harassment, Stalking, Threats and Attacks Targeting New Zealand Politicians: A Mental Health Issue'. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 49(7) 2015, pp. 634–641.

³ Susanna Every-Palmer, Oliver Hansby and Justin Barry-Walsh, 'Stalking, Harassment, Gendered Abuse, and Violence towards Politicians in the COVID-19 Pandemic and Recovery Era'. *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 15 2024, article 1357907. Over a quarter of members surveyed had received death threats, with women at significantly higher risk of gendered and sexualised abuse and threats to family.

⁴ Local Government Association, 'Debate Not Hate: Survey of Councillors 2025'. Accessed at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/debate-not-hate-survey-councillors-2025>.

⁵ Australian Human Rights Commission, *Set the Standard: Report on the Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces*. Sydney: Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021.

same rigour as physical hazards.⁶ By any reasonable application of that framework, the digital demand described above is a psychosocial hazard of parliamentary work: it is chronic, it is emotionally charged, it is structurally embedded in the role, and — as the following parts argue — it is unevenly distributed and largely unmeasured. Naming it as a hazard matters because hazards attract duties. A member's exposure to a torrent of abuse ceases to be a matter of individual thick skin and becomes a matter of institutional design, exactly as a nurse's exposure to occupational violence or a content moderator's exposure to traumatic imagery has in other sectors.

PART TWO — THE ARCHITECTURE OF ATTENTION: COGNITIVE LOAD AND PARLIAMENTARY WORK

Why should a stream of notifications matter to the quality of democratic governance? The answer lies in the architecture of human cognition, and the most useful map of that architecture for present purposes is cognitive load theory, developed by John Sweller from the late 1980s.⁷ The theory's foundational insight is that working memory — the mental workspace in which complex reasoning occurs — is severely limited in capacity and duration. Because that capacity is finite, the composition of the load placed upon it determines how much genuinely productive thinking can occur. Cognitive load theorists distinguish three components: *intrinsic* load, generated by the inherent complexity of the task itself; *germane* load, the productive effort of building understanding and expertise; and *extraneous* load, generated by poor task design, irrelevant information and unnecessary processing.⁸

The mapping onto parliamentary work is direct. Intrinsic load is the irreducible complexity of legislating, deliberating and representing: analysing a bill's interaction with existing law, weighing competing constituent interests, interrogating a department's evidence in committee. This load cannot and should not be reduced; it *is* the work of democracy. Germane load is the effort members and staff invest in becoming better at that work: mastering a portfolio, learning a community, synthesising policy options. Extraneous load is everything else — and the digital demand described in Part One is extraneous load of a historically unprecedented volume and persistence. Monitoring mentions, triaging abuse, correcting fabrications and managing platform presence consume the same finite working memory that policy analysis requires, while contributing nothing to it. The central claim of this paper follows: social media does not merely *add to* parliamentarians' workload. It *crowds out* the cognitive capacity available for the intrinsic and germane work on which the quality of democratic governance depends.

Three well-replicated findings from cognitive and organisational psychology sharpen the point. The first is *attention residue*. Leroy demonstrated experimentally that when people switch from one task to another before the first is cognitively 'closed', part of their attention remains attached to the

⁶ Safe Work Australia, *Model Code of Practice: Managing Psychosocial Hazards at Work*. Canberra: Safe Work Australia, 2022.

⁷ John Sweller, 'Cognitive Load During Problem Solving: Effects on Learning'. *Cognitive Science* 12(2) 1988, pp. 257–285.

⁸ John Sweller, Jeroen J. G. van Merriënboer and Fred Paas, 'Cognitive Architecture and Instructional Design: 20 Years Later'. *Educational Psychology Review* 31(2) 2019, pp. 261–292.

unfinished task, measurably degrading performance on the next one.⁹ Social media engagement is, by design, never cognitively closed: the feed refreshes, the thread continues, the attack may resume at any moment. A member who checks their mentions in the corridor carries residue into the committee room. The second is the cost of interruption. Mark, Gudith and Klocke found that interrupted workers can compensate for lost time by working faster, but do so at the price of significantly higher stress, frustration and perceived effort — a trade-off with obvious implications for the tone and quality of deliberation under chronic interruption.¹⁰ The third is the finding of Ward and colleagues that the mere presence of one's own smartphone — silent, face down, untouched — measurably reduces available working memory capacity, because inhibiting the impulse to attend to it is itself cognitively expensive.¹¹ For a member whose phone is also the conduit for abuse, the device on the chamber desk is not neutral furniture.

To attentional depletion must be added emotional depletion. The classic 'ego depletion' studies argued that self-control draws on a limited resource that is consumed by acts of emotional regulation and restraint.¹² The strength of that specific laboratory effect has been contested in large replication studies, and the claim should be handled with appropriate caution.¹³ But the broader workplace evidence is not in serious doubt: sustained engagement with high-volume, emotionally charged and hostile material is a recognised source of strain, burnout and secondary traumatic stress in every workforce in which it has been studied, from emergency services to commercial content moderation. Nor is the effect of scarcity itself: Mullainathan and Shafir's research programme shows that when cognitive bandwidth is taxed — by any persistent, intrusive demand — the quality of judgement and decision-making measurably declines.¹⁴ Finally, none of this occurs by accident. As Williams has argued, the platforms are engineered to maximise engagement through intermittent variable rewards, making compulsive checking not a personal weakness but a designed outcome.¹⁵ The economics beneath that design now has a name — the *attention extraction economy* — in which attention is the commodity from which platform revenue is manufactured: Meta and X derive roughly

⁹ Sophie Leroy, 'Why is it so Hard to do My Work? The Challenge of Attention Residue when Switching Between Work Tasks'. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 109(2) 2009, pp. 168–181.

¹⁰ Gloria Mark, Daniela Gudith and Ulrich Klocke, 'The Cost of Interrupted Work: More Speed and Stress', in *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2008, pp. 107–110.

¹¹ Adrian F. Ward, Kristen Duke, Ayelet Gneezy and Maarten W. Bos, 'Brain Drain: The Mere Presence of One's Own Smartphone Reduces Available Cognitive Capacity'. *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* 2(2) 2017, pp. 140–154.

¹² Roy F. Baumeister, Ellen Bratslavsky, Mark Muraven and Dianne M. Tice, 'Ego Depletion: Is the Active Self a Limited Resource?'. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74(5) 1998, pp. 1252–1265.

¹³ Martin S. Hagger et al., 'A Multilab Preregistered Replication of the Ego-Depletion Effect'. *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 11(4) 2016, pp. 546–573.

¹⁴ Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir, *Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much*. New York: Times Books, 2013.

¹⁵ James Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

90 per cent of their revenues, and Google about 75 per cent, from selling users' attention to advertisers.¹⁶ A member's attention is not fragmented incidentally; it is harvested deliberately.

The synthesis is uncomfortable but unavoidable. The deliberative core of parliamentary work — sustained, careful, complex reasoning about contested public problems — is precisely the kind of cognition that is most vulnerable to fragmentation, residue and depletion. A parliament whose members and staff operate under chronic extraneous load is a parliament whose scrutiny is shallower, whose legislation is less carefully considered, and whose deliberation is more reactive than it would otherwise be. The degradation is invisible in any single sitting day, which is why it has escaped institutional notice; it is cumulative, which is why it matters.

PART THREE — NOT NOISE, A COORDINATED SILENCE: THE GENDERED AND RACIALISED DIMENSION

If Part Two described a rising tide that lifts every member's cognitive burden, this Part concerns a targeted current within it. A substantial body of scholarship now establishes that online hostility directed at women in politics is not simply incivility distributed at random, but a distinct phenomenon — violence against women in politics — whose defining feature is that it targets women *because* they are women, with the aim of deterring their political participation as such.¹⁷ Krook and Restrepo Sanín argue that treating such abuse as an ordinary 'cost of doing politics' both misdescribes it and helps to perpetuate it: its logic is exclusionary, not merely critical.¹⁸ Recent Australasian scholarship widens the lens: openly queer candidates at Australia's 2022 federal election received markedly more personal, identity-based harassment than heterosexual counterparts, and New Zealand women members describe misogyny and racism compounded by threats to their families.¹⁹

The empirical record for our own region is now stark. The Inter-Parliamentary Union's 2025 study of sexism, harassment and violence against women in Asia-Pacific parliaments — based on confidential interviews with 150 women parliamentarians and parliamentary staff across 33 countries, including Australia and New Zealand's Pacific neighbours — found that 60 per cent of women parliamentarians had been targeted online through hate speech, disinformation, image-based abuse or doxing, the highest rate recorded in any of the IPU's regional studies. Seventy-six per cent of women parliamentarians, and 63 per cent of women parliamentary staff, reported psychological violence; a quarter of parliamentarians and more than a third of staff reported sexual violence.²⁰ The staff figures

¹⁶ John M. Newman, 'Attention Capitalism: The Law and Political Economy of Attention Markets'. *Stanford Law Review* 78 (2026), p. 415. On the extractive architecture underlying these business models, see Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2019.

¹⁷ Mona Lena Krook, *Violence against Women in Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

¹⁸ Mona Lena Krook and Juliana Restrepo Sanín, 'The Cost of Doing Politics? Analyzing Violence and Harassment against Female Politicians'. *Perspectives on Politics* 18(3) 2020, pp. 740–755.

¹⁹ Elise Stephenson, Gosia Mikolajczak, Blair Williams and Jack Hayes, "'Risky Visibility': The Online Harassment of Queer Politicians". *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 2025 (early view); Rhiannon Watson, Lucy Hammans, Oliver Hansby, Justin Barry-Walsh and Susanna Every-Palmer, 'Misogyny, Racism, and Threats to Our Families: A Qualitative Study of Harassment of Female Politicians'. *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online* 20(4) 2025, pp. 979–1007.

²⁰ Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women in Parliaments in the Asia-Pacific Region*. Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025.

deserve emphasis in a paper addressed to parliamentary managers: the people screening the member's inbox are themselves inside the blast radius.

The content of the abuse differs in kind, not merely in volume. Analyses of tweets sent to UK members of Parliament find that women receive more identity-based 'othering' — abuse referencing their gender, appearance and bodies — than their male colleagues receive on any comparable dimension.²¹ Large-scale computational studies of the 2019 UK general election show that abuse concentrates on prominence and on contested topics, meaning the most active and visible voices attract the most sustained hostility.²² Survey research on parliamentary candidates finds that women experience disproportionate harassment and that it changes how they campaign — what they say, where they go, and how visible they allow themselves to be.²³ And an emerging weapon compounds all of it: sexualised deepfakes and digitally altered imagery, a form of image-based sexual abuse that cross-national research shows is disproportionately deployed against women and is experienced by victims as profoundly harmful even when the imagery is known to be fabricated.²⁴ Turner's recent analysis in this journal documents the specific vulnerability of parliamentarians: hours of consistent, high-quality, front-on chamber footage constitute ideal training data for synthetic media, and deepfake pornography has already been used internationally to humiliate and discredit women politicians.²⁵ The Australian data agree: in a 2026 survey of 110 women across all levels of government, 65 per cent had experienced or witnessed AI-generated abuse, including deepfakes, and 98 per cent expected AI to make abuse worse.²⁶

Viewed through the cognitive-load lens of Part Two, the mechanism of silencing becomes legible as a sequence. First, *target selection*: women members who are vocal on gender equality, climate, immigration or minority rights are identified and prioritised. Second, *volume flooding*: high-volume, sustained abuse exploits precisely the working-memory limits described above, forcing the target and her staff into permanent defensive monitoring. Third, *content contamination*: fabricated quotes, doctored images and synthetic video convert the information environment itself into a hazard, compelling defensive public statements and diverting yet more attention. Fourth, *withdrawal*: the rational response to unmanageable load is to reduce exposure — fewer posts, safer topics, fewer public appearances. Fifth, *exit and deterrence*: some targets leave public life, and others watching

²¹ Rosalyn Southern and Emily Harmer, 'Twitter, Incivility and "Everyday" Gendered Othering: An Analysis of Tweets Sent to UK Members of Parliament'. *Social Science Computer Review* 39(2) 2021, pp. 259–275.

²² Genevieve Gorrell, Mehmet E. Bakir, Ian Roberts, Mark A. Greenwood and Kalina Bontcheva, 'Which Politicians Receive Abuse? Four Factors Illuminated in the UK General Election 2019'. *EPJ Data Science* 9(18) 2020.

²³ Sofia Collignon and Wolfgang Rüdiger, 'Harassment and Intimidation of Parliamentary Candidates in the United Kingdom'. *The Political Quarterly* 91(2) 2020, pp. 422–429.

²⁴ Asher Flynn, Anastasia Powell, Adrian J. Scott and Elena Cama, 'Deepfakes and Digitally Altered Imagery Abuse: A Cross-Country Exploration of an Emerging Form of Image-Based Sexual Abuse'. *The British Journal of Criminology* 62(6) 2022, pp. 1341–1358.

²⁵ Brittany Turner, 'Balancing Openness and Integrity: Parliament's Role in the Age of AI and Deepfakes'. *Australasian Parliamentary Review* 40(2) 2025, pp. 138–159.

²⁶ Women for Election, *A Threat to Gender Equity and Democratic Representation: The Impact of Online Abuse to Women's Safety, Leadership and Political Participation*. Women for Election, August 2026. The report presents findings from the Online Abuse and Women's Political Participation survey conducted in July 2026; the 110 respondents were Australian women currently holding, or running for, elected office across local, state, territory and federal government.

from outside decide never to enter it. Recent Australian work on information manipulation and the harassment of local leaders documents coordinated, cross-platform campaigns — including internationally networked actors supplying scripted messaging against local representatives — that follow exactly this pattern.²⁷ The abuse, in other words, is not incidental noise around politics. For its most organised perpetrators, the silence is the point.

The democratic cost is best understood as a pipeline problem. At every stage — considering candidature, contesting, serving, re-standing, progressing to leadership — targeted abuse operates as an attrition mechanism. In the LGA’s 2025 survey, roughly a quarter of councillors who were unsure about re-standing, or had decided against it, cited the possibility of abuse or intimidation as a factor, with women over-represented among them.²⁸ The IPU’s 2026 report reaches the same conclusion at the parliamentary level: rising public hostility, experienced disproportionately by women, risks discouraging women from seeking or remaining in office.²⁹ In the same 2026 survey, 82 per cent of the Australian women had changed their behaviour because of online abuse, and almost two-thirds said it had made them less likely to stand again, seek higher office or encourage other women to run.³⁰ Two features of this attrition make it a first-order democratic concern rather than a workforce inconvenience. The first is compounding: losses at each pipeline stage multiply through the stages above, narrowing the pool from which future leaders are drawn precisely where diversity of experience matters most. The second is invisibility: the largest losses never appear in any resignation statistic, because they take the form of self-censorship — the speech not given, the portfolio not pursued, the candidature never announced. A parliament can retain every one of its members and still lose their voices.

PART FOUR — PARLIAMENT AS A WORKPLACE: TWO INSTITUTIONAL BLIND SPOTS

If the digital demand is a workplace hazard, the natural question for senior parliamentary managers is how well the institution currently sees and governs it. Two recent contributions to this journal suggest the answer is: barely.

The first blind spot is a *measurement gap*. Yong’s analysis of the psychological wellbeing of parliamentary staff applies the job demands–resources (JD-R) model — the dominant framework in contemporary workplace health psychology — to the New Zealand Parliament’s annual staff engagement survey.³¹ The JD-R model holds that employee wellbeing is a function of the balance between job demands (workload, time pressure, emotional labour, exposure to harmful content) and job resources (autonomy, support, leadership, development), and that chronic demands drive a

²⁷ Ika Trijsburg and Paul Costello, *Information Manipulation and Harassment of Local Leaders: Impacts and Implications*. Australian Resilient Democracy Network Discussion Paper 16, Canberra: Australian National University, 2026.

²⁸ Local Government Association, ‘Debate Not Hate: Survey of Councillors 2025’.

²⁹ Inter-Parliamentary Union, *When the Public Turns Hostile*.

³⁰ Women for Election, *A Threat to Gender Equity and Democratic Representation*.

³¹ Amy Yong, ‘Psychological Well-being of Parliament Staff: What Do We Know and What Can Parliaments Do?’. *Australasian Parliamentary Review* 40(1) 2025, pp. 172–180.

health-impairment process that resources can buffer but not abolish.³² Yong's finding is striking: the survey measures job resources in considerable depth — leadership alone attracts multiple questions — but contains no measures of job demands and no direct measures of wellbeing outcomes such as job satisfaction or general wellbeing.³³ The implication for the present argument is immediate. Social media management — the triage, monitoring and abuse-screening described in Part One — is a job demand, and under a survey architecture that measures no demands at all, it is invisible in the institution's own data. What is not measured cannot be managed; what is invisible in the data will be absent from the risk register, the budget and the board paper. The JD-R literature adds a warning against the most tempting institutional response: piling on resources (resilience training, wellbeing apps, employee assistance schemes) while leaving demands untouched. Resources moderate the harm of demands; they do not repeal it.³⁴

The second blind spot is an *accessibility paradox*. Turner shows that the very reforms that have made parliaments more open — comprehensive broadcasting, streaming and archiving of proceedings — have created a new attack surface, supplying the consistent, well-lit, front-on footage from which convincing synthetic media of members can be trained.³⁵ Meanwhile, the regulatory architecture has not kept pace: broadcasting standing orders were drafted to govern accredited media within the precinct, and are largely silent on the downstream manipulation and reuse of parliamentary footage on social platforms. Legislatures are beginning to respond — South Australia became the first Australian jurisdiction to legislate against electoral deepfakes, and reform is under consideration federally — but Turner's core injunction stands: openness and integrity must be pursued jointly, because a parliament that sacrifices either is diminished.³⁶ Once a deepfake circulates, even a successful debunking imposes exactly the defensive cognitive burden described in Part Two: the member and their office must notice it, verify it, rebut it, and live with its residue.

Taken together, the two blind spots describe an institution that neither measures the demand nor governs the attack surface — leaving individual members and, disproportionately, their staff to absorb a structural risk privately. That inversion of responsibility would not be tolerated for any physical hazard in the building. The *Set the Standard* review demonstrated that Australian parliaments are capable of institutional self-correction on workplace harm when the evidence is assembled and the obligation is named;³⁷ the task now is to extend that same seriousness to the digital dimension of parliamentary work.

³² Evangelia Demerouti, Arnold B. Bakker, Friedhelm Nachreiner and Wilmar B. Schaufeli, 'The Job Demands-Resources Model of Burnout'. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 86(3) 2001, pp. 499–512; Arnold B. Bakker and Evangelia Demerouti, 'The Job Demands-Resources Model: State of the Art'. *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 22(3) 2007, pp. 309–328.

³³ Yong, 'Psychological Well-being of Parliament Staff'.

³⁴ Arnold B. Bakker and Evangelia Demerouti, 'Job Demands–Resources Theory: Taking Stock and Looking Forward'. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 22(3) 2017, pp. 273–285.

³⁵ Turner, 'Balancing Openness and Integrity'.

³⁶ Turner, 'Balancing Openness and Integrity'.

³⁷ Australian Human Rights Commission, *Set the Standard*.

PART FIVE — FROM DIAGNOSIS TO DESIGN: A THREE-LEVEL PREVENTION ARCHITECTURE

The reframing proposed in this paper is only useful if it changes what parliaments do. This Part sets out a prevention architecture at three levels — individual, office and institutional — ordered deliberately from least to most consequential. Individual strategies are necessary but radically insufficient; the durable protections are those built into job design and institutional governance, before crisis rather than after harm.

The individual level: attention hygiene and preparedness

Three practices follow directly from the evidence in Part Two. The first is *cognitive load management*: protecting scheduled, device-separated blocks for deep policy work; batching social media engagement into bounded windows rather than allowing it to metastasise across the day; and treating the physical separation of the member from the device during deliberative work not as a discourtesy but as a performance measure, given the demonstrated cost of mere device presence.³⁸ The second is *psychological literacy*: training members and staff to recognise the signatures of depletion, anxiety and secondary traumatic stress in themselves and their colleagues, so that escalating harm is noticed before crisis. The third is *proactive legal literacy*: pre-crisis familiarity with the reporting and removal pathways available under the Online Safety Act 2021 (Cth) — including the adult cyber-abuse and image-based abuse schemes administered by the eSafety Commissioner — together with relevant criminal and protective-order avenues, so that response time when an incident occurs is measured in hours rather than weeks.

The office level: designing the job so no one drowns alone

Because staff are often the primary absorbers of hostile content, the electorate and parliamentary office is where job design matters most. Offices should adopt explicit *triage and filtering protocols* that specify who handles abusive material, with what supports, and — critically — for how long, importing the exposure-limitation and rotation practices developed in commercial content moderation rather than leaving one junior staffer indefinitely on the digital front line. *Distributed monitoring structures* spread the load across trained roles instead of concentrating it on whoever happens to manage the accounts. And *wellbeing check-ins embedded in ordinary workflow* — brief, regular, unremarkable conversations about digital load and emotional impact — normalise disclosure before crisis rather than only after it. The JD-R logic should discipline all of this: the objective is not merely to add resources to an overloaded role but to redesign the role so that the demand itself is capped.³⁹

The institutional level: measure, respond, govern

Four institutional moves would do most of the work. First, *measure the demand*. Following Yong, parliamentary staff surveys should incorporate validated measures of job demands — including social media workload, abuse exposure and after-hours intrusion — and direct wellbeing outcomes,

³⁸ Ward, Duke, Gneezy and Bos, 'Brain Drain'.

³⁹ Bakker and Demerouti, 'Job Demands–Resources Theory: Taking Stock and Looking Forward'.

alongside the resource measures they already contain.⁴⁰ A demand that appears in the annual survey appears, eventually, in the corporate plan. Second, establish a *rapid response mechanism* for coordinated campaigns: a centralised institutional capability that can verify and document an attack, preserve evidence, liaise with platforms, police and the eSafety Commissioner, and support public rebuttal — relieving the targeted member’s office of a burden it cannot carry alone, consistent with the holistic response model proposed in recent Australian work on coordinated harassment of local leaders.⁴¹ Third, *govern the attack surface*: update broadcasting standing orders to address the reuse and manipulation of parliamentary footage on social platforms; adopt provenance and watermarking standards for official video; and support nationally consistent legislation on electoral deepfakes, building on the South Australian precedent.⁴² Fourth, *extend the support architecture*: the standing, independent workplace support structures established in the wake of *Set the Standard* provide the institutional template; their remit and resourcing should explicitly encompass online abuse exposure for members and staff alike.⁴³

One boundary must be drawn plainly. Nothing in this architecture is directed at insulating parliamentarians from criticism, satire, protest or hard scrutiny, all of which are the lifeblood of democratic accountability and none of which is a hazard in the sense used here. The target is abuse, threat, coordinated manipulation and technology-facilitated violence — categories that impair accountability rather than serving it, because a depleted, self-censoring representative is *less* answerable to constituents, not more. The distinction is the same one the LGA’s campaign title compresses into three words: debate, not hate.⁴⁴

PART SIX — WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW: A RESEARCH AGENDA

The evidence base assembled above is sufficient to justify action, but significant gaps remain — and several are ones the Australasian parliamentary research community, including the readership of this journal, is unusually well placed to fill. Five stand out.

First, the *cognitive load profile of parliamentary work* has never been directly measured. Time-use and experience-sampling studies, long standard in other professions, could establish baseline data on the attentional composition of a member’s working week — and without a baseline, no intervention can be evaluated. Second, the experience of *staff who triage abuse* remains almost entirely unstudied: the secondary traumatic stress literature is mature in policing, moderation and emergency services, but Yong’s identification of the parliamentary gap has yet to be answered with primary research.⁴⁵ Third, the *link between attentional depletion and legislative quality* is theoretically robust but empirically untested in legislative settings; longitudinal designs comparing members’ output and participation before, during and after high-intensity abuse episodes would be revealing. Fourth,

⁴⁰ Yong, ‘Psychological Well-being of Parliament Staff’.

⁴¹ Trijsburg and Costello, *Information Manipulation and Harassment of Local Leaders*.

⁴² Turner, ‘Balancing Openness and Integrity’.

⁴³ Australian Human Rights Commission, *Set the Standard*.

⁴⁴ Local Government Association, ‘Debate Not Hate: Survey of Councillors 2025’.

⁴⁵ Yong, ‘Psychological Well-being of Parliament Staff’.

intervention evaluation is needed at the institutional level: individual resilience training is well documented, but triage protocols, rapid response mechanisms and deepfake governance have not yet been evaluated in live parliamentary environments. Fifth, Australia lacks *longitudinal pipeline data*: without consistent tracking of who considers standing, who stands, who stays and who exits — and why — the attrition of diverse representation described in Part Three can be neither quantified nor interrupted, a gap recent Australian work on democratic resilience has called to be filled through a national evidence base.⁴⁶ A sixth question sits across all five: whether deepfake incidents impose a distinctive attentional and reputational burden, different in kind from other disinformation, that warrants a proportionately distinctive institutional response.⁴⁷

CONCLUSION — PROTECTING THE QUALITY OF THINKING DEMOCRACY DEPENDS ON

This paper has argued for a change of frame. Social media, in parliamentary life, is not a background condition to be endured or a communications channel to be optimised. It is an active workplace hazard — chronic, designed, and unevenly distributed — that consumes the attentional and emotional resources of members and staff at scale. The gendered and racialised dimension of that hazard is not incidental: for its most organised perpetrators, silencing diverse voices is the objective, and democracy pays the price twice over, in a narrowed pipeline of representation and in the quieter, unmeasured losses of self-censorship.

The argument is also, deliberately, an optimistic one. Unlike many of the challenges gathered under this conference's theme, this one lies substantially within parliaments' own control. The theoretical tools — cognitive load theory and the job demands–resources model — are mature. The evidence base, including from within this journal, is growing quickly. The institutional precedents, from *Set the Standard* to South Australia's deepfake legislation, demonstrate that parliaments can act on workplace harm and technological risk when the obligation is named. What remains is to name this one: to measure a demand that current surveys render invisible, to design offices so that no staff member absorbs the digital front line alone, and to build the rapid-response and governance capabilities that individual offices cannot build for themselves.

Parliaments exist to think in public on behalf of the community. When the thinking of those we elect is fragmented by design and depleted by coordinated hostility, the institution is being hollowed out from within, one notification at a time. Protecting the attention of representatives and their staff is therefore not indulgence, and not insulation from accountability. It is maintenance of the democratic machine at its most fundamental level — the level of the human mind — and it is work that should begin before, not after, the scrolling turns to silence.

⁴⁶ Trijsburg and Costello, *Information Manipulation and Harassment of Local Leaders*.

⁴⁷ Turner, 'Balancing Openness and Integrity'.