
From:

Australian Human Rights Commission

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PART C: Submission

1. How would you describe the workplace culture(s) of the Commonwealth parliamentary workplace(s) where you work/have worked? Please outline specific strengths and/or weaknesses in terms of workplace culture(s), based on your experiences, as appropriate.

The workplace at Australian Parliament House is one of elitism and arrogance. The vast majority of people who work at APH (including myself at the beginning of my employment) thrive off being at the heart of the nation's decision making and consequently feel as though they are more powerful, informed or important than those who work outside of politics. The act of constantly being in "the know" and hearing news first hand before it breaks to the public, does wonders in inflating the egos of everyone in the building.

At the risk of generalising, working up at APH attracts a certain type of person, not surprising given the extremely long hours and relative detachment, during sitting weeks, from the rest of the world. APH is a city of its own and it is incredibly easy to get caught up in that bubble and forget some of the norms and behaviours of the real world. Canberra is transformed during sitting weeks and the APH culture quickly takes over the entire city, meaning that it's easy to continue behaving in a certain way even outside the physical bounds of APH. The APH culture has such a reputation that locals turn a blind eye and allow the false reality to continue as that is "just how it is up on the hill."

I am sure that the culture encourages positive attributes such as hard work, however it promotes a myriad of negative ones that far outweigh any strengths. In my experience the culture promotes underhanded behaviour, manipulation, backstabbing for reasons of political gain, deceit, discourages calling out troubling behaviour for risk of career based ramifications, a work hard play hard mentality, a culture that prioritises male careers and perspectives over female ones and an expectation of silence among victims.

2. Based on your experiences, what are the factors that already do, or could contribute to a safe and respectful environment in Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces?

In my experience, there are no initiatives at APH that actively contribute to making the environment more safe or respectful.

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

The nature of politics and having a winning and losing side is an inherent factor in adverse behaviour as it makes all interactions transactional and promotes a power imbalance. The same exists even within each party, ministers and

cabinet members are held in a higher regard and socially have more power than their backbencher colleagues and automatically are able to get away with more than someone with less social capital or power might be able to. Certainly I think the way that job is structured plays a large role in why inappropriate behaviour occurs at the rates it does. Having parliamentarians work in a town that is seen to exist only for their benefit and to essentially revolve around them is not helpful to the culture of arrogance and elitism that I described under Question 1. The hours that are required of parliamentarians and their staff is astronomical during sitting weeks. Having people work until 11pm most nights arguably encourages poor decision making and puts everyone involved in a vulnerable position.

My experience is that certain events have very well known reputations and at these type of events there is a “anything goes” mentality. My personal experience is that prior to a large party-wide function, the parliamentarian that I worked for advised the entire staff base that they could have fun doing whatever they wanted so long as it wasn't seen by the media. When Parliamentarians themselves display inappropriate behaviour it sends the wrong message to impressionable staffers who may be young and only starting out in their careers and feel the pressure to behave similarly in order to succeed in politics.

4. Are you familiar with any Commonwealth parliamentary workplace policies, processes and/or practices in relation to staff and worker safety and wellbeing, workplace bullying, sexual harassment or sexual assault? If so, please outline your understanding of how these policies, processes and/or practices operate.

I am not familiar with any policies or processes on these topics but in my time working at APH I also never actively sought them out.

5. During your time working in a Commonwealth parliamentary workplace(s), have/did you receive any education or training in relation to worker safety and wellbeing, and/or how to prevent or respond to workplace bullying, sexual harassment or sexual assault? If yes, please outline your experience of the training and whether it was useful in increasing your knowledge and/or skills in relation to preventing and responding to workplace bullying, sexual harassment or sexual assault.

I did not receive any formal training during my time at APH and certainly not on the topic of harassment of any kind.

6. Are you aware of how you and/or other people working in Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces can report workplace bullying, sexual harassment or sexual assault (either formally or informally)? If yes, please specify what reporting options exist, and outline your experience with accessing and/or using those reporting options if applicable.

I am not aware of how to lodge a formal complaint. I attempted to make an informal complaint to my supervisor but was told that what was done to me “would have been considered a compliment in my day” and the issue went no further.

7. Are you aware of any supports available in Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces to people who experience workplace bullying, sexual harassment or sexual assault? If yes, please specify what supports exist, and outline your experience with accessing and/or using those supports if applicable.

During my time at APH I was not aware of any support options available, however I did not actively seek out this information.

8. Based on your experiences, do you have any suggestions or recommendations on how to improve the prevention of and responses to workplace bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault in Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces?

I see no reason why APH couldn't operate on regular 9-5 work hours like the rest of the country does. Watering down some of the privileges and uniqueness known to APH would do wonders to bring everyone in the building back down to earth and keep them more closely grounded to the morals and values that exist outside the APH bubble. My opinion is that this should be done in a way that encourages family participation given the rate of infidelity occurring at APH and the culture of acceptance for this type of behaviour.

Unfortunately the implementation of new policies and rules alone is unlikely to alleviate the issues that exist on APH, in fact I'd even suggest that they might further encourage a culture of silence and turning a blind eye. What is

really needed is a sweeping cultural reform that encourages mutual respect for all employees regardless of their title, status or party, an environment where open communication is applauded and prioritised and where people feel comfortable coming forward when they witness inappropriate behaviour of any kind.

More tangibly, I would suggest an APH wide training or onboarding pack for everyone who works in the building regardless of who they are as I believe that education and equipping people with the appropriate tools and skills is a positive step towards reform.

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

All of my comments above relate to APH only. I worked in the electoral office of a different parliamentary some years before my time in APH and found the entire experience enjoyable, safe and educational. I have no complaints from my time in that EO.

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