

PUBLIC LETTER

26 June 2012

The Committee Chair
Inquiry into Workplace Bullying
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

**House of Representatives Standing Committee
Inquiry into workplace bullying**

In 1999 I worked for a government agency. The project I was involved in was a conference proceeding and the manager was inexperienced, in that it was one of her earliest ventures into project management.

As the administrative assistant I worked exorbitant hours, as the project was over budget and outsourcing was not an option. I had to put together 80 conference folders, which included manually inserting the signage and photocopying submissions for the conference, plus putting together the nametags and nameplates. The in-house printer was totally inadequate for the job and well past its use-by-date. It continually broke down and misfed submissions, which had to be doubled-sided. I spent many nights photocopying sometimes until 10.00pm and I was beginning to get extremely fatigued. I complained about the workload and was able to take three flex days' leave tacked on to Easter. On my return the manager got even more aggressive and sarcastic. She was good at making you feel incompetent. It came down to nearly every hour on the hour, she would come out and stand over me and ask: "What are you doing, what are you up to?" Needless to say it was very mentally wearing. I had worked a number of years and had never encountered anything like her management style and people skills. She was a bully, a control freak and regularly harassed me and habitually criticised other administrative staff. She also seemed to not get on well with other professional staff members. I partially blame the agency's manager and deputy for not mentoring her management style properly.

After the proceedings I physically broke down. I suffered a demyelination disorder or sclerosis attack. The right side of my face collapsed and I later suffered from double vision and dizziness was constant, but I was able to sleep well. I recovered with constant rest and sleep. I was off work for nearly three months and was hospitalised for about three to five days for extensive tests and put on a steroid drip. When seeing my neurologist at his surgery some time afterwards, he told me three medical professors discussed my case with him and they could not agree. Two thought I had

suffered a multiple sclerosis attack and one professor disagreed. Luckily I recovered quickly, and was starting to get my strength back. When I returned to work my previous manager had left and the new manager in his evaluation report on the conference proceedings concurred with me in many instances, especially about my opinion on the issue of outsourcing, and also added verbally on the *personalities* within the branch. The evaluation report is a vindication on what I had suffered in the workplace.

Personally, my health has been damaged for the rest of my life, in fact even shortened it. I can no longer go for long walks, I need ten hours sleep a night, I cannot stand for any great length of time and fatigue sets in. I cannot read for any great length of time, as my right eye is now weaker because it has been scarred from the attack. I did seek a second opinion apart from my ongoing neurologist. I sought out an eminent professor of neurology who told me that my treatment had been correct. I have a 50 to 80 per cent chance of getting multiple sclerosis, however, I still have a residue from the attack that I suffered, but told me I was very lucky as “my body had shut the door”.

Unfortunately, the government agency does have a class system. The egalitarian Australian characteristic does not exist in this organisation. Professional class staff is held in high esteem, whereas administrative staff members are held in contempt, even likening their position to nineteenth ‘below stairs’ servants and of course they are all female. Even my last boss said the establishment was all about ‘control’ and the staff survey of the early 2000s proves that harassment and bullying does exist in the organisation.

To make a point of the above fact, in the late 1990s a certified agreement was introduced into the organisation. The manager of the agency addressed a meeting of administrative staff on the issue. To my shock and others she said that we (the administrative staff) were not even worth the money we were on now, let alone more!

Financially I lost nearly three months worth of wages and paid my own medical expenses. My ill health also deeply affected my family. I had two teenage sons at the time, which impacted on their lifestyle and well-being, and also my husband’s.

On the issue of bullying and harassment I believe we have not come very far from the Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills research report published in 1995, entitled *Enterprising Nation*. I believe 21 countries were studied and Australia came 19th out of 21, a dictum of third world management. And that is exactly what I suffered from in the workplace, **third world management**, which is not a good report card and of course on a personal note calamitously affected my health.

I fully believe that where you have strong management to curtail bad behaviour, less snobbery and class distinction, bullying and harassment can be eliminated.