

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee of Privileges

20 January 2026

Dear Committee Secretary

Submission to the Senate Standing Committee of Privileges' Inquiry into the Department of Parliamentary Services' handling of documents and communications

I appreciate the Committee's decision to inquire into this matter and the opportunity to make a submission.

About me

I worked for the Department of Parliamentary Services (DPS) between May 2016 and April 2023, aside from the period from September 2019 to September 2020 when I was a Principal Research Officer in the Senate Committee Office. At DPS I worked as a Researcher and Acting Senior Researcher in the Parliamentary Library.

In October 2025 I settled a legal claim against the Commonwealth in relation to my claims of bullying, discrimination, and adverse action at DPS in 2021 and 2022, and sexual assaults that occurred while I was volunteering in a federal parliamentarian's office in 2000 and 2001. The 2021 and 2022 events followed my disclosures to two DPS managers of the 2000 and 2001 incidents.

Here are links to media articles relating to these matters for the Committee's information:

- [16 April 2025 article](#)
- [12 June 2025 article](#)
- [11 October 2025 article 1](#)
- [11 October 2025 article 2](#)
- [17 October 2025 article](#)

Concerns about inappropriate access to my private and confidential information

When I first read media reports in late 2025 about apparent data breaches at DPS during an investigation into a senior executive's incentive to retire payment, I became worried that my own information may have been inappropriately accessed. That concern

intensified when I read reports that emails from the inbox of former DPS Secretary Mr Robert (Rob) Stefanic had been accessed during a particular period in 2023.

During the period in question, on 15 September 2023, my lawyers sent an email to Mr Stefanic attaching a letter clearly marked “Private and Confidential.” The letter, which was seventeen pages long, was addressed to Mr Stefanic and the Australian Public Service and Australian Parliamentary Service Commissioner, Dr Gordon de Brouwer. Dr de Brouwer’s copy was delivered by post only, while Mr Stefanic’s copy was delivered by email only.

The contents of the letter were intended solely for Mr Stefanic, Dr de Brouwer, their legal representatives, and any other individuals with a genuine business need to access the information. The letter contained detailed and highly sensitive personal information, including information about my experiences of sexual assault, bullying, discrimination, and adverse action and the impact of those experiences on my physical and mental health.

Providing this information for the purpose of progressing my legal claim was extremely difficult and left me feeling acutely vulnerable. The possibility that this information may have been accessed by individuals without a legitimate need to do so, particularly as part of an unrelated investigation, is deeply concerning.

I was also concerned to read that information held by DPS was provided to an external legal firm that had previously experienced a significant data breach, raising broader questions about risk management and safeguards.

In November 2025 I wrote to the current Secretary of DPS, Ms Jaala Hinchcliffe, seeking assurances that my information had not been accessed inappropriately and that my privacy and confidentiality had been respected. Ms Hinchcliffe subsequently provided those assurances. However, based on the information that has since been reported publicly, I cannot be entirely confident that the letter described above was not accessed by individuals who should not have had access to it, either within DPS (including within DPS IT functions) or externally.

While I appreciate the assurances provided, my concern is not limited to my own correspondence. Rather, my experience highlights the importance of strong systems and governance arrangements to ensure that sensitive, confidential, and potentially privileged material is not accessed or disclosed without appropriate authority, oversight, and necessity.

I respectfully request that the Committee consider what steps can be taken to establish, with clarity and transparency, exactly who had access to what material during this process, and under what authority.

Broader concerns regarding parliamentary privilege

More broadly, I was troubled by what appeared to be a permissive or insufficiently cautious approach by DPS in facilitating access to parliamentary emails by DPS IT staff and external parties.

As someone who has worked in parliamentary settings since 2016 and who has a working understanding of parliamentary practice and procedure, I was particularly concerned by the apparent absence of consultation with the Clerks of the Senate and the House of Representatives prior to access being granted.

In my view, accessing or providing parliamentary emails in these circumstances gives rise to a real risk that material subject to parliamentary privilege was accessed or disclosed without the knowledge or consent of either House of Parliament. This includes communications involving Senators, Members, their staff, parliamentary department employees, and others, where such communications may form part of, or be closely connected to, parliamentary proceedings.

I am also concerned about the potential implications for communications from constituents, who contact their elected representatives with the reasonable assumption that their correspondence will be read only by the Senator or Member and their staff. Members of the public should be able to communicate with their representatives confidentially and without fear that their communications may be accessed by others for unrelated purposes. They should not have to resort to encrypted messaging platforms to ensure basic confidentiality.

I am particularly concerned about the possibility that current or former political staffers or parliamentary staff, including DPS employees, who may have emailed parliamentarians to raise concerns about workplace matters could have had those communications accessed. Such a scenario would raise serious concerns about confidentiality, procedural fairness, and the chilling effect this could have on staff raising legitimate concerns. Unfortunately, this is not a situation that is without precedent at DPS.

Workplace culture at the Department of Parliamentary Services

I recognise that workplace culture is not expressly within the Committee's terms of reference. However, in my experience organisational culture is directly relevant to how seriously obligations relating to parliamentary privilege, confidentiality, and proper process are understood and observed in practice.

It has now been more than four years since the *Set the Standard* report was tabled in Parliament. Although I stopped working at Parliament House more than two and a half years ago, I continue to be approached by a steady stream of current and former

parliamentary department staff and political staffers regarding their experiences of bullying, discrimination, adverse action, sexual harassment, and sexual assault.

Most of the accounts I have heard in recent years relate to current or recently former DPS staff, from across the department. Common themes include:

- unsustainable workloads, unreasonable demands, and staff burnout
- bullying
- discrimination based on disability, race, gender, pregnancy, or sexuality, with discrimination following disclosure of mental health conditions being particularly common
- misuse of performance management processes to remove staff who raise concerns or disclose mental or physical health issues
- a pervasive culture of fear that discourages staff from speaking out
- promotion and recruitment decisions influenced by cronyism rather than merit
- lack of accountability for managers who bully, discriminate, or are ineffective

My own experiences, combined with the volume and consistency of these accounts, have led me to the view that a separate Senate inquiry into workplace culture at DPS is necessary to ensure transparency, accountability, and meaningful reform.

A key reason I made a submission to the Jenkins Review and later spoke publicly about my experiences was the hope that doing so would reduce the likelihood of others experiencing similar harm. It is deeply distressing to hear that many DPS staff continue to experience mistreatment at work, often with a devastating effect on their career trajectory and their mental and physical health. I strongly urge Senators to support a dedicated inquiry into the workplace culture at DPS.

Suggested recommendations

1. Mandatory consultation with the Clerks

Require formal consultation with the Clerks of the Senate and the House of Representatives before access is granted to parliamentary emails or IT systems for investigative or administrative purposes.

2. Public reporting of access to parliamentary communications

Mandate that records of who accessed parliamentary communications, when, for what purpose, and under whose authority are created and ensure these are made publicly available on the Australian Parliament House website within a set timeframe after access occurs.

3. Independent review of DPS workplace culture

Recommend a separate Senate inquiry or independent review into the workplace culture at DPS with a focus on accountability, cultural change, and leadership.

Yours sincerely

Anna Hough