



# KYLEA TINK MP

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Dear Mr Neumann,

## Submission – inquiry into recommendations 10 and 27 of the Setting the Standard Report

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Standing Committee on Procedure’s inquiry into recommendations 10 and 27 of the *Set the Standard* report.

From the outset I would like to place my staunch support for all 28 recommendations put forward by the Australian Human Rights Commission on the public record.

For many Australians, politics has become typified by behaviour which is frequently rowdy, masculine, and poor, with big personalities dominating aggressive debates and insults slung across the floor of the House of Representatives Chamber with seemingly no consideration for who may be speaking, about what, at any point in time.

Meanwhile in mainstream media politicians exchange barbs that are frequently personal in nature and divisive. It is little wonder then that frequently when the average Australian interacts with a member of the Parliament they in turn feel justified in acting aggressively.

The Set the Standard Report provides us with a series of recommendations to improve our work environment but importantly if we are to ultimately change both the public’s perception of our profession and the culture of politics more broadly, we must act in a way that is consistent with our ambitions. As a parent I know very well you cannot get anywhere by asking your children to “do as I say, not as I do” and therefore these reforms are an essential element in fundamentally moving our democracy and national identity forward.

This last election saw trust in government, and its services falling to an all-time low<sup>1</sup>, and with many independents elected, it is clear that a sizeable portion of the community wishes to see politics done differently. The 47<sup>th</sup> parliament can implement practical reforms to how our democracy works. This reform is what the community wants, and it is what we as a nation deserve.

With diversity being a key feature of the new parliament, we must seize on the opportunity to implement lasting change that can help improve public trust in politicians, and ensure mutual respect, accountability and transparency is at the forefront of our democracy.

### **Question Time Reforms**

Sadly, to everyday Australians the expectation of politicians is often set by what they see as the adversarial nature of Question Time: where the public witness political point scoring and insults hurled across the chamber at the expense of accountability and information gathering.

While lively debate and the contesting of ideas is an important function of any modern democracy, parliament must move beyond the current “staged show” filled with jeering to what it was designed to be - a chamber for robust, respectful, debate and discussion.

Too often we have seen governments of both persuasions avoid direct answers to questions posed by the opposition and crossbench during Question Time. Rather, long preambles set a scene that then enables the Minister answering to cast an aspersion towards the opposition of the day thus not addressing what the current concern is – but instead using the time to reflect on what did not work last time.

Meanwhile then, when the opportunity arises for a member of the backbench of the Government to ask a question, rather than sincere queries being made of the Executive by that backbencher on behalf of their electorate, we see Dorothy Dixers (a question to which the answer is already scripted by the Government) politely lobbed to the Minister. The Minister then uses this opportunity to either convey a message re current government policy or again seek to embarrass the opposition. And this is all again surrounded by loud jeering and insult slinging.

While I am not suggesting governments should not be able to speak to their policies, or justify their actions, I do believe Question Time should be reformed to ensure all communities are heard equally and to deliver the outcome for which it was originally conceived. That is to provide a public forum where the Executive of the day can be questioned by any parliamentary member, on behalf of their electorate.

To realise this for this forum would not only improve the quality of debate but would also arguably help progress policy development and go some way to restoring public faith in the political process.

At the same time, while many of the behavioural issues during Question Time relate to disorderly interjections and jeering, the presence of electronic devices – namely mobile phones during Question Time – has become problematic. Electronic devices are an essential form of communication, but when

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.roymorgan.com/findings/since-march-2019-government-trust-distrust-have-fluctuated-but-2021-ended-with-soaring-levels-of-distrust>

MPs – especially ministers are seen scrolling their phone during Question Time, it perpetuates the public perception that Members of Parliament are disengaged, or worse – have no regard for the community they represent.

The Speaker of the House of Representatives does already have some power to expel a member from the House following consistent poor behaviour. I would argue however that the bar at which this “poor behaviour” is being tolerated, needs to be lowered and the Speaker should manage and punish disorderly conduct<sup>2</sup>, to a greater extent. This could include extending the Speakers powers to enable time penalties for disorderly interjections, and warnings for persistent mobile phone use during Question Time.

Last year, this very Committee published a report specifically into the practices of Question Time<sup>3</sup>. Disappointingly, not one of the recommendations has been adopted, and I urge the committee to consider implementing the reforms identified at that time along with the ones pertaining to this inquiry.

**Recommendation 1**

**Standing Order 94 be amended to allow the Speaker to direct a member who is being disorderly during Question Time to leave the Chamber for a specific period to be served during Question Time.**

**Recommendation 2**

**Ensure microphones are on to record interjections in Hansard to allow the Speaker, where necessary, to review and impose a retrospective Question Time sanction.**

**Recommendation 3**

**Amend Standing Order 100: Rules for Questions – to remove the potential for Dorothy Dixers and instead instate a requirement that questions are placed within the context of either a direct electoral issue or specific point of policy as it relates to a particular population.**

**Recommendation 4**

**Introduce a short-term trial of limited use of mobile phones by Members during Question Time<sup>4</sup>.**

**Parliamentary sitting schedule and routine of business**

While Parliament is well-known for its unpredictable hours – the impact that this culture of “work hard / play hard” has on individuals cannot be underestimated. The Set the Standard report highlighted the impact of the hours on the chamber culture and wellbeing and safety of people working across the

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<sup>3</sup> [A window on the House: practices and procedures relating to Question Time – Parliament of Australia \(aph.gov.au\)](https://aph.gov.au)

<sup>4</sup> Recommendation 9

[https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportrep/024667/toc\\_pdf/AwindowontheHousepracticesandproceduresrelatingtoQuestionTime.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportrep/024667/toc_pdf/AwindowontheHousepracticesandproceduresrelatingtoQuestionTime.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf)

workplace noting that “the operation of the chambers can contribute to, and normalise a masculinised and competitive culture, both inside and outside the chamber.”<sup>5</sup>

Achieving a more respectable work-life balance, while still fulfilling the role as a Member of Parliament, starts with amending the sitting calendar, and the hours of business. Debating and voting on issues of critical importance should not occur late at night and constructive debate and detailed legislative reform can still be achieved with changes to the order of business. I note, and welcome the changes already initiated by the Government as its first order of business in August.

Introducing more family-friendly working hours into the parliamentary calendar is not a new concept. A report prepared for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, found that “parliaments need to change their internal culture, structures and procedures—both formal and informal—to create organizational environments that are conducive to the achievement of gender equality”<sup>6</sup>

Parliament needs to implement measures that balance the responsibilities of being an MP with better work and life balance if a diverse cohort of parliamentarians are to be recruited and retained. While not all MPs have caring responsibilities, this change would send an important signal to the community that it is possible to combine work in Parliament with caring responsibilities.

#### **Recommendation 5**

**Standing Orders be amended to guarantee that parliamentary recess weeks align with school holidays across all states and territories.**

#### **Recommendation 6**

**Parliamentary sitting calendar for the upcoming year to be released by October with regard given to ensure there is no overlap with final year exams – HSC-equivalent.**

#### **Improving safety and respect**

Public expectations of the behaviour of members of Parliament are that members are sober in their decision making. Additionally, whilst alcohol is not the sole reason people misbehave, most sexual harassment and bullying is associated with alcohol use<sup>7</sup>. Alcohol causes disinhibition and can lead to poor decision making.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/ahrc\\_set\\_the\\_standard\\_2021.pdf](https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/ahrc_set_the_standard_2021.pdf) p.269

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/b/506885\\_2.pdf](https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/b/506885_2.pdf) p.15

<sup>7</sup> Q&A: Alcohol and the workplace | Health & Safety Handbook ([healthandsafetyhandbook.com.au](http://healthandsafetyhandbook.com.au))

The Standing Orders should be amended to ensure the decision-making capacity and behaviour of all members attending the House are not impaired or adversely influenced by the consumption of alcohol.

**Recommendation 7**

**That the Standing Orders be amended to grant the Speaker the power to exclude any Member suspected to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs.**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide my thoughts to the Committee. I look forward to continuing this conversation and implementing these important reforms.

Yours sincerely

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