



Inquiry into the Operation and Management of Department of Parliamentary Services Operation and Management of

DEPARTMENT OF PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

CPSU Submission

Community and Public Sector Union (PSU Group)

October 2020

Introduction

CPSU members are proud of the work they do supporting the functioning of our Australian Parliament and the work of parliamentarians. This work covers a broad range of areas from research and library services, to building security, visitor services, and maintaining the Parliament’s vast art collection. Along with the work of the Departments of the Senate and the House of Representatives, it is an important part of our democratic institutions.

Our submission is based on a survey of CPSU members working in DPS and feedback from CPSU workplace delegates. Both indicate there are significant issues with many of the management and workplace relations practices of the DPS. These are impacting negatively on staff morale and the effectiveness of the agency.

This inquiry is an opportunity to shine a spotlight on those matters and establish a constructive way forward to address these issues.

As the primary union representing staff at Department of Parliamentary Services, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry into the operation and management of the Department of Parliamentary Services.

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About the Department of Parliamentary Services (DPS)

All Commonwealth agencies have distinct characteristics based on the nature of their work and location. While DPS is a relatively small agency, the nature of its work means that it covers a broad range of functions. These functions include:

- library and research services;
- information and communication technology services;
- security services;
- building, ground and design integrity services;
- audio visual and Hansard services;
- art services;
- visitor services;
- food and beverage services;
- retail, health, banking, and childcare services; and
- corporate, administrative and strategic services for DPS.

Workplace culture

During August and September 2020, the CPSU surveyed members in DPS about the Department’s workplace culture. The survey results showed CPSU members are increasingly concerned that DPS is not a good place to work. Funding cuts have impacted negatively on DPS and over recent years, issues with accountability and transparency, bullying and harassment and questionable decisions by management regarding career advancement opportunities have increased.

The key survey results were:

- 49% of respondents said their branch has suffered from budget cuts in recent years;
- 60% of respondents reported an increase in workloads due to budget cuts;
- 42% reported a decrease in quality of services; and
- 51% reported a lack of practical understanding of, or respect for, the value of the work by management.

Cuts in funding have a direct effect on workplace culture in DPS, one respondent noting:

‘The budget for the branch is almost entirely spent on wages so ongoing efficiency dividends/concerns over future budgets have meant a reduction in staff numbers, long periods of recruitment freezes and the use of contract staff to fill positions rather than ongoing staff’.

A lack of consultation

Many of our members flagged concerns about a lack of transparency, accountability and consultation. There appears to be a culture in DPS where management decisions are made without proper consultation. Many members called for accountability as summarised aptly by this member:

‘There needs to be more accountability for decisions and actions taken by management to ensure they align with the APS Values. Management working with us, supporting us to do our jobs, encourage us and appreciate us. Not having such a big them vs us attitude.... we are all one team with common goals. Be honest with us.’

The CPSU has been concerned about a lack of genuine consultation for some time. DPS has a Consultative Forum that is the primary mechanism to ensure formal consultation. In the past, there were quarterly meetings that went for up to three hours and allowed for some engagement on upcoming initiatives and matters of concern. More recently, the extent of consultation has decreased considerably. The latest Consultative Forum went for 15 minutes and there was little input sought or received from DPS branches.

While there have been more frequent meetings since July after the CPSU raised its concerns, these do not meet previous standards of consultation and there continue to be limitations on what information is shared. Formalised and robust consultative arrangements are an important part of information exchange and effective change management.

Bullying and harassment

Bullying and harassment continues to be an issue within the Department.

A majority (54%) of respondents reported an increase in bullying or inappropriate behavior.

When asked about one thing that would improve DPS, addressing problems with management culture was commonly mentioned. It was summed up by one member who recommended DPS ‘Restructure management to change culture to improve morale and eliminate the culture of bullying and intimidation from management’.

Career progression

A lack of career progression prevents the development of a healthy, productive culture within DPS. This is most apparent in the Research branch and in the Security branch, where many members stated there were few career progression opportunities within DPS.

There are recruitment and retention issues with a high turnover rate for Parliamentary Security Service (PSS) 1-4 officers. There are estimates that it is higher than the average rate for the APS and there is a lack of gender equality in recruitment within the PSS.

When surveyed, only one in four in PSS believed there are adequate vertical or horizontal pathway options available to them as a PSS employees and concerns about favouritism were a common. Comments from members in Security included:

‘There is no such thing as career progression within DPS especially if you have a target on your back and or management do not like you’

‘The only people progressed are the ones they want progressed, based on relationships not merit’

The Research Branch has a very flat structure resulting in fewer opportunities for career progression. Members state senior management in the branch do not appear to support opportunities for acting/higher duties or secondments compared to elsewhere within DPS.

Several staff had secondments and acting opportunities rejected because management is more concerned about the impact on operational capability rather than giving staff opportunities to develop their skills.

Workplace arrangements

Security staff expressed concerns about how DPS management has applied workplace policies to PSS, resulting in a lack of procedural fairness and due process on matters that included:

- annual leave application processes and frequency of leave requests being denied;
- directions affecting changes to employment conditions of PSS staff were not communicated to the CPSU in a timely manner;
- Workplace Consultative Committee changes to Terms of References; and
- procedures around Code of Conduct inquiries, personal leave directive.

30% of survey respondents from across the Department stated that they had been impacted negatively by the application of the TOIL or overtime policy.

The CPSU is concerned that information about the impact of workplace arrangements on attrition is not being captured. For example, the CPSU understands DPS has not been conducting ‘exit interviews’ with departing staff meaning there is limited information about the levels of job satisfaction and reasons for leaving DPS.

The most recent Annual Report (2018-19) also cited a higher than average turnover rate for ongoing staff with a separation rate of 13% as compared to the APS at 9%.¹

Classifications for PSS were also cited as a problem and a barrier to mobility. The 1-2 broad-banded classification was developed two decades ago but is not reflective of the increased tasks and responsibilities since. One member explained that:

‘As we are structured differently to other Dept’s for a PSS, officer to move to any pathway is extremely difficult under the current situation. We are definitely undervalued as years of experience and knowledge of APH and its workings takes years to accumulate.’

Staff Survey outcomes

The results of the last two staff surveys for the Department have not been released.

These surveys are intended to provide the organisation feedback on what is working and what isn’t, and to inform future workforce strategies. The failure to release them indicates a lack of willingness on the part of the Department to acknowledge and respond to staff concerns. This is consistent with the feedback through CPSU channels.

Building and asset management

Parliament House has been in a constant state of rebuild over recent years. Some members believe aesthetics are prioritised above the safety of those utilising the space. The following examples of poor design were provided by members:

- The main front re-design has blind spots
- Temporary Road access to NE & SW H-field gates means delivery trucks may become bogged and be at risk of rolling over;
- Staff have been exposed to fumes and building dust;
- Restricted and unnecessarily inconvenient access to staff entry when enhancements were being fortified to entry points; and
- Staff rostered outside on the hard surface forecourt were forced to stand for long hours (2-3 hours) without appropriate breaks and in all sorts of weather.

CPSU members believe many of these problems would have been avoided if DPS management genuinely consulted with staff about alternative options.

¹ Department of Parliamentary Services (2019). Annual Report 2018-19. Retrieved from https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Department_of_Parliamentary_Services/Publications/Annual_Report_2018-19

Security Arrangements

Security protections and procedures at Parliament House have increased significantly in recent years. Security staff undertake their duties with diligence and pride. The behaviour of PSS guards is a positive aspect of the community’s engagement with Parliament House.

While security staff continue to do an important job well, many of them are unhappy and discontent. There is a notable level of distrust of management by PSS staff. Almost all stated they were not satisfied with the level of communication provided by DSO currently. Many commented more information and clarity was needed in writing because what is provided by management is not sufficient. Members suggested that professional standards for email communications to all staff should be considered.

Four in five said they were uncomfortable or very uncomfortable approaching management with any day to day or work specific policy issues.

Just under half stated they were comfortable raising issues with their direct manager without fear of reprimand or consequences.

The Parliamentary Library

Responses to the CPSU survey, particularly from members in the Research Branch of the Parliamentary Library were consistently critical.

Staffing numbers in the Research branch of the Parliamentary Library have been cut in recent years. This has meant the branch is struggling to retain and recruit staff with specialist knowledge in many of the areas of interest to parliamentarians. The complexity of client requests has increased meaning staff with specialised knowledge, rather than generalists, are needed to adequately answer client questions. Generalists necessarily require more time to answer some very detailed questions. This results in slower services to parliamentary clients (including queues of client requests) and thus those who are working to finish tasks being stressed and overworked.

60% of the respondents in the Research Branch indicated services to the parliamentarians had increased in complexity while resources available to service the enquiries appropriately had declined.

The Research Branch is another area where a lack of accountability from management in DPS is evident. It has been acknowledged by management that there is no clear control over workflow, made worse because management have little visibility of it.

The work comes in directly from the offices of MPs and Senators to researchers and goes out directly as well. What this means is if senior management do not engage well with the research staff, they cannot understand the work demands on researchers and subsequently do not make informed resourcing decisions across the Research branch.

Finally, a recurring concern was the lack of transparency and the failure to release the results of staff surveys. It is unclear why the latest APS staff surveys have not been released. Comments included:

‘Research Branch is yet to see the results of the last APS Census - gives the impression the results reflected poorly on management but also that management doesn’t want to engage with that feedback and is instead covering it up. Also means that we will be less likely to participate in other surveys if we know the results will be ignored or not even released.’

‘There are many issues with the Research Branch of the Parliamentary Library that would be exposed by the release of the last 2 staff surveys.’

Implementation of recommendations from past inquiries

The CPSU previously made a submission to an inquiry into the Department of Parliamentary Services in 2014.² The submission raised concerns about budget pressures, resourcing for Hansard, funding arrangements that did not distinguish between maintaining the parliamentary estate and operating costs, workplace culture especially recruitment practices and bullying and harassment and security arrangements. Despite the best efforts of CPSU members, these continue to be issues.

Related Matters

COVID-19

COVID-19 has resulted in operational changes by the Department and has further highlighted underlying issues with how management communicates to staff. The response to COVID-19 within different branches varied from well in some sections, to some sections not appropriately responding. DPS was relatively slow to embrace working from home arrangements compared to other agencies. WHS assessments were conducted of staff’s work areas at home, however, there was no appropriate follow up

² Community and Public Sector Union (2014). Submission to inquiry into the Department of Parliamentary Services. Retrieved from <https://www.aph.gov.au/DocumentStore.ashx?id=63a0c34e-08e8-49b0-a274-e4aa2bbb0dcf&subId=299853>

if a WHS issue with working from home was recognised. The other WHS issue was the potential exposure of front facing staff whilst Parliament House remained open to the public.

The lack of supported video conferencing software and hardware meant that staff were forced to use personal devices and unsecure software, thus if clients wanted to have video conferences it was unable to be done in a secure way. Video conferencing capabilities have recently been provided, however, this still requires the use of personal devices for those working from home.

Initially, many staff were not clear on the parameters around working from home, for example, regarding caring responsibilities. Some staff felt they had to take carer’s leave to stay at home and do home-schooling while others worked remotely while also caring for their school children at home. Different sections had different arbitrary rules around these circumstances which resulted in inconsistencies across the workforce.

The lack of clarity was evident for those who were seconded to Services Australia to process JobSeeker claims. Staff from DPS noted it was far from a smooth transition with difficulties around parking reimbursements, payroll issues, and leave entitlements, amongst other issues. In respect to pandemic and contingency plans, DPS appeared to have not factored in scenarios common to non-business as usual settings.

ICT in DPS

The inadequacy of ICT capacity, and particularly broadband capacity is well known in Parliament House. There are also a number of mobile phone dead spots in the building. COVID-19 further demonstrated the importance of ICT to the effective functioning of workplaces and the inadequacy of the Parliament House ICT. Much more needs to be invested in ICT at Parliament House.

DPS is upgrading its ICT security system, however, this has not resulted in extra resources for all branches implementing such a significant change. More resources are needed, a member stating that ‘team effort is needed to develop, test and hand-off automation solutions to one-off changes that used to be done more simply by one technician’.

Other upgrades like the migration from Windows 7 to Windows 10 did not result in extra staff, despite it being clear this was needed when implementing such a change.

This lack of resources is having an impact on staff in ICT. They flagged that mental health and wellbeing are ongoing issues in the CPSU survey. Commenting about the funding shortfall in ICT, a member in ICT put it plainly, *‘[the budget cuts mean] Heavier workload for current staff causing stress and anxiety’.*

Staffing Levels

Many of the issues raised in this submission have come about because of staffing pressures. The 2020-21 Budget papers reveal that the DPS Average Staffing Level (ASL) for the last financial year was 838, when the Department was budgeted for 900 ASL, we think because of the reduced parliamentary activity. The ASL rises to 939 for this financial year and it is critical that the Department staffs at least to that level with ongoing, direct APS employment. The CPSU believes there is also a need for a review of staffing levels is required to ensure they are sufficient to meet the increasing complexity and demands of the work of this important agency.

Conclusion

Our submission has raised significant issues with communication, workplace culture, some management practices, and ICT capacity. These have affected the ability of DPS staff to carry out their roles to the best of their ability. To address some of the issues raised by this submission, the CPSU makes the following recommendations:

- DPS reinstates regular and structured staff consultation processes and ensures thorough and consistent staff consultation over all change management;
- DPS makes the outcomes of departmental staff surveys available and uses them to inform improved workplace strategies;
- DPS takes seriously the problems of bullying and harassment and nepotism that exist and work with the CPSU to address these with good policy, manager and staff training, improvement targets, and regular reviews to get results;
- DPS prioritise staff workplace safety in the planning of all capital works;
- That there be significant investment in upgrading Parliament House IT capacity; and
- DPS utilises its full ASL allocation, and that a review of staffing levels to ensure adequacy is undertaken.