

Submission to the Inquiry into workplace bullying

**House Standing Committee on Education and
Employment**

Inquiry into workplace bullying

Submission.

Dear Ms Rishworth,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on this important social problem. I am mostly writing in relation to your first term of reference. I am a victim of workplace bullying and I believe my story is relevant (and common).

I would like to suggest that, whatever definition for workplace bullying is applied, the real issue is Poor Management. People who are placed in a position to manage other members of the workforce have a responsibility. Their decisions must be aimed at bringing out the best performance in those other people. Management is not about being efficient or clever or important; it is simply about getting the best out of others.

When incompetent or malicious people are moved to management positions, their efforts to impress people above them are self-seeking. They believe others should 'make them look good'. Left unchecked, their narcissism destroys the morale of the group and can lead to poor mental health of the individuals.

This is a personal story and I want to quote from a diary kept during 2008 when I was a senior lecturer at the University of the . I had extensive experience in teaching, publishing, research. I had a significant international reputation and had published several books.

I created a diary because I was lucky enough to have insurance with my superannuation fund, but that required making a case that

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I was unable to continue with my career. Unfortunately severe depression left me physically unable to speak. I was literally silenced because I couldn't make sounds, unless I was reading. Through two difficult years as I attended a series of assessments with psychiatrists, I read from this diary.

In my diary, on my psychologist's advice, I listed the events of the bullying and I am now quoting excerpts:

"about five years ago I asked for Long Service Leave combined with Research leave to finish my book on propaganda. I finished the book, which is now published. When I returned to the University, I found that XXX had been promoted into a newly created position of Deputy Dean.

It is an inappropriate appointment: this is her first academic job, so she is inexperienced. Her personality type is to always feel slighted and she uses the position of power to 'get' people who slighted her. She has used the position to litter my personnel file with letters of complaint, alleging misconduct.

This was the first example:

In my war propaganda course, which is always crowded with students, we had a tutorial room from which the chairs were always being taken to adjoining rooms. On one occasion, some students didn't have a chair and one of them went to the Academic Office of the faculty and complained, thinking he was assisting me in getting more chairs. In fact, the Acting Dean called me in and told me that my tutorial room was crowded, that this breached workplace health and safety regulations and that this was misconduct. She sent me an aggressive bullying letter and I went to the Vice Chancellor with it, to complain about her heavy handedness and her inflexibility. I complained that I was being bullied for no reason. He agreed that she had been inflexible and asked the new Deputy Vice Chancellor to meet with me. He had just arrived and when I met him, he was hostile, indicating that he didn't believe my version of events, that the Acting Dean had told him another version. Nevertheless he agreed to set up formal mediation. I asked for a specific mediator. The Deputy Vice Chancellor did not ever organise the event because he said my mediator wasn't available.

I knew that the Deputy Vice Chancellor had been the Deputy Dean's supervisor at University of _____ and I thought that fact was why he reacted the way he did. I felt powerless to do anything about what was clearly now a poisoned relationship with a new person in power.

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This is another example:

I was then the chair of a Selection Committee for a new lecturer in the Faculty (and this was the last time I played any role designed to make a difference to the direction or staffing of the Faculty – from this time on I have been completely sidelined and ignored). The outstanding candidate was a man coming from University of . The internal candidate did not have a Masters yet, so of course, she had no publications. After the interviews the Deputy Dean (who was a member of the Selection Committee) announced that this outstanding candidate was a paedophile. She said she had written evidence and had been contacted by five people from U to warn her.

I wrote a Memo to the Head of Personnel saying I thought that that unexpected announcement made sane decision-making impossible and asking his guidance in whether this was a situation which needed correcting. He did nothing. After a long time I decided to ring the candidate and tell him to get the committee notes through Freedom of Information processes and to ask for my memo. He did. The Pro Vice Chancellor called me to his office and asked me if the committee had leaked. He asked me who he should be asking about whether they'd leaked information to that candidate, and he said the FOI request had caused a lot of trouble for him. I know he didn't ask anyone else so I interpreted that as a threatening meeting.

Since then I've applied for Research Leave to work on my next book, which is a biography. My application was rejected. The Manager of the Research Office, who is an administrator not an academic, informed me that writing a biography is a hobby, not a research project, and that the university may consider ordering me to stop work on the project. I've since won a prestigious Arts Fellowship to Antarctica to help me work on the biography but had to take Long Service Leave because my research leave was rejected.

I feel that the last five years has been an uninterrupted process of abuse and attack, that no positive messages are directed at me, that any email I get from any of my supervisors is likely to be the next attack, and that my closest colleagues have also come under constant attack. One of the members of my former team was made redundant, one left when she was not promoted despite an impressive CV and one is so disengaged he has sold his house and moved to Melbourne, and is on leave from which I doubt he'll return.

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There are no positive experiences for me except from the students and even though there are many wonderful colleagues there, they are so sad and jaded, even their presence doesn't help. People have their doors shut and don't speak to each other.

When I got back from Antarctica I went back to work and found that I was sitting in the car for a long time before I got out. The students started telling me that because my courses had been removed from a lot of majors, they couldn't complete their degrees. I didn't know that my courses **had** been removed from majors, which means students in that major can't do my courses. I found myself saying 'I can't help you'. And it isn't normal for me, it isn't something that sits well with me, and I felt so utterly helpless that one day I just decided not to go back.

It's a story which has cut short my career by more than twenty years but it is also a story of proper processes not being followed, of mediation meetings that were not set up, of complaints about inappropriate action not being addressed; of high achieving members of staff having their research options shut down until they stopped producing the publications needed by the University and of a culture which required generation of ideas through open discussion being transformed into corridors of closed doors. I never did return to either that University or any other. A lot of my colleagues followed me out, into either reliance on a pension or, in one particularly tragic case, by ending his life.

As you were quoted as saying in *About The House*, bullying has had a 'profound effect on all aspects of a person's health as well as their work and family life'. It certainly has had a profound impact on me.

I have made this submission simply to make one small contribution to "the national evidence base on workplace bullying".

Yours sincerely,

23 August 2012.