



## **Samara Centre for Democracy Advises on Safer Working Conditions for Elected Officials**

*Sabreena Delhon, CEO of the Samara Centre for Democracy, was invited to be a witness for the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs on May 30, 2024. She provided the following statement to support the Committee's review of the Members of the House of Commons Workplace Harassment and Violence Prevention Policy.*

Thank you Mister Chair. It's a pleasure to speak with the committee today.

My name is Sabreena Delhon, and I am the CEO of the Samara Centre for Democracy which is a nonpartisan charity dedicated to making Canada's democratic culture more accessible, responsive and inclusive. We have been studying the lived experience of elected officials for 15 years through our MP Exit Interview project which has produced several publications and two podcasts. This material serves as a key resource for aspiring politicians, is used by high school and post-secondary educators across the country to teach about active citizenship and has received extensive media attention. Over 160 exit interviews have been conducted with former Members of Parliament since 2008. I'll be drawing on our most recent cohort of interviews today to guide potential changes to the workplace harassment and violence prevention policy.

In these interviews former MPs across parties have expressed concern that their conditions of work create significant barriers to achieving a Parliament that is representative of Canadian society. They call for modernization in the form of more flexibility, stronger HR policies, and formalized protocols to prevent harassment. Our interviewees feel that these changes are crucial in order to attract and retain Parliamentarians. This was a defining theme in this group - more so than in previous cohorts. MP's repeatedly shared concerns that a failure to improve Parliament as a workplace would undermine the faith and trust that Canadians have in this institution.

The way forward isn't through policies alone but through the formation of a healthy culture that can reverse this normalization of an increasingly hostile environment on and offline.

This requires considering the following questions: what are the rewards for good behaviour? How are parties incentivized to contribute to civility and collegiality? And what other healthy boundaries can be put into place to foster more productive conditions of work?

I'll turn now to specific feedback about the working conditions from former MPs. Encountering racialized comments was identified by interviewees as a significant risk when serving in the House of Commons. This problem was compounded by the absence of mechanisms to address these instances which brought forth a sense of alienation.



In terms of gender equity, harassment of younger women MPs was brought up as a point of concern amongst a number of our interviewees (and not only by those who are women-identifying. A number of male MPs that we interviewed remarked on this phenomenon as well.)

Some interviewees spoke of the negative effects of “harassment” or “bullying” during Question Period, and which they connected to the broader harassment and silencing of women and other underrepresented groups in the political arena.

The effect of online harassment of MPs was also a recurring theme. Our interviewees explained how harassment affected their mental health and extended to their families. This is a particular concern for those from minoritized communities who receive a high volume of online abuse.

Recently we’ve seen numerous politicians at all orders of government leave the political arena because of the hate and harassment that came to define their job. This isn’t just about having a thick skin or being more resilient. In our interviews the women we spoke to frequently mentioned receiving death threats and struggling to get the appropriate security that they required.

If safer working conditions aren’t put in place then the leaders we need, the leaders that reflect Canada’s diverse communities, won’t stay or they’ll stop stepping forward altogether. The context I’ve outlined here takes a significant toll on staff and has a chilling effect on the public who are pushed away from democratic engagement instead of being drawn in.

None of our interviewees regret devoting years to public service and they share their stories to help evolve life in Parliament. In this period of global democratic backsliding it’s never been more urgent to secure healthy conditions of civic engagement.

We are willing to partner to support a safer and more inclusive workplace should the Committee see a role for us. Thank you.