

## Party leaders need to address federal parliament's intolerable workplace culture: Phelps

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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High-profile activist Kerryn Phelps, who is considering whether to join the battle in the Wentworth byelection, has condemned federal parliament's toxic political culture and called on all major party leaders to address it.

As the fallout from Liberal MP Julia Banks' condemnation of bullying continues, Phelps told The Conversation: "Some of the behaviour in the Australian parliament of late would not be tolerated in any other workplace", saying it seemed to have got worse. This made for an unhealthy workplace which was ill-suited to getting the best performances from MPs.

Phelps, a City of Sydney councillor who was very active in the same-sex marriage debate, lives and practices as a GP in the Wentworth electorate, and could be expected to attract a substantial vote if she ran as an independent.

The seat, formerly held by Malcolm Turnbull, who had a strong personal vote, is on a 17.7% margin but the Liberals are worried about a big protest vote.

The fallout from the leadership coup is already being felt there with Turnbull's son Alex encouraging people to donate to the campaign of Labor candidate Tim Murray.

The younger Turnbull tweeted: "Best bang for the buck you'll get in political donations in your life. Tight race, tight margin for government, big incremental effect whatever happens. If you want a federal election now this is the means by which to achieve it."

While the focus in the bullying debate last week was on women, Phelps said some men suffered equally and "don't perhaps get recognised in terms of the emotional cost [to them]."

She said the "toxic nature of parliament as a workplace" needed to be addressed, and she rejected the message sent by some Liberal players that people should toughen up or, in the words of backbencher Craig Kelly, "roll with the punches".

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If any business leader said “just toughen up”, they wouldn’t be there for long, Phelps said.

She said that a quantitative improvement in the political culture had to be generated by the leaders of the large parties. “You have to have the leaders of the major parties draw a line in the sand,” and say that bad behaviour would not advance people’s careers. At present the opposite seemed to be the case, she said.

Earlier on Sunday Labor frontbencher Clare O’Neil said “there’s a level of aggression, of conflict, of egocentrism that dominate parliament house and I think that that is quite hard to handle”, in particular for women.

O’Neil, spokeswoman on financial services, told the ABC her experience as an MP was “that there’s increasingly a culture in Canberra and in parliament house that feels really toxic”.

Attention is coming on the Minister for Women Kelly O’Dwyer, who issued a general statement last week condemning bullying, to take a stronger stand. O’Dwyer is expected to say more this week.

Some current and even former Liberal MPs women are reluctant to speak out for fear of blowback.

Labor has had its own controversy centred on one of its female MPs – Emma Husar has said she will not run again, after allegations of her bullying staff and other misbehaviour. A Labor inquiry upheld some allegations but not others.

Labor’s spokesperson on women, Tanya Plibersek, said that while the way parliament worked was adversarial, debates should be conducted with decency and respect.

“A positive culture is critical, and each one of us has the duty to help foster that both within parties and across the parliament.

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"I believe the closer the parliament reflects our community - a more equal representation of women and men, and a greater diversity of backgrounds - the better that culture will be.

"I actually think something that really helps is more people working on issues in a bipartisan way, for example on committees," Plibersek said.

*Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.*

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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