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Mr. Bryan May

Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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● (1555)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.)): Good afternoon.

Pursuant to the order of reference of Monday, January 29, 2018, the committee is resuming its consideration of Bill C-65, An Act to amend the Canada Labour Code (harassment and violence), the Parliamentary Employment and Staff Relations Act and the Budget Implementation Act, 2017, No. 1

Today the committee will hear from two witnesses via teleconference. We have Hilary Beaumont, staff reporter, Vice News, who's in Los Angeles, California. I understand she's on holiday, so I really appreciate Hilary's attendance. And from Waterloo, Ontario, we have Beisan Zubi.

I believe we're going to give each of you seven minutes for your opening remarks. We'll start with Hilary. The next seven minutes is all yours.

Ms. Hilary Beaumont (Staff Reporter, Vice News, As an Individual): Good afternoon, and thank you to the honourable members for inviting me to testify on this urgent subject.

My name is Hilary Beaumont, and I'm a staff reporter with Vice News, an on-line news outlet. I have a journalism degree from the University of King's College and I recently completed the Banff Centre's investigative journalism workshop. One of my areas of focus is sexual harassment and assault in the digital age.

Recently, I published an investigation into workplace harassment on Parliament Hill, hoping to shed light on the issue and to influence debate on Bill C-65. Over the past three months, I interviewed more than 40 women who worked on Parliament Hill, everyone from current and former MPs, to lobbyists, journalists, staff, and interns.

It quickly became clear that female employees are the most vulnerable to harassment. Many of them shared negative experiences, ranging from sexist comments to groping and sexual assault. Some said they had been fired, or passed over for jobs, after they had tried to report abuse. Current employees said that they have no idea how to report harassment if it happens to them. My investigation found that weak anti-harassment policies, alongside a baked-in hyperpartisan and male-dominated culture, are failing survivors, particularly female employees.

Bill C-65 will do a number of important things. It will bring Hill employees under Canada's Labour Code, giving them another route to report. It will require investigations of known incidents of harassment and will add a third party to receive complaints. It will not replace the Hill's current feeble policies, and it will not erase cultural reasons that prevent women from reporting abuse, including party loyalty, small office environments, and the imbalance of power between employees and superiors. That's why I believe Bill C-65 is an important step forward.

Briefly, here are my recommendations as you study this bill. Please note that these recommendations are specific to the parliamentary workplace.

First, harassment complaints must be removed from politics as much as possible. The December 2014 House of Commons policy is the main policy that employees access to report harassment. Now that employees of all parties, including the NDP, can access this policy, it needs to be improved.

One major issue is that employees must first report harassment to the MP who employs them. I spoke to one former employee who said she experienced psychological harassment from a male coworker who was her equal. She went to HR, but she was told that she had to report it to the MP she worked for. She was too intimidated to report to him, because she was still on probation and would have been easily identifiable in a small-office environment. Her alleged harasser referred to their office as a "boy's club", and she would have been reporting to a male MP about male behaviour. She was fired shortly after she contacted HR. She believes the MP found out about her contact with HR through a co-worker whom she confided in, but she was given no reason for her dismissal.

Bill C-65 will not replace this policy, but it can strengthen it. The bill requires every workplace to have a third party to receive complaints. According to the survivors whom I spoke to, this person must be outside of politics completely in order for them to feel safe reporting. The first point of contact cannot be the MP.

Second, to that point, under the bill it should be possible for employees to report directly to the labour ministry without first having to complain through an existing workplace policy. As I said, this would help take politics out of the equation.

Third, there are employees on the Hill right now who do not know their rights or the policies that cover them. Training on the resulting anti-harassment policies must be mandatory for all employees and employers. In these sessions, they should go through the policy in detail so that employees understand how it works and what the consequences are if you're a perpetrator.

Fourth, all policies on the Hill have different definitions of harassment. The bill should adopt a single definition of harassment and it should require that this definition be present in all workplace policies. This definition should be broad, and it should include all forms of harassment, and not be limited to sexual harassment.

My reporting also found that in 2014 a group of staffers within the NDP came together in a closed-door meeting, and wrote a letter to prevent an alleged harasser from returning to Parliament Hill. Accordingly, if possible, anti-harassment policies should allow survivors the option to report their experiences in groups of peers, so they feel heard and not isolated.

All anti-harassment policies on the Hill should have annual public reporting requirements on the number of complaints received, and how they were dealt with. Only the December 2014 House of Commons mechanism has this requirement currently.

• (1600)

Finally, the regulations alongside the bill must have teeth. There must be clear, legal consequences for not acting to prevent or stop harassment.

With such a high bar to report abuse, the parliamentary workplace is an example of a catch-22 scenario. Because existing policy does not account for cultural issues, women know it's not safe to speak up, and because they don't speak up, the culture of harassment continues.

I hope that once it passes, this legislation will begin to break the cycle.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Beaumont.

Now, coming to us via teleconference from Waterloo, Ontario, is Beisan Zubi.

The next seven minutes is yours.

Ms. Beisan Zubi (As an Individual): My name is Beisan Zubi. I am a former Parliament Hill staffer. I worked on the Hill twice, first from January 2011 to September 2012 as a political researcher in the NDP's media team, and then again in 2014 as a communication and logistics assistant in the NDP House leader's office.

My time on the Hill was very intense. Within a couple of months of my being hired, we had entered into a federal election that put us in official opposition status. We hired hundreds of new staffers in a very short period of time after that. Jack Layton died that summer, which threw us into a leadership race. Then we had a new leader. And then I left the Hill to do my master's degree in Toronto.

A couple of months after I finished my studies, I was back on the Hill. There was a terrorist attack. There was a sexual harassment

scandal. I burnt out pretty quickly and left. I was there for about four months that second time.

I tell you this only to give you some context around the intensity of what it was like to work on Parliament Hill at that time, and I think also, in general, to frame why all the sexual harassment I was seeing and the terrible behaviour that I was experiencing seemed almost normalized. It felt like everyone was acting out because they had to. We were all on this intense and abnormal political odyssey. I don't say that to justify anyone's behaviour except, perhaps, my own in explaining why it was so difficult for me to register just how off an environment it was and why I went along with it for so long.

A year ago I wrote about my experiences on Parliament Hill for *Vice*, where Hilary works, in an article entitled "Here's why I never reported sexual harassment while working in Parliament".

Among the reasons I named in that piece are that it happened when alcohol was involved; because no one saw it; because everyone knew about it; because the perpetrator worked for the victim's party; because the perpetrator worked for a rival party; because it happened so fast; and because I didn't work there anymore.

I understand that Bill C-65 is not a panacea, but I'd hazard a guess that it doesn't do very much to protect people in many of these situations. In fact, the onus to report is on the victim. They have to work within their own party infrastructure and go to the whips. Sexual relationships between managers and subordinates aren't prohibited or even disclosed. And the culture piece, which in my opinion is the most pernicious and toxic part of all of it, isn't addressed.

I do get that you can't legislate office culture, but the normalization and glorification of alcohol and drinking, of aggressive behaviour, and of sexually explicit language are, in my experience, a large part of the Hill's culture, and I don't know if I see that changing.

The open secrets that we all participated in still hound me and make me feel guilty. I almost feel complicit in accepting my own mistreatment, and in how it could have created more abuse for women who came after me and who are still on the Hill. The political partisanship that makes you feel like you're in a neverending campaign makes the idea of launching a complaint against someone in a rival party automatically seem partisan, and launching a complaint against your own team seem treasonous. As well, very little is being done to hear from and protect former employees, who are potentially more able and freer to speak out without fearing for their current jobs.

I have to say I'm disappointed that I am the only former Parliament Hill staffer who will be speaking on the record in regard to this bill. I was contacted by this committee on Thursday of last week. I was able to shift my schedule to accommodate it to speak as an individual, but I'd like to remind us all that harassment is received and processed differently. The intersectional perspectives of young queer men and women, black women, indigenous women, differently abled folks, and racialized staffers who don't benefit from the same systemic privileges that I do would have been an impactful and educational component of any holistic conversation about harassment.

I just want to say a couple of things on the record.

The first, I think, is the most important. Even though I worked in a partisan position, I made friends and acquaintances across the board. This isn't a problem within one party or group. At 25, 26, and 27 years old, I was subject to sexual harassment—innuendoes, inquiries, and general creepiness—from men, generally exclusively men, anywhere from 10 to 40 years older than me, from the Conservative, Liberal, Bloc, and NDP caucuses, from staff in all of those caucuses, from bureaucrats, lobbyists, and journalists.

You have to believe me when I say the problem was cultural. The types of sexual harassment were myriad. They involved touching, groping, comments, come-ons. My body was discussed in front of my face. Older men would tell stories to a table of young staffers about bedding other young staffers. Alcohol and gossipy conversations that you would turn a blind eye to at 32, I can say, having worked outside politics for almost four years, in retrospect, were very abusive and very destructive as far as work environments go.

• (1605)

I am still working through and processing my feelings of anger at the environment, but I didn't want to stop my intervention on that note, so I'd like to share one final thing.

I burnt out of politics really hard when I left. While I've toyed with the idea of going back in some capacity, as I noted in my *Vice* piece, Parliament Hill just felt fundamentally unsafe for young women. However the one ray of hope that I had, and the one that I would like to leave you with, is that I was lucky enough to have great managers at the NDP, including Kathleen Monk, who went to bat for me, protected me, and warned me when they could. It was a negative and toxic environment, except for brief moments of success and support. However, behind all those moments I experienced were women who wanted to make sure that women were getting credit that was due and that young women weren't being dismissed as women or as ornaments.

Yesterday, I joined the board of my local chapter of Equal Voice and I hope to one day be as supportive and fiercely protective of, and to advocate for, more women in the House moving forward. I don't necessarily agree with our Prime Minister on everything, but the one issue that I know he is right about is this: "Add women, change politics".

I would like to leave you with that cultural suggestion.

• (1610)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you to both of you for adding to this conversation.

We'll start our first round with questions of six minutes each.

First up, we have Mr. Blaney.

Hon. Steven Blaney (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you both for your testimony. We are here in the House today, and can appreciate your—I wouldn't say punch-in-the-face, but straightforward—comments, which I believe are very helpful to this committee and the bill. What we are trying to achieve is, what I would humbly say and you've heard it politically, zero tolerance.

Ms. Zubi, I was running in 2011 in Quebec, and I can tell you I felt that orange wave in a partisan way. You mentioned that you came back on the Hill for four months and you mentioned in your remark that this culture of harassment was cultural and deep.

Just to clarify, is it the reason why you left the second time, Ms. Zubi?

Ms. Beisan Zubi: There were a lot of reasons why I left the second time. The job was not the best fit as well.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Okay.

Ms. Beisan Zubi: I was doing logistics, and it wasn't the right fit for me, but I think my physical health was the real barrier to my continuing on the Hill.

There was the October 22 shooting, and then a couple of years later there was the sexual harassment scandal.

Then I had a nervous breakdown at my desk. I had to leave work. I went to get a massage, and the masseuse told me that my back felt like a bag of rocks because that's how physically upset I was. I kind of knew at that point that it wasn't a healthy environment for me. I really did love the political environment, and I love the idea of helping people, but I think I knew it wasn't something that my body could sustain. It wasn't something I could sustain mentally or physically.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Yes, you're referring to this tragedy we all went through when there was a terrorist inside the House during caucus. I sure remember that, as I was public safety minister.

I'm going to turn to Ms. Beaumont right away because in the article you wrote, in *Vice*, I see that you mentioned that a lack of a clear definition of sexual harassment on Parliament Hill has complicated efforts by women who want to report mistreatment.

Can you add any comment to your remarks about defining clearly what we're talking about and what we're trying to achieve with this bill on sexual harassment, both on the Hill and on federally regulated bodies?

Ms. Hilary Beaumont: Absolutely. I understand that whether or not there's an adequate definition of harassment has been a heated issue for the committee, so across all of the different harassment policies on Parliament Hill that I reviewed—which includes the December 2014 policy, the union policy, the MP-to-MP policy—all of them include different definitions of harassment. That means there is no clear understanding across the Hill of what that word actually means

My recommendation is that the bill itself have a clear definition of harassment that is very broad, including all different types of harassment; not only sexual harassment, but everything from psychological harassment to racial harassment, including an intersectional viewpoint on all of the different types of harassment that can affect different people.

This way, you wouldn't get caught up in the definitions. Right now if you want to complain about somebody who's covered by a different harassment policy than you are, there's a kind of loophole there where it's only voluntary for that person who's being complained about to participate, and you might be covered by different definitions of harassment. The bill can clarify that. That's a major issue from my reading of the policies.

Hon. Steven Blaney: It is certainly our view, Ms. Beaumont, that we need a definition that is broad enough and that could be more defined and specific in the regulations. We need something in the bill in that regard, and I thank you for your very constructive comments.

I will go back to you, Ms. Zubi. I have a question. You mentioned that there was some behaviour that was totally inappropriate. Did you know at that time the clear line of recourse you had, and if so, or if not, do you feel it is of the utmost importance that every employee on the Hill knows what is available, so they can go to their resource and try to resolve these situations that we don't want to occur but that do occur?

• (1615)

Ms. Beisan Zubi: In 2011, when I first started, there was actually no official recourse.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Okay.

Ms. Beisan Zubi: I worked for at the NDP, which gave me a little bit of a benefit because we had a union that would help us with grievances. But there was no central House of Commons force that could adjudicate or look at that. I did know what I could do through the NDP, but I didn't know exactly.... I think that with anything you do, the first thing is to make sure that people are completely aware of their options. Also, it's really important to make sure that people are able to be movers of that culture in positive ways, other than just being victims and complaining about a specific kind of treatment. We need to have the same expectations of people who are victims of sexual harassment as we do of people who are seeing sexual harassment, people who are witnessing it but not saying anything. This would go a long way as well.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Thank you.

Whether you know what to do when you're concerned or when you see something that is concerning—

Ms. Beisan Zubi: I think that is just as important, because intervention by bystanders could really be helpful, especially when

you're talking about power imbalances. When the person who's inferior, politically, might be the one who's the victim, having somebody who has a bit more power politically advocating for them is really impactful.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Thank you.

The Chair: Now over to MP Fortier.

[Translation]

Mrs. Mona Fortier (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you both very much for your testimony today. I also want to thank you, Ms. Zubi, for taking up the torch and getting involved in Equal Voice. I think it's really important for women to participate in the political process.

Can you hear the interpretation?

Ms. Beisan Zubi: I speak French, so I understand what you are saying.

Mrs. Mona Fortier: Great.

I would like you both to answer....

[English]

Ms. Beisan Zubi: I don't hear the interpretation, if there is interpretation happening.

The Chair: Just one moment, please.

We're going to continue, and we will try to work out the technical difficulties.

[Translation]

Mrs. Mona Fortier: My first question is for both of you, ladies.

You said that the culture had to be changed, and I think that's very important. I believe you talked about ways to ensure prevention. Could you suggest ways to strengthen Bill C-65 in terms of prevention? We all know that the current culture on the Hill needs to change.

Ms. Beaumont, I'm listening.

[English]

Ms. Beisan Zubi: Building culture is really difficult, and I think it's even harder to change a culture once you have one that is as pervasive and as negative as the culture on the Hill was. One thing that really does change a culture is diversity and inclusion. I know that isn't exactly the easiest actionable item for you, but really, it is about including diverse voices, including diverse experiences, and making sure that the people who are making decisions and driving culture are coming from a variety of backgrounds and are cognizant of this.

Some people have asked me if I think eliminating alcohol from any on-the-Hill event would help. I don't. Alcohol is everywhere. It's off the Hill. It's in every industry. It's really not about that. It's about what kind of event you're inviting people to. What are the implications? If you're inviting people to be there and there are staff, are you making sure it's a professional environment? Are you making sure there are professional kinds of conversation, or is it just an excuse for people to get around a table and act badly?

It needs to be driven by people, and I think that requires empowering people to have that ability within the Hill culture, for example, creating culture champions who help in shaping events and these conversations in a way that includes more diverse voices. There are a lot of things you can do—

● (1620)

[Translation]

Mrs. Mona Fortier: Ms. Beaumont, I'm sorry, but I will have to interrupt you because time is short.

Ms. Beisan Zubi: Okay, I understand.

Mrs. Mona Fortier: I want to make sure that Ms. Zubi can also answer this question.

[English]

Ms. Hilary Beaumont: Sorry, is that directed to me?

Mrs. Mona Fortier: Sorry, Madam Beaumont, I mistook you both. Would you like to answer that question as well?

Ms. Hilary Beaumont: I would echo what Beisan said. I would add that I think the best prevention possible is training, as long as it's mandatory for all employees and employers. I believe Monsieur Parent said that he was able to get three hours of training. I don't think that's enough. There needs to be more time for training on an annual basis, and it needs to take employees and employers through the policies so they understand exactly how they work. You need to take them through the definition of harassment so they understand exactly what it is, and they need to understand what the consequences are if they are complicit in harassment or perpetrate it in any way.

[Translation]

Mrs. Mona Fortier: Thank you. I have another question, and I would like you to answer it quickly because I don't have much time left

Ms. Beaumont, in your opinion—you talked about this in your presentation—what parliamentary authorities are in the best position to help members and senators develop policies on harassment and violence, as laid out in Bill C-65?

[English]

Ms. Hilary Beaumont: I'm not sure, to be honest, what specifically you mean.

Mrs. Mona Fortier: You mentioned earlier that harassment can't be reported directly to the MP. Who would be would be the third party that you mentioned victims could report to?

Ms. Hilary Beaumont: I guess the third party would have to be an independent party outside of the Hill. I understand there are independent consultants who can be brought in response to formal complaints, but I think they should be brought in for informal

complaints as well. There should be a third party who is external to the Hill, does not work on the Hill, who could be brought in to keep politics out of the equation.

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Mrs. Mona Fortier: Thank you very much.

[English]

Ms. Beisan Zubi: I would agree that I probably would have been more likely to go a third party who was impartial and at arm's length than to report to anybody internal.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now for six minutes, MP Trudel, please.

[Translation]

Ms. Karine Trudel (Jonquière, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for your testimony.

My first question is about the investigation you submitted, Ms. Beaumont. You mentioned several elements in your statement, and I would like to hear you talk about the complaint process.

In addition, when answering a question earlier, you said that the complaint should not be addressed directly to the member in question. I would like you to elaborate on that, as well as on another aspect that seems important to me that was mentioned several times—the confidentiality survivors are entitled to.

[English]

Ms. Hilary Beaumont: My understanding—and I think Beisan could also answer this—is that if an employee is reporting directly to their MP, they might feel intimidated doing that, especially if they're on probation. The MP could also be the harasser, so it might not be ideal for them to report to the MP. Also, there are political reasons that an employee might not want to report to the MP. For example, if the harassment is coming from their own party or another party, reasons of party loyalty and hyperpartisanship could make the employee feel too intimidated to report. Again, I believe there should be a completely independent third party to report to.

• (1625)

[Translation]

Ms. Karine Trudel: Thank you.

My next question is for you, Ms. Zubi. You were an employee on the Hill, and you talked a lot about supervision at events.

I would like you to tell us more about that. Should we regulate events on the Hill more, as well as the arrival of lobbyists or various individuals from across Canada?

[English]

Ms. Beisan Zubi: This might sound silly, but making sure that food is being served, and not just alcohol, might help. It's generally seen as a normal thing to do, but a lot of times it's a sanctioned event and it's quite alcoholic. I think that's good party planning.

Many times I would walk into a room and it would be filled with a lot of older men. I just need you to understand how intimidating and unwelcoming an environment that is for women. You also feel on edge and like you are dealing with something on all sides. I think it's about making sure that invitations to these events go to a wide list of people so you get a diverse group of people in that space. I think that really does require having a diverse group of employees to attend these events. Having a bit more of an open environment, maybe not having events in dark rooms, would help. I think generally speaking that people are able in other industries to have events.

You really do need to talk about the way that young women specifically are treated on the Hill, as objects that are totally usable. That, to me, is not about the event. It's not about anything other than the fact that they are operating in unique situations where they are very junior in a lot of situations, where they are dealing with people who have been around for a long time. Just empowering young women and making them feel like they can actually walk into those rooms and that it will be okay, I think, would go a long way towards actually getting more diversity and and getting more women to show up at these events without being scared of what might happen.

[Translation]

Ms. Karine Trudel: My next question is once again for you, Ms. Zubi, and it follows up on what you just talked about.

Do you think it would be important, in addition to mandatory training for all staff on the Hill, for people who are in charge and aware of this issue to attend events, if only to ensure supervision in the case of an unfortunate event?

I would like to know what you think about this, since it could be part of the solution.

[English]

Ms. Beisan Zubi: I actually don't think that's a bad idea. I mentioned having this idea of a culture champion, people whose role in these social events is to make sure that people are safe, that people aren't getting over-served, or that if somebody looks uncomfortable, there is someone who can gently interject and say, "Hi, how was your day?", and to defuse these situations.

Right now the way it's been working on the Hill is that these have all been self-appointed. They have all been guardians of these events, but there is no assurance that they're going to show up to everything. Until at least something has changed and people feel better and safe, I don't think there's anything wrong with having some kind of a culture champion who represents the values of the workplace at all Hill-sanctioned events

It wouldn't really do much to address the events that take place outside of Parliament Hill, but it could be a really good start to shift the culture in a way that people are being more conscious about these actually being work events and that they are there because it's their job. They're not there for a boyfriend; they're there to do their work.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now over to MP Dabrusin please.

(1630)

Ms. Julie Dabrusin (Toronto—Danforth, Lib.): Thank you. I want to take a step back because I believe both of you talked about former employees.

Ms. Zubi, you spoke specifically about some of the thoughts you were having, after the fact, about the work environment you had worked in and had left.

Ms. Beaumont, I think you maybe had mentioned having interviewed former employees as well. The reason I mention this is that when I look at the legislation, it seems to cover current employees, but I don't believe it covers people who have left their place of employment. Do you think there would be any value in changing this so that former employees could also benefit from the new Bill C-65?

Ms. Beisan Zubi: I can start.

I have revisited the article I wrote for *Vice* a couple of times, but most of the perpetrators of that kind of behaviour are no longer employed on Parliament Hill either. I was thinking about that too and what I could say about it. When I went through it, the four-year turnover of an election cycle and the nature of political work makes the workforce pretty transient.

I don't know. What I think your main focus should be right now is just ensuring that people who are the Hill right now are safe. I want to make sure that the people, like the young women who really want to work in politics, I tell should go to work on the Hill are not being sent into a lion's den. That's what I think your focus should be on. I think the people who left politics are still working working through their experiences. I'm lucky because I have my career and other things, and I think we should really be focused on protecting the vulnerable right now.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: What both of you can't see—and I apologize—is the lights that are flashing, so if you hear some distraction in the background, that's what's happening. If I can check with you, Mr. Chair—

The Chair: Yes, I do actually have to ask for unanimous consent to continue. They are 30 minutes bells and we're at 29:30. Do I have unanimous consent to continue?

Some hon. members: No.

The Chair: Okay.

I apologize, but we do have to go. I would like to thank both of the witnesses for appearing today. Unfortunately, this is something that can happen. We are being interrupted by votes and we all have to be in the House to vote. I would like to thank both of you for appearing today.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: Mr. Chair.

The Chair: If you are able and interested, we are also accepting written submissions. The deadline for that is April 2, if you have any thoughts, questions, or concerns that you think we have not gotten to as a result of today's shortened meeting. Again, thank you both of you.

Julie, you had one question?

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: I was just going to ask if either of the witnesses was interested in responding in writing to my question about former employees. Rather than providing a general brief,

perhaps they could provide an answer in writing about former employees.

The Chair: That's acceptable as well.

Ms. Julie Dabrusin: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, everybody. We'll see you all in the House very shortly.

The meeting is adjourned.

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