Toxic Parliaments and What Can Be Done About Them, by Marian Sawer and Maria Maley. Palgrave MacMillan, 2024, pp. 125 Paperback RRP EUR 39.99 ISBN: 978-3-031-48327-1.

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The word 'toxic' is perhaps a contested descriptor of Westminster parliaments, but as Marian Sawer and Maria Maley have prosecuted in their new book, *Toxic Parliaments and What Can Be Done About Them,* it is clearly applicable. In 2023, I appeared before the Australian House of Representatives' Procedure Committee and was encouraged to reflect on the universality of the term:

> *Mr Boyce: I have a couple of observations. You are operating on the presumption that parliament is a toxic workplace. What grounds have you based that on? Given that assumption, is this a toxic meeting? I don't think it is. We are all relatively friendly and courteous to one another. Sure, there are some instances in parliament that happen and shouldn't happen, but to generalise to the greater public that parliament is a toxic workplace is incorrect.[1]*

Mr Boyce (Member for Flynn, Liberal National Party of Queensland) further argued that describing the Australian parliamentary workplace as toxic was a 'limited minority view versus an overall view'.[2] Minority or majority view, the term has triggered largescale reform in the Australian parliamentary context, and indeed elsewhere.

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[1] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, *Inquiry into recommendations 10 and 27 of Set the standard: Report on the Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces*. 2023: Parliament of Australia, p. 5.

[2] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, p. 5

As Sawer and Maley contend, parliamentary toxicity stems from widespread allegations of sexual harassment, intimidation and bullying that has been uncovered in parliaments in the wake of the #MeToo movement. They define a toxic parliament as 'a parliamentary work environment in which employees and elected members do not feel safe', a workplace that is 'harmful and injurious'.[3] Describing the gendered institutional practices evident in the parliaments of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, Sawer and Maley illustrate the hostile environments in which representatives, political and parliamentary staff operate. Strong examples in this regard are the 'struggle to make parliaments family friendly' and changes to the 'sitting hours and sitting calendar'.[4] Westminster conceptions of appropriateness have traditionally kept 'strangers' off the floor of the chamber, even when those strangers are infants in need of a feed. Changing these norms has involved a confluence of new norms articulated at the international level and women members with young children lobbying for change. Likewise, the idea that parliaments can limit the number of days that representatives need to travel to the capital, away from their constituencies, by sitting longer hours, sometimes well into the night, has been challenged by international guidance and women MPs who were dissatisfied with the distinctly family *un*friendly nature of these hours.

The innovation of the book lies in the detailed analysis of experience in the four case studies in 'trying to turn parliament into a model workplace'.[5] With careful precision, these chapters outline the challenges inherent in 'creating robust systems to tackle sexual and sexist misconduct in parliaments'.[6] The authors argue that parliaments need to establish independent bodies that address and adjudicate on grievances, as well as strong, proactive commitment to reform from parliamentary leadership. They note in the United Kingdom, a jurisdiction from which others have learned important lessons because of its pioneering start, complexity has been the enemy of culture change. With 13 different remits and bodies in the current parliamentary standards ecosystem, confusion about where to turn has resulted in an absence of 'high level oversight' and accountability.

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[3] Marian Sawer and Maria Maley, *Toxic Parliaments and What Can Be Done About Them*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2024, p. 2.

[4] Sawer and Maley, *Toxic Parliaments*, pp. 26-31.

[5] Sawer and Maley, *Toxic Parliaments*, ch. 5-6.

[6] Sawer and Maley, *Toxic Parliaments*, ch. 5-6.

In Canada, a self-regulatory regime has left the investigation of allegations of misconduct in the hands of party whips who unsurprisingly prioritise the interests of the party over the interests of those who allege misconduct has occurred. Canada is presented as a case where good intentions are simply not enough, and indeed, where the poor design of the standards architecture may even do more harm than good. In New Zealand, the external Francis review resulted in 85 recommendations instigating interesting new measures intended to encourage culture change, including a Parliamentary Culture Committee, Behavioural Statements for the parliamentary workplace and a Positive Workplace Culture awareness program. These initiatives, however, have been insufficient in reversing poor behaviour, particularly in the absence of a strong human resources framework.

The chapter concludes that mechanisms intended to redress sexual and sexist misconduct must be internal to the parliament, and tethered to power, culture and institutional norms. The Australian parliament, coming much later to these issues than its Westminster counterparts, has been able to heed these lessons and added its own: 'a single, authoritative cross-party body' is essential in providing 'leadership of reform'.[7]

Who might *Toxic Parliaments* appeal to? I can think of three groups. First, and perhaps most obviously, parliamentary practitioners: parliamentarians, political staffers, and parliamentary staff. This book provides these actors with tools for action and greater awareness of what works and what doesn't. A second group is of course academics. There is more work to be done in thinking through the elements of culture change we want to see in parliaments, and indeed, in influencing that change from both the inside and outside. Finally, civil society actors will find this book, with its rich data and narratives, very useful for their lobbying work. These groups, however, should not work in silos. For change to be meaningful, practitioners, academics and civil society actors need to collaborate and find strategies in which their work builds on, and extends, the gender sensitivity of parliament. Moreover, while the design of reforms is important, this book uncovers a new pressing need to monitor continuously the implementation of reforms.

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[7] Sawer and Maley, *Toxic Parliaments*, p. 96.