

# Humans of the House Episode 3: The Best/Worst Place I Ever Worked

## Episode Transcript

**Sabreena Delhon:** Hi listeners. Just a note that this episode contains some discussion of harassment and sexual assault. Please take care while listening.

*[music]*

**Sabreena Delhon:** What makes a good workplace culture?

What does it look like? Free snacks? No meetings on Fridays? Casual dress code? Calm dogs in the office?

It might sound basic, but we do our best work when we feel valued and respected. Where it's safe to learn and grow. When there's an understanding that we are workers but also people with lives outside of our job.

Parliament Hill is definitely not your average workplace. For MPs, the line between personal and professional is blurred and there's a high likelihood of threats, harassment and intimidation. But if we want our democracy to be healthy, shouldn't their workplace be healthy too?

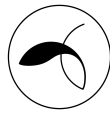
**[THEME MUSIC]**

**Sabreena Delhon:** I'm Sabreena Delhon. And this is Humans of the House. A show where we draw on interviews from a dozen former MPs who served at some point in the last two Parliaments, so people who left office between 2015 and 2021.

We're sharing the real stories of former Members of Parliament. In this episode, we're examining the House of Commons as a workplace. Because it is. So what's it really like to work there?

Last episode, we followed our former MPs through an average week-in-the-life while they were in office.

**Kennedy Stewart:** You actually have to go sit in the House of Commons for something like six hours.



**Matt DeCoursey:** ...fly from Ottawa to Toronto, Toronto to Fredericton...

**Kennedy Stewart:** I was flying probably fifteen hours a week for nine months of the year.

**Sabreena Delhon:** If there's two things I took away from this it's that...

Number one: MPs spend a *lot* of time on the job. And I wasn't the only one who was blown away by just how much.

We surveyed over two dozen former MPs and got responses from across Canada and a range of parties. We asked them "What surprised you about being a Member of Parliament?" Here are some of the answers, read by our colleagues.

*[music]*

**Voice 1:** What a grind it is.

**Voice 2:** How hard it would be on my family.

**Voice 3:** I had been an entrepreneur previously and thought that was hard work. This was a whole new level.

**Voice 4:** There's no amount of preparation possible for the workload and health impacts of being in office. I put on an average of a pound a month every month I was in office. I drove over 5000 km each month...

**Sabreena Delhon:** Which brings me to the second thing that stood out: an MP's work environment is...everywhere.

In an average week, MPs are traveling from Parliament Hill to their ridings and back again. Depending on their roles in the House, even more travel within Canada or abroad might be on the books.

Add to this the expectation these days that you always be online and responsive.

I don't know about you, but it sounds like time to process complex issues, think through strategies, and rest, would make for a much better MP.

So we had to ask – with so much to do and so many demands, when do MPs get to shut off? What's it like to have zero downtime? And how does that affect other parts of your life?



**Romeo Saganash:** I think one of the most, uh, disturbing statistics that I've heard, uh, is that the highest rate of divorce in any profession is, uh, politicians. That may be true. And I understand it because of the time we have to invest in this job. If we were paid by the hour, we'd all be millionaires, but that is not the case.

**Sabreena Delhon:** What former MP Romeo Saganash heard has truth to it. Divorce rates for MPs are really high. Parliamentary Library research from 2013 shows that 85% of MPs back then were divorced. Sure, some of them may have been divorced before they entered Parliament, but that's more than *twice* the national average. Two years later another study found that the divorce rate for women MPs was 50%.

Divorces happen for a range of reasons, but these numbers help to show that this role is tough on your personal life.

Catherine McKenna is very familiar with the sheer amount of work this job can take, and the impact it can have on a family. She was elected in October of 2015, sworn in a few weeks later, and immediately became Minister of Environment and Climate Change. Within a couple of weeks, this role had her at the COP 21 climate conference in Paris where she went to negotiate a global standard in fighting the climate crisis. That's. A lot.

As a mom of three, she didn't find Parliament very family-friendly.

**Catherine McKenna:** Parliament was designed at a time where honestly it was a bunch of white men that left their spouses and came to town. That's, that's just not the case right now. If we are going to attract the best and the brightest and diversity, including parents, including women, we're gonna have to do things a lot better.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Over the past few years we've navigated major changes with how, when and where we work. Hybrid work spaces, inclusive leadership, four day work weeks – these are all ways work is evolving. For Catherine, this kind of big picture thinking was not part of life in Parliament. In fact a lot of basic professional standards just simply weren't there.

**Catherine McKenna:** Why are there not normal practices here? Like why aren't there normal rules about, you know, like not keeping people up, like all night for days on end with votes that were, you know, to make a point? I thought that was unconscionable.

And in fact, actually dangerous for people's health. We have people, you know, that are older, or have other underlying conditions. And I hated it 'cause I was exhausted. Look, I'm a hardcore person. I just didn't see the point. And I just thought it was an extremely strange work environment.



**Sabreena Delhon:** As the MP for Ottawa Centre, Catherine had the unique advantage of barely having to travel between work and home. But that also came with some downsides.

**Catherine McKenna:** Everyone knew I was always in Ottawa, so there was a complete blurring of all lines. I had a journalist say, well, how's this worklife balance going? 'Cause I think I must have said that in the campaign. And I kind of laughed. And that day I had told my, I had told my team and my, both teams, so I had a ministerial team and then my, my constituency team, that I was literally turning off my phone, um, at six o'clock 'til eight o'clock. And I had to do that, and I said, I'm not going to receptions. I'm not going to events during the week. I've gotta go home, have dinner with my kids and make sure they're doing their homework and put them to bed. And so that was super liberating.

I mean, in my case I was, I was just overwhelmed quite frankly, because I was, you know, working on climate change, trying to get a climate plan in Canada and I had to travel a lot. So when I was home, I was for sure gonna make sure that I had time with my kids. Um, and I was always feeling guilty. So I actually literally had to do it for my own sanity.

I do think we need to reflect on the role of the Parliamentarian, because the reality is if you're doing events every single night or you're in Ottawa having to work late in committee and you're in the House of Commons, and then on weekends, you come home, and all you do is go to events from the morning, noon, night, you have no time for yourself or for your family. And that's just not healthy. Um, and that's not an expectation really from any other job. Yes, Parliamentarians get paid well, but at the same time, I mean I think to be effective, you have to be able to spend time with your family.

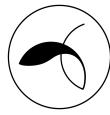
**Sabreena Delhon:** Science has proven that around-the-clock work leads to major drops in performance. And also that taking breaks improves creativity and problem-solving. Which sounds pretty essential for running a country – especially one with six time zones. Think of the travel time and jet lag!

**Catherine McKenna:** I just think it needs a total rethink and that's from top to bottom, including how Parliament works or doesn't work. Cuz I think it's unacceptable voting through the night.

**Sabreena Delhon:** It's not just Catherine - lots of MPs we surveyed echoed that idea. We asked them about their biggest challenges while in office.

**Voice 2:** Being away from my family.

**Voice 3:** Balancing travel and family and the work.



**Voice 1:** ...voting for 36 hours straight is insane and not healthy.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Those are the intense and perhaps questionable demands of the job. And the weight can increase depending on if you have additional roles. If you're a cabinet minister, you're jetting across the country, or sometimes around the world. Parliamentary secretaries too. Even a backbench member might find themselves fact-finding on international trips or criss-crossing Canada.

**Elena:** Wait, Sabreena, sorry – so MPs take on other roles...

**Sabreena Delhon:** This is Elena, a producer on this show.

**Elena:** Hey! I was just thinking it would be great to get some clarity on all of these roles.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Agreed. Let's bring in Vijai, one of our researchers. You two can break down some of the roles in the House of Commons. 'Cause if we're going to understand the workplace culture, I want to make sure we all know who's doing what.

*[music]*

**Elena:** Alright Vijai, take me through the different roles an MP can play in the House of Commons.

**Vijai:** Sure thing. Let's take a step back to our high school civics class for a moment.

**Elena:** *[laughs]*

**Vijai:** There are three branches in our system of government. There's the judicial branch, so the courts. Now, they're super important but not super relevant for right now.

**Elena:** Gotcha.

**Vijai:** So we're focusing on the last two because that's where MPs are. The legislative branch is all about laws, debating, voting. That includes MPs and the Senate. The executive branch are the big decision makers. They prepare bills for debate in the house, and they implement existing policy. That includes the prime minister, their cabinet, the monarch, and the governor general representing the monarch in Canada.

**Elena:** We've mentioned cabinet ministers before. What exactly are cabinet ministers?



**Vijai:** Well, cabinet ministers are picked by the prime minister. They're usually MPs. They typically lead a department or a Ministry.

**Elena:** So there's a Minister of Health and a Minister of the Environment and things like that?

**Vijai:** Definitely, and, and those could change by the way, depending on what the government wants to focus on and what the country might need at the time. For example, uh, the Minister of the Environment is now the Minister of the Environment and Climate Change. In 2021, we saw Canada's first ever Minister of Mental Health and Addictions.

**Elena:** Right, and like a hundred years ago, they probably had a Minister of Horse Traffic Laws...

**Vijai:** I can't verify that, but...

**Elena:** Unverified! *[laughs]*

I've also heard our MPs talk about being parliamentary secretaries. What does that mean?

**Vijai:** Think of it like a minister's right hand person. So the prime minister has a parliamentary secretary as well. They're supposed to be a bridge, I guess you could say, between the minister and Parliament. They help out with a minister's portfolio. They can speak on behalf of the minister and the House of Commons, but they don't get a minister's full powers. They can't just do anything if they want.

**Elena:** Very much the Robin to a cabinet minister's Batman.

**Vijai:** That's a, that's a great analogy.

**Elena:** All right, so we've got cabinet ministers, parliamentary secretaries, backbench MPs, anything else?

**Vijai:** Well, there are some roles within each party in Parliament, right? So we all know the party Leader. There are also party whips. They're responsible for making sure that all the members are acting in accordance with the, uh, party's customs and norms and sort of voting on issues the same way. Um, but this makes them often unpopular among other MPs.

**Elena:** Hmm.



**Vijai:** There are also roles within the House of Commons that strictly have to do with House business.

**Elena:** When I picture roles in the House, I'm thinking about the Speaker of the House, you know, "Mr. Speaker..." I picture the Speaker kind of like a referee or an MC at a wedding, you know?

**Vijai:** Yeah. Referee, MC, maybe even school teacher at times.

**Elena:** Right. *[laughs]*

**Vijai:** They oversee and they guide the proceedings of the House of Commons. They give MPs the floor to speak...

**SOUND CLIP:** *Speaker of the House Anthony Rota announces "The Honourable Member for Edmonton-Riverbend."*

**Vijai:** They might reign things in if it gets too what's called "unparliamentary."

**SOUND CLIP:** *Speaker of the House Anthony Rota says "Some of the comments have not been very parliamentary. I just want to remind the honorable members..."*

**Elena:** Right.

*[music rises]*

So I'm sure there's so many more roles to cover Vijai, but I think I'm pretty confident with, with the basics, with a general who's who.

**Vijai:** I would say that you are well versed in the players in Parliament.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Thanks, Vijai and Elena.

*[music ends]*

**Sabreena Delhon:** When we imagine the day to day life of an MP, it might sound like this:

**SOUND CLIP:** *Ahmed Hussen, Minister of Housing and Diversity and Inclusion, speaks in Question Period in the House of Commons. Other Members shout and yell "Shame!" as he speaks.*



**Minister Hussen:** *I can assure the Leader of the Official Opposition that we can tell the difference. We are a compassionate country, we are a compassionate government...*

*[shouting]*

**Speaker of the House Geoff Regan:** *Order. Order. Let's have some adult behaviour in the House, please.*

**Sabreena Delhon:** In reality, Question Period – they call it QP – is only scheduled for 45 minutes each day that the House meets. When it's not the fireworks and back-and-forth of QP, Members are debating bills and motions, presenting petitions from constituents, reporting on committee work and so on. Most of what happens in Parliament flies under the radar. It's only the most sensational moments from the House of Commons that go viral or make the news. It's not big drama everyday over there!

That said, how pervasive is heckling in Question Period? What is it like to step into that environment as a new MP?

Here's former Windsor – Tecumseh MP, Cheryl Hardcastle:

**Cheryl Hardcastle:** Going into the House of Commons, uh, horror. Nightmare. The level of heckling and hostility within it was, some people were really harsh I felt, on ministers that were younger women.

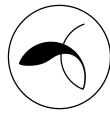
During Question Period, they can yell things like, uh, to one minister who is a younger woman that was proud that she had this position, was, you know, needing to prove herself, just being yelled at from a senior MP who should know better. And just yell, like, sit down, sit down. You're in over your head, just sit down.

**Sabreena Delhon:** As the Minister of Environment and Climate Change, and later the Minister of Infrastructure and Communities, Catherine McKenna had a lot coming her way during Question Period.

**Catherine McKenna:** I was in the line of fire in the House of Commons and that was one thing. It wasn't pretty. And I also, I have things to say about Question Period and how we ran Question Period. And once again, that actually goes to regular workplace.

I think it's almost like harassment. When I got in, I had no idea that people would just be screaming at me and heckling you. You could barely actually think to get your answer out.





**SOUND CLIP:** *yelling in Question Period. Members yell “Resign!”, “If you don’t want to be here, resign!”*

**Catherine McKenna:** And I, I, I actually committed that I would not read my answers, but it was very hard when people are yelling at you *[laughs]* and you're trying to just get your answer back. And I, I don't know why we don't put an end to that. Like I think Speakers have to be way tougher by the way. And I think for, for women, it's extremely odd. And I don't wanna generalize about women, but as I say, I'm really tough. I went to law school, I lived in a war zone. *[laughing]* I'm a competitive swimmer from Hamilton! And I just could not believe this, um, this environment. It's like this little cage match, everyone's screaming and then everyone, it just gets everyone going. And I felt I was getting going too, they are yelling at you.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Did you, did you feel safe?

**Catherine McKenna:** I felt safe, but I felt like some days it was really hard mentally. Like, you had to get into a particular head space, and you knew if you said anything one little twig wrong that it would suddenly be an attack ad. And so for me, I'd be even in a very high profile role, fighting for a price on pollution, really fighting for climate action, which was actually my job. Um, I found it extremely stressful and, and people, maybe I didn't tell people this, but I actually really did not like Question Period. I really didn't. And I gave as good as I got probably by the end. Um, and I didn't even love that, but I felt like I had to be seen as fighting because I was fighting. I was fighting for the planet.

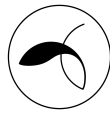
And so it was, um, it was not fun. And then, then there are under the comments, snarky remarks. Um, I mean, I was called, uh, I was even called by, by a colleague, uh, “Climate Barbie.” And then, you know, I mean, that was already a bit out there, but suddenly that's when I got really furious, I was like, okay.

A colleague in the House of Commons is actually trying to make fun of me and diminish me, really to diminish my message. Um, because I would, you know, not be a credible, you know, spokesperson for what we were doing.

**Sabreena Delhon:** This colleague was Conservative MP Gerry Ritz. He replied to an article on Twitter.

Here's a clip from CTV News:

**SOUND CLIP:** *“...hot on the heels of a political firestorm, triggered by a tweet from Conservative MP Gerry Ritz, calling McKenna ‘Climate Barbie.’”*



**Catherine McKenna:** Well, I mean, no one did anything for a long time because I think that the best advice, or people thought this was the best advice, was to do nothing. And I was like, oh, for the love of God, you know, I'm a serious person actually just trying to do my job and I don't wanna take on the gender thing too.

But one day, uh, I was just mad. I was with my ministerial team 'cause I was in New York at a UN meeting on climate and it was a long day and I came home and I just said, I came back to, we were in the hotel lobby and I just said, sorry guys, I'm just gonna respond.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Catherine responded on Twitter. She said, "Do you use that sexist language about your mother, daughter, sister? We need more women in politics. Your sexist comments won't stop us."

**Catherine McKenna:** And I just called him out, but it was actually probably even, it wasn't really just about me. It was about what I saw in the House of Commons. It was the way I saw women treated on social media and it was also 'cause I had, you know, I have kids.

And I also want women to get into politics. And if we don't, if we let these things slide, then you think, oh, it's all, okay.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Twenty minutes later Gerry Ritz deleted his tweet and apologized, saying that the word "Barbie" was not reflective of Catherine McKenna's role as Minister.

**Catherine McKenna:** The party did come round and, and I think, you know, the, anyway, the, the opposition, the, the member did, he sort of apologized. You know, but it didn't stop.

**Sabreena Delhon:** It didn't *stop* because it hadn't *started* with Gerry Ritz's tweet. The phrase "Climate Barbie" was already being used. In fact, it led to this heated exchange at a press conference. This audio is from CBC News:

**SOUND CLIP:**

**CATHERINE MCKENNA:** *So you're the Rebel Media that happens to call me Climate Barbie, I certainly hope you will no longer use that hashtag.*

**REPORTER:** *Me personally, I never have, Minister.*



**CATHERINE MCKENNA:** *I just would like a commitment that you will not call me names. That you won't talk about the colour of my hair. That you won't make fun of me. And the reason I'm asking you not to do this is because I have two daughters.*

**REPORTER:** *Alright.*

**CATHERINE MCKENNA:** *That there are lots of girls that want to get into politics, and it is completely unacceptable that you do this.*

**Sabreena Delhon:** In the years that followed, the threats continued online and also moved offline. By 2019, at times, Catherine even needed extra security because of the threats to her safety. That's pretty unusual, even for a high-profile cabinet minister.

**Catherine McKenna:** And that's the thing that really made, that really was bad for my kids. Like when it gets to become security issues, or I'm walking my son to school and it's the first time I've been able to walk him to school for a very long time, 'cause we've just come out of a hotly contested election, which I hated every single day. I hated it. I found it very stressful 'cause I was like, we have to win or we're gonna lose a price on pollution. Like we're actually, I really felt personally responsible. Um, anyway, I, uh, got a call while I was walking him to school, um, saying that someone had written the C word on my, on my campaign office.

*[ominous music]*

**SOUND CLIP:** *News reporter reads "Early this morning, staff at Ottawa Centre MP Catherine McKenna's office discovered a vulgar word, which we've blurred, scrawled across a large image of McKenna's face on the front window of her campaign office."*

**Sabreena Delhon:** That was from CBC News.

What happened to Catherine is sadly all too common. Women in politics have always faced harassment. Now with so much of the political conversation online, the volume and reach of toxic attacks that target women leaders is unprecedented.

**Catherine McKenna:** And so I would say, you know, you could probably talk to almost any Parliamentarian right now, and they've had incidents with respect to their security, but certainly if you're a high profile politician, um, you happen to be a woman, you happen to be LGBT2+, you happen to be Indigenous, you happen to be a visible minority, I, I can almost guarantee that you've had many more problems, um, on social media, but often in real life, too.



*[music ends]*

**Sabreena Delhon:** At the Samara Centre we've been examining how toxicity in the political conversation online is a barrier to civic engagement. In our SAMbot project we use machine learning to measure toxicity received by candidates on Twitter during Canadian elections.

In the 2021 federal election we monitored over 2 and a half million tweets, tweets received by about 300 candidates, and found approximately 140 000 tweets with sexually explicit content. Most of this was misogynistic, personal and largely directed at just 88 candidates who were women.

On average the candidates we tracked received a toxic tweet every *seven seconds*. Imagine trying to do a high stress job with that volume of hate.

You can find links to our SAMbot work in this episode's shownotes.

*[soft music]*

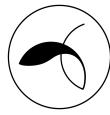
Catherine thinks the solutions to this toxicity should come from both inside and beyond the House of Commons.

**Catherine McKenna:** I think that we have to stop looking at the House of Commons like it's totally different from some other place. The protections in place have to be there. The normal workplace practices should be there. I actually don't think it's really that hard. People get kind of stuck, 'cause they really think the House of Commons is very particular.

I don't think you get a pass on that anymore. Um, and I think that'll, it'll be better for it.

I think we hold, need to hold politicians responsible. And to be honest, I think that there should be a much higher standard in the code of conduct. Parliamentary privilege seems to be this thing that people throw around like you can do anything. Um, I'm sorry. That's not what it's about.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Catherine here is talking about parliamentary privilege, a constitutional convention meant to protect MPs and the institution of Parliament. Among other things, it gives MPs the right to free speech in the House and freedom from prosecution.. This makes MPs free to criticize, and it's an important part of keeping the House democratic. But...



**Catherine McKenna:** There are your privileges as members to say things, but it doesn't mean, you know, you're, you're attacking your colleagues. Um, and, and when you attack them, right, because with social media, then it's amplified.

I have a lecture that I give to young Liberals and others, um, about, you know, what's okay in politics. Um, but I, I just feel, I feel a personal obligation to speak up because I do think it can be better and it has to be better cuz the route we're going down is not great.

And I do think social media companies have a lot to answer to. But I think, you know, it's easy for politicians to always say, it's not me. I know I got into this as much as anyone else. Like I felt like suddenly I was shouting in the House of Commons and sometimes it was okay. It's okay to be mad about climate change and inaction.

But sometimes, you know, you just get part of this. And I think we can hold ourselves to higher standards. We can professionalize by the way, our HR policies. And we can expect more of politics because then Canadians will believe in us more and believe in, ultimately more importantly, believe more in politics.

And I want people, everyone to wanna vote. I don't care who they vote for. You gotta earn the vote by the way you learn that in politics, earn every vote. But I want people to wanna vote because they believe in, in Canada, they believe in our institutions. They believe in democracy.

*[music]*

**MIDROLL AD:**

**HANNAH SUNG:** *This is a midroll ad. So you might be expecting us to sell you a mattress or some accounting software.*

*Well, listen. We wish you good sleep and fiscal organization – but no. We're not going to sell you anything. This minute is for us. You and me.*

*I'm Hannah, one of the producers of this show, and we want to tell you why we made this podcast.*

*See, the Samara Centre for Democracy is on a mission to secure a resilient democracy with an engaged public and responsive institutions.*

*What does that mean? Well the Samara Centre wants to make it easier for you to talk about Canada's democracy and participate in it.*



*So...talk to us. Tell us why you're listening to this show. It's simple to do. I know you've got your phone in your hand right now.*

*Post about Humans of the House and tag us on Instagram and Twitter: @samaracentre. That's @ T-H-E-S-A-M-A-R-A-C-E-N-T-R-E.*

*We know why we're doing this work. Tell us why you're listening! Hashtag Humans of the House.*

*[music]*

**Sabreena Delhon:** Former Conservative MP for Milton Lisa Raitt is also no stranger to the scrutiny that comes with being elected and stepping right into a high-profile cabinet position. But she had a far different experience of the House from many others.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Can you talk about the work environment in the House of Commons? What did you think of it when you first arrived?

**Lisa Raitt:** I still think it was the best place I worked at. I know that others are gonna disagree with me, but when you're paid equal to everybody else in the joint, and everybody knows you're paid equal, you have equal power and that's empowering. So my say is as important as your say, because you don't make more money than me, you're not worth more than I am, cabinet ministers maybe.

But the that's the, the reality of it, every voice was equal. Everybody was respected because you went through a nomination process and you went through an election and you brought the seat and you were supported for that. And even across the aisle, I still have great relationships with some of the former Liberal MPs and, uh, some of the former NDP MPs, because we're all going through it together and you know, you bond and you laugh at the same kind of things.

And you look for the moments of levity. But the reality is, is that the House of Commons is based on conflict and that's okay too. You gotta fight for what you believe is right. And what you believe should happen and make the best persuasive arguments that you can internally to caucus as well as on the floor of the, of Parliament.

My downfall was the press. I could never figure out how to deal with the press. I made the mistake so many times assuming that they were my friends and they're not, they're in business.



Their business is to get soundbites, their business is to get stories and to get to what they think is the bottom of things. But really isn't the bottom of anything. It's just understanding the secrets that everybody seems to be keeping in Ottawa.

And that would've been the part that I didn't get guidance on. Uh, I didn't get clear guidance on it, and I still think Conservatives struggle to understand how to have a, a good relationship with media.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Can you tell us about the backlash you faced early on, dealing with the medical isotopes crisis?

**Lisa Raitt:** Um, there's a, and there's a lot to unpack there and I really honestly don't like thinking about it or talking about it, cuz it was extremely painful. It, uh, broke up my marriage. My marriage was already on a thread, but certainly the emotion and the stress around that time wasn't helpful to me being able to figure out how to repair that part of my life when I was, I was drowning in my, my, my life.

**SOUND CLIP:** *music announces the start of a news program.*

**ANCHOR:** *Hello, I'm Peter Van Dusen and this is PrimeTime Politics on CPAC, the Cable Public Affairs Channel. The shutdown of the Chalk River nuclear reactor that produces isotopes is depriving patients in Ontario of a much-needed diagnostic tool for cancer and other illnesses. By the end of the week Ontario medical facilities will have only 10% of the isotopes they need. And the situation...*

*[clip fades out]*

**Lisa Raitt:** So basically what happened is this. Uh, Canada had decided that it wanted to be the world's provider of medical isotopes. Medical isotopes are important in, in cancer treatments, they're important in diagnostics with respect to you, name it, brain tumors or digestive issues. And they're made when you take a piece of, of material, whatever element it is, and you expose it to radiation within a nuclear core, and then you produce medical isotopes.

Now there are five sites around the world that had these plants and in 2008, 2009, all of these plants were starting to go into disrepair or they were being shut down.

And Canada had decided it was decommissioning its large reactor because it had come up with a new technology that it was going to be able to corner the market on called MAPLEs.



Well, after billions of dollars, MAPLEs didn't work, the, the science didn't work. And when they turned the machine on, they weren't sure whether or not they could control the reactions. And as a result, it was a danger of a nuclear meltdown for these reactors.

So I mothballed the whole thing and scrapped the program, and that left us with a reactor, an old reactor to serve the world and it couldn't keep up. So we had lots of controversy about whether or not medical isotopes were gonna be available to people. And that's a terrible thing.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Terrible because these isotopes are so vital for cancer treatments.

**Lisa Raitt:** In December, or I guess it was in January or December, I had traveled with my press secretary to do a tour in Vancouver. And for some reason she had her tape recorder running. For some reason, she left her tape recorder in the house of a reporter for the Halifax Herald. For some reason, he listened to the tape recording and on it, she had asked me how I felt about the medical isotope situation and my response was, I think we can handle it because the press likes these issues, and this may be helpful for my career, 'cause I'll be seen as somebody who can handle big issues.

And that will put me in a better light with the Prime Minister. And that was, it was just played for everyone all the time. And as a result, I was painted as a craven, horrible human being who thought cancer was sexy, and I was judged accordingly.

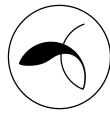
**SOUND CLIP:**

**PETER VAN DUSEN:** *The Prime Minister is once again standing by his embattled Minister of Natural Resources Lisa Raitt. The opposition parties are demanding that Raitt resign or be fired, after comments she made on tape made five months ago describing the shortage of medical isotopes as "sexy," and looking to get political credit for herself for resolving it.*

**Sabreena Delhon:** That's from CPAC in 2009.

**Lisa Raitt:** And then the reactor that we were holding onto cracked and there were no medical isotopes. So the efforts went into trying to keep a very large organization like AECL on track. And then the final straw of it all, uh, had to do with the fact that when I went to do some public discussion on how we were going to, uh, restructure Atomic Energy Canada Limited one of my staffers left behind a briefing binder that contained secret documents.





So all of that, all of that was swirling around within a short period of time. And as a result, I personally became radioactive and the Prime Minister took me in and he said, we need to take the target off your back. You've been targeted for too long, and we're gonna move you out. You're gonna go to another portfolio.

*[music]*

**Lisa Raitt:** But along the way, I mean, he wanted to fire me for leaving the binder behind. And he certainly wasn't happy with the way things went down on the, on the tape. Um, and you know, he, he never, I would say he never looked at me the same again. I went from being somebody that he appreciated bringing business skills into the cabinet, to somebody that was a problem to manage.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Thank you for breaking that down for me. Can you share, uh, what it was like to be in the public eye that way, and how you navigated all of that pressure and stress?

**Lisa Raitt:** I didn't, I uh, I didn't navigate it at all. I'm gonna forever think about it. I can actually look upon it now and wonder if there was a bit of misogyny involved in it, to be honest, how it was such a, a game to hunt me down and make me look as, as worse as, possible. Uh, and it had the allure. I was one of the top recruits into cabinet. I was young. I was smart. Um, I could speak well and you know, nothing, nothing like taking down a cabinet minister to make the press gallery, uh, feel good about itself. And it, uh, definitely it definitely, it hurt and it's completely changed my life, honestly, completely changed my life. I'm a very different person now than I was before. Some of it's good. Some of it's bad. The good side is I have a lot of empathy. I have, I'm a lot wiser. I have better judgment. I no longer seek out the spotlight at all. Um, and that can be a bad side too, because in a world where sales is important for promotion, I don't self promote.

And I still struggle with talking about my accomplishments because I'm tainted by the fact that when I did get caught talking about it, I was seen to be a bad woman.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Do you think being a bad woman is worse than being a bad man?

**Lisa Raitt:** For sure it is. See, I didn't say a bad MP. I didn't say a bad cabinet minister. I said a bad woman.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Mm-hmm.

**Lisa Raitt:** I think it had a lot to do with it. And I look at, I look at, um, Helena Guergis, uh, had a temper tantrum. She's a bad woman.



Bev Oda, \$8 glass of orange juice. She's a bad woman.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Bev Oda's glass of orange juice actually cost \$16.

**SOUND CLIP:** news clip from CBC News

**PETER MANSBRIDGE:** *The Minister of International Cooperation was the target of angry criticism today over some extravagant travel expenses. Bev Oda was booked at a 5-star hotel but demanded to be moved to a swankier one. It all added up to big bucks and guess who got the bill?*

**Sabreena Delhon:** That's from the CBC in 2012.

**Lisa Raitt:** I mean that, and it's not just, it wasn't Harper saying we're bad women. It was the press saying we're bad women. And he stuck by us. He kept us in cabinet. Um, Bev, eventually succumbed to the pressure and left. But if you compare it to some of the, how shall we say it, misadventures [*laughs*] of this Liberal cabinet and the men in it... Yeah, wow.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Was this ever something that you talked about with your peers, this, like, I wanna use the word, or phrase "double standard," but it doesn't really capture it.

**Lisa Raitt:** No, no, you just live it. 'Cause then you're whining. I think this is honestly, I think this is the most that I've ever. This is the deepest I've ever talked about it.

I didn't wanna go in public with my kids.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Yeah.

**Lisa Raitt:** The other time. So when I was Minister of Labor... sorry, that's emotional for me, 'cause I'm talking about myself and I'm not good at that.

When I was Minister of Labor, and I was involved in some really heated union stuff, I didn't mind being called names then because I was doing what I thought was right. And it was advocating on behalf of the position of the, what was best for the nation and best for the government. And I did get, you know, death threats and we did get accosted at a hockey game with my kids, but that was all manageable. And that kind of just rolls off my back. The other stuff though, that went to my personal integrity, I found really really hard. Really hard. And that's the hardest part about being an MP.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Did you feel that you had any support or protection?



**Lisa Raitt:** No, not at all. None.

**Sabreena Delhon:** And what about social media during this time as well?

**Lisa Raitt:** There was none. Can you imagine if there was social media? That's one of the benefits of '08-'09. Is that there was no Twitter at the time. It was bad enough.

*[music]*

**Sabreena Delhon:** We want our politicians to meet a high standard of integrity. Journalists play a vital role in our democracy by holding our politicians to account. And social media, at its best, is also an accountability tool.

But where is the line between critique and personal attack?

And what does an MP need to navigate this space?

**Lisa Raitt:** Age does bring perspective and it does bring wisdom. And I'm far wiser now than I was. If I, if I knew then what I know now, I wouldn't have got myself into that trouble. Uh, maybe, maybe not, but my hubris was exposed. And as a result, I've been overcompensating by not having any hubris at all. Maybe that's why everybody likes me because I say yes to everything, I wanna please people. And, um, yeah. And it has a lot to do with the fact that for a number of years, I was painted as this terrible character. Um, could I have leaned on people a little bit more? Perhaps, but I also didn't have people reach out to me say it's gonna be okay.

And that's the deal, right? It's gotta be, it's hard for people to ask for help when they're drowning. Uh, you need somebody to come in and save them. So I think the onus needs to be on people to say, if you see one of your colleagues having a problem, you go and help them. That's the kind of help that I would like to see.

However, was it worth it being an MP and stuff? I have a great job. Yes. Everything was worth it. Everything that I did since then, but I had to work hard. I had to work really, really hard and become a different person in order to get a reputation back again.

*[soft, uplifting music]*

**Sabreena Delhon:** So we've heard about MPs' mental health and stress levels. The work-life balance, or lack thereof. About getting harassed everywhere from Twitter to Question Period. Of course, no two MPs have the same experience. Party Leaders and ministers are put under the



microscope more than your typical MP. And women in the House can face a far different tone of debate from men.

One thing the former MPs we surveyed agreed on, whether or not they experienced it first hand: this House was built for a different time. It was created 150 years ago in a society where women and minorities couldn't vote. Where owning property was sometimes the deciding factor on whether you could cast a ballot. MP pay was so low, the only people who could afford to serve and even travel to Ottawa were people with deep pockets...

You can imagine what kind of representation *that* led to.

While a lot has changed since then, Parliament Hill's workplace policies for MPs are still lagging behind.

And that can have consequences.

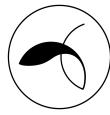
Kennedy Stewart is the former mayor of Vancouver, and before that was the MP for Burnaby South.

**Kennedy Stewart:** Lots of people focus on, on the heckling and stuff, but I think there's much bigger problems than that. The House of Commons is like the worst place I've ever worked in terms of an environment.

You know, I was coming from a university culture. Universities had come through a period of, where kind of sexual harassment was a normal thing, uh, but not any longer. And so, there were so many policies and oversights, to protect students, especially women from kind of predatory behaviour that I was just shocked at, at how none of those things were in place in Ottawa. So uh, I mean, while I was in Parliament, uh, two of my colleagues were sexually assaulted by two other colleagues, uh, which is a very well documented, uh, case, but it was two women within the New Democratic caucus that were sexually assaulted by members from another caucus.

I did know one of the victims of this and it, it affected her, well, both actually, I think both victims very well, and just the devastating impact on their lives...

And, uh especially with the, the young, uh, female MPs, I would often see, uh, predatory behaviour by older male MPs. And, and many of us would intervene, uh, but, it seemed to be almost completely unregulated. And that left led to some really horrific behaviour that, I don't know if it's been addressed even to today, but it, it definitely wasn't, uh, a safe workspace, I didn't think.



**Sabreena Delhon:** Wow.

**Kennedy Stewart:** You know, that you allow this to happen is, is, it undermines, it should undermine Canadians' faith in the institutions that we have.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Yeah.

**Kennedy Stewart:** So it, it is very serious, but in the toing and froing of, of regular parliamentary business, on budgets and foreign affairs and all the other things, it doesn't seem to ever be prioritized until there's a, a huge problem.

And then, you know, there's some lip service and then you just go back to having the same old thing.

*[music]*

**Sabreena Delhon:** Some of the MPs we spoke to saw a few key changes over time.

**Sabreena Delhon:** So over the course of your time, uh, in the House of Commons, did you observe a change in the workplace culture?

**Lisa Raitt:** Yeah. In a positive way. I mean, I believe what I can say is that there is a far less tolerance for...impropriety when it comes to socializing. I don't wanna say sexual harassment 'cause it's not necessarily sexual harassment, sometimes it's, it's welcome. Um, it's a weird atmosphere. And I just find it really tough when I see male colleagues dating female staffers, 'cause, but it happens, and sometimes they get married and sometimes they don't. Um, but I see a lot less of that now.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Former MP for Fredericton Matt DeCoursey remembers how Parliament first responded to the Me Too movement.

**Matt DeCoursey:** We, we also, as Parliamentarians, had to really examine a lot of different elements of our behaviour when Me Too struck. And, and we were not immune to it. And, and, um, the women in caucus were really, really good about, uh, welcoming us into the conversation about how they were feeling.

And we had educational and professional development seminars that, you know, we were required to go to, but also felt, uh, empowered to go to and felt good coming out of, right. That uh, and, and, and I'll simplify it by, by saying we learned a lot and realized that most, most of our colleagues weren't out to get us. They just wanted us to be better



educated about some of the overt and maybe, you know, passive ways in which different gender imbalances, can cause problems.

So, so those are a number of things that kind of I watched workplace culture shift because of throughout my time, both before, during, and, and after, after being in office.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Future research from the Samara Centre will dig deeper on this.

*[music]*

**Sabreena Delhon:** Remember the online hate we talked about earlier?

Hard to forget, isn't it?

One thing that struck me listening to our former MPs was the tension between how challenging their work environment was and how *committed* they were to public service. They really believe in our democracy and they're passionate about keeping us engaged with it.

We need diverse leaders and problem solvers to tackle the huge problems we're facing in Canada. You know the list.

So in a workplace like the House of Commons, who is supported? Who gets to learn on the job? And who is given the tools to thrive?

In our next episode we'll explore polarization, hyper-partisanship and power.

**Celina Caesar-Chavannes:** Most of them said "Politics is gonna change you, Celina. You're not gonna come out the same way that you came in."

**Kennedy Stewart:** Most of the hostility towards me was within my own party.

**Sabreena Delhon:** Join us as we ask: who is an MP's real boss? Their party? Canadians? Themselves?

**Robert-Falcon Ouellette:** Are you here for the party, or are you here for the people?

*[music]*

**CREDITS:**

Big thanks to all the former MPs and thank you for listening to Humans of the House.



Samara Centre  
for Democracy

This podcast is produced by Media Girlfriends for the Samara Centre for Democracy.

I'm Sabreena Delhon, executive director of the Samara Centre.

Executive producers of this podcast are Hannah Sung and Garvia Bailey

Associate producer is Elena Hudgins Lyle.

Research is by Manager Dr. Beatrice Wayne and Coordinator Vijai Kumar at the Samara Centre.

And our sound engineer is Gabbie Clarke.

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