

TITLE: Should political staffers be 'off-limits' to scrutiny?

AUTHOR: Ben Oquist

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Usually political staffers are not seen and not heard. This week a striking exception was made when Clive Palmer brought attention to the Prime Minister's chief of staff's potential qualification for his paid parental leave scheme, and then called her the "top dog". Outrage ensued, as it became better known that Credlin - perhaps the most powerful staffer in Australia - is undergoing IVF treatment.

Though ridicule rained down, Palmer, who has asked the PM to allocate his own party more staff, refused to offer anything but a partial apology. But behind this spat was a broader question: should staff be "off-limits"?

Traditionally, personal staff to politicians were scarcely ever in the public eye. But recently *The West Wing* and *The Thick of It* glamorised and demonised political staffers in equal measure.

But it isn't just TV series. It is also due to the increasing number and influence of ministerial staff (a 200 per cent increase in the PM's office, for example, in the past 30 years).

Here is the most important question when it comes to public interrogation of political staffers: is this in the interests of our democracy? One thing is clear: it is very rarely in the interests of our politicians. If a staffer is in the spotlight, it is invariably bad news for a government, and a distraction from their core messages.

The politician most damaged is usually the leader. When key staff are blamed for policy, it is most likely a sign of dissatisfaction with the leader on the backbench. It is much safer for backbenchers to grumble to their colleagues and the media about staff than the leader themselves. The higher the profile of a staff member, the more potent the grumbling.

But what is best for the country? A basic principle of parliamentary democracy is that with power comes accountability.

In 2001, this was starkly evident when claims were made for political gain about refugees throwing their children overboard.

There had always been fierce resistance to calling staff before parliamentary committees. However, it became clear that political staff were integral to understanding what had happened.

A subsequent Senate inquiry noted while ministers are ultimately responsible, staff must also be accountable. Senior public servants appear before Senate Estimates. Why not senior political staff?

To deny the Parliament the right to interrogate increasingly powerful staff is to deny the proper role of the Parliament to be the ultimate protector of our democracy.

Staff should not be subject to parliamentary interrogation at a whim: it should be case-by-case. And it should only ever relate to politics - not personal lives.