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## Youngest in Parliament: Underestimated, Sexualised, and Changing the Conversation

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Australia's 48th Parliament, convened on 22 July 2025, is among the youngest and most diverse, yet young parliamentarians like 21-year-old Senator Charlotte Walker face underestimation, sexism and unique pressures. This article explores the challenges and opportunities for young MPs, drawing on recent interviews and the experiences of trailblazers like Walker and former MPs.

At 21, Charlotte Walker, representing South Australia for the Australian Greens, became the youngest woman elected to the Senate, surpassing Sarah Hanson-Young's record set in 2007 at 25 (The Conversation, 28 May 2025). Young parliamentarians, often Millennials or Gen Z, navigate a Parliament House where the average age is 52, far above Australia's median of 38 (ABC News, 21 July 2025). Walker, like former Senator Fatima Payman, reports being underestimated, with colleagues assuming inexperience due to age. Payman, who left the Australian Labor Party (ALP) in 2024 over Gaza policy, described "micromanagement" and feeling unequal, particularly on international delegations (ABC News, 21 July 2025). Such attitudes reflect a broader cultural challenge in a parliament dominated by older, established figures.

Young women face additional hurdles, including sexualisation and harassment. Hanson-Young, the youngest woman elected until Walker, endured "overt sexualisation" and online trolling, recalling advice to ignore bullies (ABC News, 21 July 2025). A 2016 Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) study found 58% of female MPs globally faced sexual misconduct, with young women particularly vulnerable (IPU, 26 October 2016). Walker has not publicly detailed such experiences, but the 2021 Brittany Higgins allegations exposed a "boys' club" culture in Canberra, with 40% of female staff reporting harassment (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021).

Despite challenges, youth offers advantages. Wyatt Roy, the youngest MP at 20 in 2010, noted senior colleagues valued his fresh perspective, granting opportunities to influence policy (ABC News, 21 July 2025). Walker's election, driven by Gen Z and Millennial voters, signals a shift, with young MPs pushing progressive issues like housing and climate

change (The Conversation, 28 May 2025). Yet, the toxic environment, as former MP Mhairi Black described, demands reform to ensure young voices thrive (The Guardian, 8 March 2021).