

# Stress and The MP

The job of an MP is unique. Beginning with the emotional high of winning a seat in an election, it offers a life that can be interesting and exhilarating. Since Parliament is the focus of national attention and the forum for debating issues of national and international importance, it opens the door to a life of wide horizons. For those who like verbal battle, the daily Question Period can be satisfying and very stimulating. In sum, election to the House of Commons holds the prospect of a challenging new career combined with an exciting lifestyle change.

Most newly elected MPs soon discover, however, that their new life also brings a whole series of unanticipated pressures. The time demands of the job have increased with the growth of government during the past few decades and they are now extreme and unremitting. The arrival of jet aircraft in the 1970s made it possible for all MPs, even those representing remote parts of the country, to return to their constituencies for the weekend and their voters now expect them to do so. Those representing areas closer to the national capital even find themselves pressed to return to their constituencies for important events during the week, after which they frequently hurry back to Ottawa. The decision taken by the House around 1980 to fund offices in each Member's constituency also added significantly to time demands on MPs. This important decision reflected the enormous expansion since the Second World War in social services provided by government. With this growth has inevitably come delays or errors in the delivery of services and the growth of public expectations, all situations that have fuelled a flood of inquiries directed at the constituency offices. Polls show that 50 per cent of the time when citizens find themselves in difficulty with some government program, they turn to one of their elected representatives – federal or provincial – for advice and help. For some Members, work for their constituents has become a principal source of satisfaction and self-worth and the activity that validates their job. For almost all Members this demand on their time is

virtually endless, occupying them when they are in Ottawa as well as in their constituencies.

When the House is in session, Members representing constituencies in the East start calling early in the morning, and those from the West have to be in their offices in the evening to deal with issues raised by their electors. When the House is not in session, MPs are usually in their local offices or travelling within their constituencies. As a result, there is no letup.

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Family life suffers particular stress, confirmed by the exceptionally high divorce rates among MPs. Members, particularly those representing rural ridings or those with small towns, find that they are constantly in the public eye, so much so that to have private time it may be necessary to leave the country. Spouses, partners and children of Members may even become the butt of local anger over actions taken or not taken by their party.

It is also a life without security; every four years or so their jobs vanish and success in the next election normally depends more on the public image of their party leader than on their own performance. Nor does the position bring the respect that it once did: what used to be regarded as an honourable position is now ranked in public opinion polls just ahead of used-car salesmen.

It comes as a disturbing surprise to many newly elected MPs that their powers are substantially circumscribed. When they decide to seek office, many assume that, if successful, they would be in a position to participate centrally in debating and forming national policy. Instead, they discover that most policy is formulated by public servants who work closely with Ministers, and

that power is actually wielded by the Prime Minister and the cabinet.

The transition to life as a member of Parliament presents its own challenge because parliamentary politics is a hard job for which to prepare. There is nothing else quite like it. Lawyers with court experience have some advantage, in that they are accustomed to verbal confrontation. Those who have worked previously for a Member have been exposed indirectly to the lifestyle and are accordingly better prepared to face the constraints of the job.

Political life is also highly competitive, with rivalry often most intense within one's party. Some Members are troubled to find themselves competing primarily with their party colleagues.

Most new MPs identify these demands and pressures as being more extreme than they had anticipated when they decided to run, and a source of some aggravation and stress. Many Members also point to the additional emotional pressures that add to the physical toll that the life entails.

Although the situation for MPs in government and in opposition differs significantly, both experience their share of frustrations. Politics is a team sport and for some government Members particularly, the pressure to conform to the party line can be a strain. They are called upon to attend House and committee meetings faithfully and to fulfil other tasks determined largely by the priorities of the party leadership. There are limited opportunities to speak in the House and Members may be actively discouraged from speaking their mind if it differs with the position taken by the government. On other occasions, they may be asked to speak on bills that have little interest for them; and the text of their interventions may sometimes even be handed to them by party staff. In principle, caucus is the forum where government Members can vent their feelings, but the time available for expressing opinions in national caucus, which the Prime Minister attends, is extremely limited.

Although opposition MPs generally have more freedom to speak, a Member can get into trouble if his or her statements are perceived to affect adversely the party's public image. Those who ran for office expecting to contribute to policy development may find that the pressure to be critical and negative makes them uncomfortable. For Members who campaigned with the

larger objective of reforming the parliamentary system, its imperviousness to change is an aggravating reminder of the limitations of their power.

For government and opposition MPs alike who looked forward to sharing in policy-making, the limited opportunities to achieve modifications in draft legislation once it finally gets to the House or to modify expenditures proposed in the spending estimates can be a source of frustration. More generally, the disconnection between the standing often accorded to Members in their constituencies and their limited power in Parliament can be a persistent source of discomfort.

Members, no matter which party they belong to, face special strains if they want to vote contrary to the position taken by their party. Their colleagues will remind them that they are letting down their side; their party leadership will warn them of the personal consequences of such a decision. The very system for holding recorded votes in the House is designed to maximize the pressure on Members to line up with their colleagues.

All Members, even Ministers, are aware that their future in Parliament lies with the leader of their party. Electing leaders at party conventions combined with the commanding profile provided by television places party leaders in dominant positions that are not easily assailed. All MPs realize that if they act in a way that their leader does not approve, they not only jeopardize their future advancement, but also risk their current position on a committee or the prospect of travelling abroad with a delegation in the future.

These pressures, physical and emotional, that characterize the life of an MP can, especially when combined, cause severe stress. The hectic pace of the MP's life leaves little down time to recharge personal batteries.

### **Stress is a Fact of Life**

What is stress? How serious is it? How can it be detected? What effect does it have? The World Health Organization has concluded that workplace stress has become a "worldwide epidemic". Among a wide range of professions, studies have concluded that politicians are particularly exposed to stress. How individual Members react to the pressures of their unique and demanding job is partly a function of their temperament and genes. Lessons learned from dealing

with stress can also be helpful. In the main, MPs who have succeeded in some earlier career not only have the advantage of experience in coping with life's stresses, but also may not feel the same need to prove themselves.

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The late Dr. Hans Selye of McGill University, a founder of the study of stress, recognized that individuals need stress to reach the highest levels of their capacities. But he also concluded that too much stress, without relief in the form of down time, is harmful. At the very minimum, it can impair the quality of a person's performance by causing him or her to become irritable and quicker to take offence, which can in turn lead them to be unnecessarily combative. More seriously it can damage personal relationships, lead some to seek solace in alcohol or drugs, and can even affect overall health in a variety of ways.

Dr. Mark Walter, a physician who served from 1990 to 1994 at the National Defence hospital as the resident doctor responsible for MPs and senior public servants, had a unique opportunity to observe the medical impact of stress on MPs. In his book, *Personal Resilience*, he warned that emotional stress can undermine the "immune system", which may account for the number of Members who get colds as a session extends. It can even contribute directly, he wrote, "to physical blockage of arteries". He continued:

*"Aside from the two big killers, cardiovascular disease and cancer, stress factors also play a major role in many other types of disease, anything from skin conditions such as psoriasis to common digestive disorders such as hyperacidity, peptic ulcer disease and irritable bowel syndrome".*

Stress is a cumulative phenomenon that occurs when demands consistently outstrip a person's capacity to adjust to them. However, the fact that this occurs is not something to be ashamed of. Dr. Richard Rahe of the Nevada Stress Center has identified 43 common life events which in varying degrees generate stress, ranging from major causes such as the death of a spouse or

partner or divorce, through illness, being fired, trouble with in-laws, to such otherwise pleasurable challenges as preparing for vacations or Christmas.

A British inquiry into mortality, known as the Whitehall Study, concluded that the amount of work and the responsibilities that people carry are not the main causes of stress. Indeed, the author observed that people at higher levels in hierarchies, who as a consequence work longer hours and have more responsibility, but who are also in a position to take decisions regarding their work, tend to live longer. Statistics Canada undertook a comparable inquiry that reached a similar conclusion, namely that it is not hard work that causes stress. Rather, people experience stress when they lack power to decide how, when or with whom they work, or when they feel that their work has little value.

MPs will recognize that their situation is comparable, in that the many constraints on their ability to control their environment can be a source of irritation, frustration and stress. The particular problem facing members of Parliament is the unrelenting persistence of challenges and frustrations and the lack of down time to recuperate.

Dr. Walter's close professional contact with MPs led him to the conclusion that "politicians have one of the most stressful jobs imaginable". He further observed that if assistance were given to Members to cope with stress, the health of MPs would be improved and the collective performance of Parliament should also be enhanced.

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In that spirit, this issue of *Parliamentary Government* offers MPs a number of suggestions that could help them to manage stress. Some are addressed to Members and others to the institution of Parliament. The list is based partly on the work of physicians, including Dr. Walter, who have specialized in this field. It has been cross-checked and supplemented through conversations with medical doctors who are or have been MPs themselves, and who have observed the parliamentary environment and counselled colleagues

suffering from acute stress. Finally it has benefited from conversations with present and former Members, some of whom have themselves experienced severe stress while in office.

### **Advice to MPs from Knowledgeable People**

Exposure to stress is a fact of life for a Member. Bear in mind that the impact of stress is cumulative, so that the effect of the job has a tendency to sneak up on you unexpectedly. Accordingly, within the constraints of your work, try to organize your life to reduce the accumulation of pressure and to find ways to give yourself some relief.

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Just as the effect of stress is cumulative, so the ways to manage it are several and varied. Each of the following suggestions will do some good, but alone they are not adequate to give you substantial relief if you are experiencing stress. The more suggestions that you can incorporate into your life, the greater the relief they will provide. Naturally, since genes differ, your physical and emotional vulnerability will vary from that of your colleagues. Besides, Members who have already faced stress in a previous profession will probably have developed some habits for managing it.

In the light of the above observations, the following suggestions are offered:

### **Your Physical Well Being**

Get exercise on a regular basis. Your lifestyle as a Member is essentially sedentary: sitting at lengthy meetings or at your desk, moving about the Hill by shuttle bus; spending hours in aircraft breathing stale air. Doctors consider that exercise is not only good for the body, but it also helps greatly to relieve stress. The two most obvious ways to get some exercise on the Hill, already practised by a number of Members, are walking to and from your office, and working out regularly in a gym. While these activities take time, those who exercise find that they are more productive at work and that makes up for the time lost. Those who

work out in the gym may also form friendships with Members of other parties, something that the setup of the House lobbies and the seating arrangements in committees does not encourage.

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Eat as regularly as possible, choose healthy food and cut back on the coffee. Following this advice may be even harder than exercising regularly. Breakfast meetings are now a common practice; lunch may be picked up on the run, often consisting of fast food that is cholesterol-inducing and calorie-rich; and dinner may either be another sandwich at a meeting or picked up late in the evening. As a result, many MPs put on weight, as well as clogging their arteries, possibly increasing the risk of a heart attack.

Select healthy food at meetings, preferably fresh fruit and vegetables. On days when you are not attending a meeting over breakfast, eat well. If you are not at a dinner meeting, take the time to eat a regular meal. And try to avoid eating late in the evening, since late evening meals can affect your sleep, an unhealthy situation for a profession where you are often short of sleep.

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The easy availability of coffee at committee meetings and in the lounges behind the House chamber represents an undesirable temptation. Maybe you drink coffee to help you to stay awake if you are short of sleep. However, it is a stimulant, hardly necessary in a job that already generates substantial adrenalin. So, resist it. Juice also can add to the calories you ingest. Press instead for bottled water.

### **The Importance of Family and Friends**

Make time for your family and friends. The demands of the job make this extremely difficult. If you are married, your election is likely to have a more profound effect on your spouse or partner than it has on you. You gain a stimulating and absorbing new job; your spouse or partner suffers a loss without a compensating gain.

If you retain your residence in the constituency, much of your weekends will be taken up with meeting constituents or attending functions so that you have little time at home. It is hardly surprising that many spouses and partners begin to feel neglected, with the result that the rate of divorce on the Hill is substantially above the national average. This phenomenon is not unique to the federal Parliament. Provincial politicians suffer in similar ways.

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Children, especially younger children, can lose touch with you. One former Member decided not to run again when he faced the fact that he had never been home for the birthdays of any of his three children, the eldest of whom was 12. Another parliamentarian decided to move his family to the capital when his five-year-old daughter asked him: “When are you coming home to visit?”

There is no simple solution to this problem. Whatever you decide, remember that your family is seriously affected when you are elected to the House of Commons, and the possible consequences need to be kept in mind. Your spouse or your partner and your family are your most important support system, the persons to whom you can turn when you have important personal decisions to take. Not only can the loss of that support seriously affect your performance, it can in itself become a major cause of stress. The intensity of your life as an MP may mask some of the immediate cost of a separation, but you may pay later when you cease to be a Member and try to build a new life.

Single Members face analogous problems. The support system for single persons is their network of close friends and extended family. Once elected, it can be very difficult to maintain contact and the support these relationships provide is lost, which can generate a troubling sense of isolation. Building new close relationships with your colleagues, normally in your

own party, can help. But that takes time and effort and some may find it stifling.

Married or single, life in the capital can be lonely. You lose touch with your personal networks at home, and the demands of life on the Hill make it extremely difficult to develop any kind of personal network in Ottawa. Difficult as it is, make an effort to build relationships off the Hill. Try to do something not connected with Parliament.

Take time to review with your family where to live. After your election, begin to discuss with your family whether to remain in the constituency or move to Ottawa. This is a decision that you should not take immediately. Some Members have found that it helped to move their family to Ottawa, because they could be home most evenings. But this is not a solution for many Members: your children may be at important stages in their schooling; your spouse or partner may have a job; or there may be cultural or linguistic difficulties involved in a move.

A common perception is that your constituents will resent a decision to move to Ottawa, thereby prejudicing your chances for re-election. Yet several MPs, who decided a few years after their election to move to Ottawa to be reunited with their families, were pleased to discover that their constituents appreciated the argument that it was done to preserve the family. They also found that they could devote more time during constituency visits to meeting their electors. One MP who had moved to Ottawa, observed that he can now devote more time to his constituents and that they often remark: “We are glad you have not forgotten us.” Of the several reasons for not moving, the argument that your electors will hold it against you appears to have the least validity.

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Apart from the all-important family considerations, much depends on how far your constituency is from Ottawa. If distances are not great, the argument for a move is much weaker. And should a decision be taken in a future Parliament to modify the order of business on Fridays, that too would strengthen the argument for not moving.

The farther a constituency is geographically from the capital, the less expectation there is for in-riding appearances and the greater acceptance there is of relocation to Ottawa. This is ironic when travel by car to closer constituencies often takes a longer time and is more stressful.

## **Organizing Your Life as an MP**

**Learn how to say No.** Saying “no” to a request from a senior Member of your party, a colleague or even a constituent is not easy in politics, where favours traded are the currency of the profession. So a decision to decline a request for some service can sometimes have implications for your future. However, of all the advice offered in preparing this article, this received the most consistent emphasis. It was identified as being crucial to maintaining your personal support system – family and close friends – and to gaining important down time.

**Set realistic personal goals.** Parliament operates according to rules of procedure and precedents developed over many years that govern the way that change is accomplished. Because the political process is highly adversarial and promotes confrontation, one party’s proposals for change are inevitably viewed with suspicion by other parties. The result is that modifications of the system occur gradually. At another level, the distribution of power and the way the rules of procedure are applied make it difficult even to amend bills.

This does not mean you should give up efforts to change the system or to amend legislation. But remember that Parliament is a place where change is usually accomplished in small steps. Accordingly, if you have come to Parliament with substantial goals, it helps if you can identify shorter-term intermediate objectives. If you set a series of modest goals, your chances of success are greater and you could even have the satisfaction of exceeding them.

This is important because a major cause of stress identified by many persons consulted in preparing this article is the tendency of some newly elected MPs to set goals that are overly ambitious. Failure to achieve such goals is likely to cause discouragement and intense frustration.

Critical to setting realistic goals is knowing thoroughly how the system works and therefore what can be changed, how much it takes to achieve the desired changes and over what time-frame. Just

acquiring this knowledge takes time, which is a good reason for waiting a while before you formulate your personal objectives.

**Reflect on how you intend to measure success in achieving your objectives.** In Parliament, there is a natural tendency for Members to measure success by the press coverage that their actions or statements generate. For opposition Members in particular, media criticism of the government can be highly valued.

But if you have a specific personal goal, media attention achieved through taking a strong position may make it more difficult to gain allies, which is normally a critical step in achieving a goal. The news media thrive on focusing attention on situations that involve conflict or disappointments. To dramatize stories, reporters – often goaded by their editors – will look for angles that reveal tension or conflicting objectives. It is no surprise that genuine successes achieved on the Hill gain much less media coverage than situations involving conflict.

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If you decide that the true measure of success for you is the realization of a personal objective, then media attention is likely to be an instrument to be used cautiously. In such cases, should you succeed, your reward may be the ability to say to yourself, “I have made a difference.”

**Try to keep an opening.** Unless you are close to retirement, you should seek, if you can, to keep open a path to a job in case you are defeated or decide not to run again. This may seem like strange advice, especially if you have just won your seat. But politics is an unpredictable profession, and unanticipated events can suddenly change the prospects for you and your party.

Especially as the next election approaches, you may find yourself worrying about what you will do if you fail to be re-elected. This is a legitimate concern because the election turnover in Canada is one of the highest in the world. If you have a profession that you can return to or have made arrangements with your former employer

to take you back, this knowledge can protect you from additional stress. Furthermore, it will strengthen your hand if you find yourself in a position where you feel it necessary to break with your party on an important policy question.

If the worst happens and you are defeated, knowing that you have a place to return to can be an enormous comfort. One of the unfortunate consequences of the diminished regard that the public has for politicians is that a defeated Member may find it difficult to get a job. A poll taken a year after the 1993 election, when more than 200 MPs were either defeated or did not seek re-election, revealed that a disturbingly large number faced difficulty when trying to find a job. Specifically they indicated that their experience as an MP was frequently treated in interviews as a liability, not an asset. Finding oneself in this position can be especially troubling for former Members who have family responsibilities and have not qualified for an MP's pension.

The stress is aggravated because defeat after working hard in an election can be traumatic, a condition aggravated by the requirement that a defeated and usually exhausted Member must close his or her office within 30 days. A further source of stress and even anger can occur when a defeated Member finds that people whom he or she thought were personal friends suddenly drop the relationship and seek to make contact with the successor MP. Former Members who have suffered this experience state that this can be one of the most personally troubling consequences of defeat. As one of them said, "It comes as a shock to find that the telephone stops ringing." Another warned: "Don't expect to be thanked for all the hard work you put in."

If this should happen to you, it will help enormously if you can say that during your time as an MP you have been able to help some people. This makes the job rewarding and defeat more palatable.

### **When and Where Should you Look for Help**

Paying attention to these several suggestions may assist you to manage the unusual pressures of your job as an MP. If you are lucky, you may be one of those fortunate MPs who have little trouble coping with the stress. If, however, you sense that you are beginning to suffer from stress, you may wonder how to recognize when you have reached the point to look for help. Although people react in many different ways,

symptoms include difficulty in concentrating, inability to sleep, working longer hours and avoiding social contact, feelings of depression, acute irritability and/or heightened anxiety.

While the consequences of stress may be no more than the absence of a sense of well-being and reduced effectiveness, the condition in the extreme can be life threatening. Persons suffering from severe depression have committed suicide. Stress may also aggravate a latent heart condition. So if you sense that you are overly stressed, do not hesitate to seek help from your doctor.

At the same time, speak to colleagues, usually in your own party, with whom you can talk candidly. Discuss the situation with your party whip. Your doctor may advise you to take a period of rest or a holiday.

### **Should the House do More?**

The House, through the Board of Internal Economy, has in fact taken some steps to improve the situation. Apart from upgrading the gym, there is a clinic for monitoring blood pressure, and the calorie-count of food provided in the lobbies adjacent to the House chamber during the lunch hour has been somewhat reduced. Members who are travelling abroad on delegations are permitted to use travel points to bring their spouse or partner, providing an important opportunity for busy MPs to be with their loved ones. However, other services have been cut back.

The Board of Internal Economy is aware of the problem, but is cautious about providing certain kinds of support for fear that the public and especially the media will slant their reports on the services made available and suggest that MPs are receiving costly privileges not accessible to other Canadians. This concern is well founded. For example, some articles on the parliamentary gym focused on its upgraded equipment without ever mentioning the value of that facility in helping MPs to cope with stress. Indeed, fear of criticism seems to have been a reason for terminating the service provided by Dr. Mark Walter. Although Parliament has the support of two nurses, they lack the medical training needed to assist Members suffering from stress or other serious medical problems.

In a book entitled *Managing Stress*, Mark Greener asserted that half of absences from work are due to stress-related causes. Many employers have recognized this fact and have acted accordingly. The Conference

Board of Canada reported in a study that half of workers surveyed experience high stress levels, nearly double the amount reported only a decade ago. Faced with this situation, 52 per cent of medium and large businesses surveyed by the Conference Board now have wellness programs. This represents a growth over a five-year period of 60 per cent in the number of companies with such programs.

Since a majority of larger companies now provide wellness programs for their workers, Parliament should do something similar. The problem is genuine and the effect of stress on the work of Members and of the House itself is demonstrable. The House should act, even if the action generates some adverse media comment. It comes with the territory. Politicians have always been and always will be the object and butt of media comment. Over a century ago, at a time when the British House of Commons was witness to the epic debates of Disraeli and Gladstone, Bernard

Shaw wrote about the profession: “He knows nothing and thinks he knows everything. That points clearly to a political career.”

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Additional support from Parliament to help MPs cope with stress would be helpful. Of that there can be no doubt. But in the final analysis, stress is a personal problem faced in greater or lesser degree by all Members of Parliament. MPs who confront and overcome the challenge will find that the quality and effectiveness of their work will improve. The ultimate result will be a more productive Parliament.