

OCCASIONAL PAPERS ON
PARLIAMENTARY GOVERNMENT

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STRESS AND THE MP

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IN THIS ISSUE...

The quickening pace of contemporary life has intensified the pressure and the stress experienced by MPs. This has affected the quality of the work of some Members, and cumulatively the performance of the House itself.

This issue of *Occasional Papers on Parliamentary Government* is devoted to identifying the main sources of stress faced by elected Members as we enter the 21st Century. But bear in mind the experience and the situation of every MP differ, making it risky to generalize.

The article also offers advice to those who are experiencing stress, drawn from doctors who are themselves Members and from Dr. Mark Walter, who for four years was responsible for a service set up exclusively for Members of Parliament and deputy-ministers. This issue of *Occasional Papers on Parliamentary Government* includes an interview with Dr. Walter.

Although this issue is appearing midway through the life of the 36th Parliament, it is hoped that it will be especially useful to Members elected to future Parliaments. To this end, we are posting the full text on the Parliamentary Centre's web site (parlcent.parl.gc.ca). We invite readers to respond orally, in writing or by email (sabouc@parl.gc.ca), in the hope that their comments will enable us to improve the text or supplement it to make it more useful.

Peter C. Dobell
Editor

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Cartoon by Anthony Jenkins

STRESS AND THE MP

By Peter C. Dobell

The job of an MP is unique. Beginning with the emotional high generated by 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 where issues of national and international importance are regularly debated, it opens the door to a life with a wide dimension. 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 the life of a Member 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. Two additional developments of the post war world have contributed materially to this situation. The arrival of jet aircraft in the 1970s suddenly made it possible for all MPs, even those representing remote parts of the country, to return to their

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.

constituencies over the weekend and their voters now expect them to do so. Those representing areas closer to the capital even find themselves pressed to return to

their constituencies for important events during the week, after which they frequently have to hurry back to Ottawa. The second development that has added significantly to time demands experienced by MPs has been the decision taken by the House around 1980 to fund offices in each Members' constituency. This was an important decision, reflecting the enormous expansion

since the Second 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 justified or unjustified public expectations, all situations that have fueled a flood of inquiries directed at the constituency offices of Members. Polls show that fifty percent 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 relatively new

are constantly in the public eye, so much so that to have private time it may be necessary to leave the country. Spouses 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 job vanishes 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

accustomed to verbal confrontation. Those who had 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 being most intense within one's party. Some Members are troubled to find themselves competing primarily with their party colleagues.

Most newly elected 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 of government and opposition Members differs significantly, both experience their share of frustrations. Politics is a team sport and for some government Members particularly, the pressure to conform with the party line can be a strain. They are called upon to attend House and committee meetings faithfully and to fulfill other tasks determined largely by the priorities of the party leadership. There are limited opportunities to speak in the House and they 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

It comes as a disturbing surprise to many newly elected MPs that their powers are substantially circumscribed.

demand on their time is virtually endless, occupying them when they are in Ottawa as well as in their constituencies.

The consequence of these two developments is added work and frequent travel by air or by car. 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 in order 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 let up.

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

as an honorable 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 working closely with Ministers and that power is actually wielded by the Prime Minister and the Cabinet.

The transition to the life of a Member of Parliament presents its own challenge because parliamentary politics is a hard job to prepare for. There is nothing else quite like it. Lawyers with court experience have some advantage, in that they are

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

if they are minded 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

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 work-place stress has become a "world wide 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 previous experience in 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.

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 offense, which can

A variety of these pressures, physical and emotional, that characterize the life of an MP can, especially when combined, cause severe stress.

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 on their election 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 disconnect 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

Parliament lies with the leader of their party. Electing leaders at party conventions combined with the commanding profile that television gives them 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 future.

A variety of these pressures, physical and emotional, that

Among a wide range of professions, studies have concluded that politicians are particularly exposed to stress.

characterize the life of an MP can, especially when combined, cause severe stress. The hectic pace of the life leaves little down-time to recharge personal batteries.

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 with responsibility

identified 43 common life events which in varying degrees generate stress, ranging from major causes such as the death of a spouse or divorce, through illness, being fired, trouble with in-laws, to such

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.

Stress is a cumulative phenomenon which occurs when demands consistently outstrip a person's capacity to adjust to them.

for MPs and senior public servants, had a unique opportunity to observe the medical impact on MPs of their stressful lives. In his recent 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:

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

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

Aside from the two big killers of 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.

The particular problem facing Members of Parliament is the unrelenting persistence of challenges and frustrations and the lack of down-time to recuperate.

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. Statscan recently undertook a comparable inquiry which reached a similar

Parliament should also be enhanced.

In that spirit this issue of Occasional Papers on 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 most of the medical doctors who are currently MPs themselves whose professional competence has made them knowledgeable observers of the parliamentary

...it is not hard work that causes stress.

Stress is a cumulative phenomenon which 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

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.

environment and who have counselled colleagues suffering from acute stress. Finally it has benefited from conversations with present and former Members, some of whom

greater the relief they will provide. Naturally, since genes differ, your physical and emotional vulnerability will vary from that of your colleagues. Besides, Members

take the time to exercise find that they are more productive at work, and in this way make up for the time lost. Those who work out in the gym may also form friendships with Members of other parties, something that the set-up of the House lobbies and the seating arrangements in committees does not encourage.

...within the constraints of your work, try to organize your life so as to reduce the accumulation of pressure and to find ways to give yourself some relief.

have themselves experienced severe stress while in office.

ADVICE TO MPs FROM KNOWLEDGEABLE PEOPLE

To enhance their immediacy many of these words of advice are expressed in the second person.

Exposure to stress is a fact of the life of 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 so as to reduce the accumulation of pressure and to find ways to give yourself some relief.

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

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

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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, 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

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. The same holds 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.

The easy availability of coffee at committee meetings and in the

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relief if you are experiencing stress. The more of the suggestions that you can incorporate into your life, the

Members, are walking to and from your office, or to work out regularly in a gym. While these activities take time, those who

lounges behind the Chamber represents an undesirable temptation. You may also take it to help you to stay awake if you are short of sleep. However,

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.

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 have to try to build a new life.

If you are married, your election is likely to have a more profound effect on your spouse than it has on you. You gain a stimulating and absorbing new job; your spouse suffers a loss without a compensating gain.

coffee is a stimulant, hardly necessary in a job that already generates substantial adrenalin. So, resist it. Even juice can add to the calories you ingest. Press instead for bottled water.

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 twelve. Another parliamen-

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

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 than it has on you. You gain a stimulating and absorbing new job; your spouse suffers a loss without a compensating gain.

If you decide to retain your residence in the constituency, when you do return for weekends, much of your time will be taken up meeting constituents or attending functions, so that you have little time at home. It is

Married or single, life in the capital can be lonely.

tarian 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 borne in mind. Your spouse or your partner and your family are your most important support system, the persons to

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.

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.

hardly surprising that many spouses begin to feel neglected, with the result that the rate of

whom you can turn when you have important personal decisions to take. Not only can the loss of

Take time to review with your family where to live. On your election, begin to discuss with your family whether to remain in the constituency or move to Ottawa. This is a decision which 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 feasible solution for many Members: your children may be at important stages in their schooling; your spouse 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

on Fridays, that too would strengthen the argument for not moving.

Ironically, the farther a constituency is geographically from the capital, the expectations for in-riding appearances will be less and the acceptance of relocation to Ottawa will be greater—even when travel time by car to closer constituencies is

rules of procedure and precedents developed over many years that govern the way that change is elaborated and agreed upon. Because the political process is highly adversarial and promotes confrontation, proposals for change by one party 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 in the system 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

Learn how to say No...was identified as being crucial to maintaining your personal support system—family and close friends—and to gaining important down-time.

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 so as 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 visits to their constituencies to meeting their electors. One MP who moved 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.

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

actually greater and the strain of a long drive greater.

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

...a major cause of stress...is the tendency of some newly elected MPs to set goals that are overly ambitious.

the currency of the profession. So a decision to decline to respond to a request for some service involves a judgment that can sometimes have implications for your future. However, of all the pieces of advice offered in preparing this article, this was the one that 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

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 media thrive by focussing attention on situations which 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

...keep open a path to a job in case you are defeated or decide not to run again.

genuine successes achieved on the Hill gain much less media coverage than situations involving conflict.

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 to Go Back To. 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 seems like strange advice to offer, 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.

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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 turnover from election to election 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 over 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 has 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 where you should 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. Go to see your whip and discuss your situation with him. Your doctor may have advised you to take a period of rest or a holiday. Recently, for example, Pam Barrett, the leader of the

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

NDP party in Alberta, took leave for six weeks in order to regain energy and decisiveness. The therapy seems to have been successful.

SHOULD THE HOUSE DO MORE?

The House, through the Board of Internal Economy, has in fact recently 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 Chamber for MPs sitting during the lunch hour has been somewhat reduced. Members who are travelling abroad on delegations are now 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 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

recent articles on the parliamentary gym focussed 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 recent 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. In a recent study, the Conference Board of Canada reported that half of workers surveyed experience high stress levels, nearly double the amount reported only a decade ago. Faced with this situation, 52 percent of medium and large businesses which were surveyed by the Conference Board now have wellness programs. This represents a growth over a five year period of 60 percent 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."

Based on the interviews used in the preparation of this article, the following are a few modest suggestions for action by the House that could help.

- The gym could be more effective if a trainer were hired on a part-time basis who could work with individual Members and recommend specific exercise programs for them.
- A separate gym for women would induce more women to visit the gym regularly.
- The Orientation for New Members could be augmented with a session on the many challenges of the job, and how to address them so as to minimize stress.
- A session on ways to manage time might also be added to the Orientation for New Members.

- A session on the impact on the spouses and families of newly elected MPs might be organized specifically for spouses and partners.

unlike the suggestions listed above, a change of this significance would not be introduced in order to ease the stress experienced by Members. If

Since a majority of larger companies now provide wellness programs for their workers, Parliament should do something similar.

- The massage therapist might be restored to full time. With Members sitting so much of the time, a massage can be relaxing and relieve stress.
- Food offered at evening sessions or at receptions on the Hill should normally include fresh fruits and vegetables.

a government party were to moderate discipline, Members would feel more important, but the decision to make such a change would be taken for quite different reasons.

Undeniably a most effective form of institutional assistance would be some relaxation of party control, enabling MPs to make a greater personal input into the formation of public policy. If private Members could review and

Additional support from Parliament 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

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.

propose changes to draft legislation and vote for some modification of departmental estimates, their sense of self-worth would grow. However,

quality and effectiveness of their work will improve. The ultimate result will be a more productive Parliament.

INTERVIEW WITH DR. MARK WALTER

PCD:

I'll begin by asking you how you came to work with Members of Parliament?

Walter:

I was a physician in Montreal and after seven years of doing family practice, I was ready for some new challenges. I had worked at an air force base and had heard about the position at the DND Medical Centre, which was basically to develop a preventive medical program for parliamentarians.

PCD:

Were you the first person to fill this position?

Walter:

No, the position had been filled for a few years previously by several military doctors, but I believe I was the first civilian to fill this position. I think DND decided to contract out because they were ill-at-ease with Members of Parliament, and unsure how to deal with them.

PCD:

Where did the initiative for the appointment come from?

Walter:

The basic idea was that, because MPs spend much of their time in Ottawa and therefore find it difficult to get to their regular physician back home, it made sense to set up some kind of

special medical service for parliamentarians in Ottawa.

I suspect that the Walter Reed Medical Centre in Washington, which looks after Members of Congress and senior officials in the executive, served as a model. However, ours was a very small service: myself and one nurse.

PCD:

However, if surgery were needed the National Defence Hospital was behind you, and supported you.

Walter:

Yes. We had the support of the NDMC. It was a mutually satisfactory arrangement. The NDMC was delighted to have me responsible for handling what they saw as being a special problem. So there I was at the end of a hall with a little clinic to manage this challenge and expected somehow to sort it out.

PCD:

Who had access to you? Was it just parliamentarians?

Walter:

No. In addition to MPs and Senators, deputy-ministers and generals could ask to see me.

PCD:

When did you start and how did the system work?

Walter:

I began in 1990 and the service was closed in 1994. MPs knew that

the service was available. Most of them would come once a year for some kind of check up. Some of the Members who came to see me just wanted an annual check-up; others came because they had a problem. Of course what often happened is that some Members, once they were patients, would come to discuss their personal problems with me because they knew me and felt comfortable coming to me.

PCD:

Did MPs always come to see you at the National Defence Hospital or did you ever go to their offices?

Walter:

No. We did not do house calls; they always came to me. It was good for me to be separated from the Hill. Members would not be seen coming to my office. It was very private and totally confidential.

PCD:

Of the 295 Members in the House at that time, roughly how many did you end up seeing?

Walter:

A good half anyway.

PCD:

Were you equally at home with French and English patients?

Walter:

Yes. Although I am more anglophone than francophone, if

the patient's first language was French, the discussion was in French.

PCD:

Did you get many francophone patients?

Walter:

Almost all the time.

PCD:

Did the initiative to talk about personal problems come initially from the MPs?

Walter:

Yes, but remember, I was their first stop. If it was an alcoholism problem, or stress problem, or if it was a medical concern, I would be their first stop. As you know, they are very busy persons who did not find it easy using other types of services. And often felt uncomfortable talking about personal problems with a local doctor who was well connected in the constituency. In contrast, many of them appeared to be at ease confiding in me.

PCD:

It is my impression that the lifestyle of Members of Parliament can produce extreme stress. Do you agree?

Walter:

Yes, over a four-year period, I got to know the details of the pressures MPs face and I agree they are substantial. They are disconnected from their families and their normal support systems. Many have not previously worked in Ottawa and have no contacts here. Nor do they have any experience of how the whole place (Parliament) works. Being disconnected can be disorienting and disheartening. This is one—an

important one—of a whole bunch of factors that make the job pretty stressful.

PCD:

As an aside, it strikes me that, because Members from Quebec normally go home every weekend, they are less separated and remain somewhat more rooted in their communities.

Walter:

Yes, that is true. Another source of stress that I found really frustrated many of them was that they were not able to achieve the things they were hoping they were going to be able to. They felt the sense of being stuck in a political system where they were not able to produce change. The idealism they had when they first came to Ottawa evaporated as they found that they were not able to make the difference they had hoped to make. I am talking of individuals, many of them quite gifted, some of whom gave up much better paying jobs when they decided to run.

PCD:

I find it disturbing that the public on the whole accords so little respect to their MPs, to people who work very hard and who give up so much when they come to Ottawa. Would you agree that another source of disappointment for MPs is that they are not given the respect that the hard work justifies?

Walter:

Yes. I used to warn MPs that 95% of the phone calls they would get would be negative, or from people who wanted something. After a while, that can be quite draining for many of them.

Losing can also be especially devastating. I did not have the

privilege of seeing the Members who were defeated in 1993 because they were not able to come back and see me. But yes, I agree that it is probably quite disillusioning to be in that situation. They probably would have said: I "busted my butt" for four years and suddenly I am out.

PCD:

Can you describe some of the manifestations of stress? You mentioned problems with alcohol. Is that a sign of stress?

Walter:

Well you know, stress manifests itself in many ways. Anything from a physical problem, a heart attack, the immune system not working properly, infections to alcoholism. Many MPs experience marital stress as a result of being away from home so much. So there really is no one way that stress manifests itself.

PCD:

When I asked if there were any warning signs, I was wondering if you could identify signs that Members should take note of?

Walter:

I think they know when they are getting stressed. They feel off balance, but the problem is they do not know what to do about it. They do not know where to turn because they feel disconnected. I do not think we need to tell people that they are stressed and do not know it. I do not think it is an identification problem, it is a management problem.

PCD:

What kind of regime did you recommend or would recommend now for Members?

Walter:

Well I have a whole program in my book, *Personal Resilience*: a nutrition program, exercise, and so on. I used to try to get MPs to walk to work if they could. They also had a gym which I encouraged them to use. But it is much more than that. Lifestyle medicine is not just a science. It is the art of trying to find ways to suit each individual.

One small example. The moment many Members get into a committee meeting, they are drinking coffee. In my view, no one on the Hill needs more coffee. Everybody is already tuned up just enough. They should be having green tea or herbal tea, or decaffeinated stuff. No one up there needs any more caffeine. And it is not going to help the efficiency of the committee meeting to have everyone pumped up on coffee.

PCD:

I find that as the session moves along, Members become more fatigued, stressed. Not having any down-time for a while, they go after each other more.

Walter:

Sure. They are not happy, not well balanced. There are some danger signals, such as not being able to concentrate, mood swings, and

lack of energy. They start off with energy and idealism and six months into it, they start to wear down.

Another point. I recollect that the gym was the subject of criticism in the media. I believe we have to stop running the country to please the media. Decisions have to be made that are good for the government and good for Canada. Because if you try and run things to please the media, you'll never be happy. The men and women that come here as parliamentarians have a tough job and they need support. I have always believed that. I was a voice in the wilderness. I think some politicians were worried that a support program was going to be criticized. Surely it is silly to go to all of the expense of having a whole democratic system and then not provide support for the men and women who are elected to office.

PCD:

But apart from the support, is it the way that MPs organize their life that is critical? I have now seen most of the doctors who are Members of Parliament. Everyone I spoke to stressed the importance of MPs saying "no" to some of the numerous requests they receive. Unless they decline some requests, they will never get the down-time they need.

Walter:

But you know it can take them two years to figure that out.

PCD:

That is interesting. I think I told you one of my objectives is to produce an issue of our magazine that will be given to every newly elected Member as a kind of warning when they first come to Ottawa.

Walter:

I think that would be useful. Because of the very privileged position that I had for four years and with my background in lifestyle medicine, I probably have more experience of the pressures on MPs than most people. I would suggest that when new Members first come to Ottawa, they should have an orientation program focussed on the stresses of the job and how to cope with them.

PCD:

You would agree with me, then, that the most important time to start is when they are first elected?

Walter:

Yes, training to manage the pressures of a job is just as important as doing the job itself. The result could be happier, better adjusted MPs who would as a result be able to achieve more