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MP's flight sends wrong message on stress

[JIM COYLE](#)

If the Richter Scale measured groans, Bill Wilkerson would probably have produced record readings of seismic frustration this week. His vexed tremblings might even have convinced those who monitor such matters that the long-awaited Big One had hit Toronto instead of California.

Wilkerson is co-founder and head of the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health. Since 1998, he has shouldered the considerable challenge of reducing the stigma attached to such conditions and convincing business and the public that mental and emotional well-being is the major public-health issue of the century.

You might say Wilkerson knows a thing or two about stress, the process Canadian physician and author Gabor Maté has called "a complicated cascade of physical and biochemical responses to powerful emotional stimuli."

The problems of stress are undeniable in a just-in-time, do-more-with-less, 24/7, multi-tasking world, a world where other people are hired to walk the dog, where *One-Minute Bedtime Stories* are marketed for kids, where any gratification short of instant isn't nearly fast enough.

Stress hides beneath depression or erupts nowadays in every sort of rage, from roads to rinks.

Canadian corporations recently cited stress and burnout as the largest drain on productivity. Yet progress in accepting that a prescription to "pull-up-your-socks" is not the antidote has been slow.

Usually, as Wilkerson says, ground is gained only when the economic costs of inaction are made loud and clear.

Then along comes Conservative MP Gurmant Grewal's sudden flight from Ottawa claiming stress leave and years of painstaking progress in shifting attitudes might be undone, Wilkerson fears, in one high-profile "cop-out" and the ensuing waves of ridicule.

It would appear, Wilkerson said, that Grewal is "confusing political pressure with job stress."

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"It sends a terrible message to the wider public, sets a terrible example for the public, and plays to those who are just looking for excuses to generate a backlash against acceptance of emotional conditions as valid health concerns."

He said yesterday in an interview that "the acceptance of mental illness generally is still at a very fragile state.

"We've made some headway in generating public understanding and public acceptance, but there is lurking beneath the waters a readiness by a percentage of the population to revert to the stereotypical and mythological assumption that emotional concerns and medical problems of this nature are not authentic and are imaginary."

Grewal, of course, is the British Columbia MP who surreptitiously taped a conversation with senior Liberals that included suggestions of how he and his wife, also an MP, might have supported the government during a recent confidence vote in exchange for plum appointments.

He returned to his riding on stress leave a few days before it was alleged he violated airline security law by trying to have another passenger carry a package for him on a flight from Vancouver to Ottawa. He was reportedly required to present no note from a doctor to justify the open-ended leave, during which he receives full pay.

"The use of the term `stress leave' tends once again to put this subject matter into a context where it is really vulnerable to cynicism and skepticism," Wilkerson said.

"Is this just another way for people — not just parliamentarians, but people in general — to escape pressure or responsibility? And how does that happen on such an informal and seemingly casual basis? It plays to this notion that stress is a copout and that stress is an excuse."

Wilkerson says there are some particular characteristics of harmful job stress. The primary causes include work overload, poor supervision and inadequate training.

Job stress also has a face, says a paper released this week by Wilkerson's group. It can lead to general ill health and "may contribute to a number of serious debilitating disorders including depression, cardiovascular disease and cancer."

Wilkerson's group has been trying to steer the medical profession, insurance industry and employers to developing standardized definitions for chronic job stress and will publish some this week.

But when one such highly public example arises of a politician apparently interpreting political pressure as job stress and taking it on the lam, it suggests to the public that "these are fake conditions," he said.

"I fight for every yard of territory," he said.

"Sometimes, something like this is just a defining moment that is extremely harmful as an example to the country and as a case on point of the wrong portrayal of an otherwise legitimate public issue."

If so, Grewal's impact on his own party's prospects is the least of the damage he's done.

Jim Coyle usually appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

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