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GOVERNING UNDER PRESSURE? THE MENTAL WELLBEING OF POLITICIANS

Abstract

Despite the singular importance of the work of national politicians in creating legislation, representing constituents and holding government to account, relatively little work has been done concerning their wellbeing and psychological health. There are unique, as well as universal, stressors that impact upon politicians; a neglect of these issues has profound consequences for those individuals and wider democracy. We propose a 'taxonomy of stressors' as a starting point for further inter-disciplinary and comparative research, and argue that it offers analytical leverage vis-à-vis a far broader set of debates concerning the future of representative democracy.

Key words: Politicians, wellbeing, mental health, political stressors, democracy

In 1979 Jeremy Richardson and Grant Jordan published a seminal text entitled *Governing Under Pressure* that questioned the role and capacity of elected representatives. As such, it formed a central component of a body of work that promoted what would become known as 'the parliamentary decline thesis'. It also contributed to the intellectual foundations for much of the later scholarship on the transition 'from government to governance' and 'the hollowing-out of the state'. This article is also concerned with 'governing under pressure' and relates to many of the issues and themes raised within this sort of governance-theoretic literature but opens-up a new seam of inter-disciplinary and international research. The primary focus is not upon the broader socio-political context, the role of specific institutions or the policy-making process but on *how individuals cope with the psychological pressures of contributing to the*

governing process in the twenty-first century. Whilst the keen-eyed critic will rightly point out that only those in the executive 'govern' as such, we argue that in a fragmented and increasingly complex political landscape of governance networks, all MPs feel related pressures. Backbench MPs, play an important role in moulding crucial and far-reaching policy decisions, in assuming the most influential roles in the state (either as a pool of potential recruits for the executive or by granting and withdrawing support for the government of the day), and in helping to design and reform the institutional nature of the state (Best and Vogel, 2018).

Our central argument is therefore that there is very little research on the mental wellbeing or psychological health of politicians per se and this is a significant gap in the existing research base. It needs to be filled for three reasons. First, the long-running debate about democratic decline and deconsolidation (cf Richardson and Jordan's book) has in recent years intensified and is now dominated by narratives of 'crisis', 'failure', and 'survival' (Tormey, 2015). Yet this burgeoning body of thinking on the health of democracy has rarely thought to examine the health of politicians. There is a massive literature on the politics of mental health but almost nothing on the mental health of politicians (an exception being Weinberg, 2012). And yet the field of occupational psychology offers a significant corpus of research on the negative psychological impacts of different and multi-layered stressors in different professions – such as medicine (Brooks et al., 2011) and teaching (Philipp and Schüpbach, 2010) – and how they manifest themselves in specific illnesses or forms of behaviour (anxiety, depression, alcohol and drug misuse, exhaustion, breakdown, high-risk behaviour, poor decision making). Little of this psychological literature has focused on politicians as a professional group.

This article represents a first in proposing a framework to advance understanding of the mental health of politicians as a professional group. Mental health is defined as 'a state of well-being

in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community' (World Health Organisation, 2014). Building from this definition, this article presents the first attempt to delineate the main pressures that politicians face in the form of a three-level, nine-part analytical 'stressors framework'.

>>> INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE <<<

Table 1 is offered very much as a starting point. The framework is an attempt to provide an initial 'organising perspective'. The levels and dimensions are not discrete or self-contained entities and the aim is to encourage scholars to explore, reject and refine our arguments and, through this, achieve a more sophisticated understanding. As a starting point this article focuses mainly on British politics and national politicians, though we hope that this framework will lead to further international and comparative research. In addition to filling an existing research gap, the significance of this initial attempt to think about 'governing under pressure' via a psychological person-centred lens suggests two central theses:

1. That when viewed through the 'stressors framework' the *pressures of governing have and are increasing;*

2. It may be that many of the perceived problems with democracy have their roots in a systemic failure to consider negative aspects of political work and to protect the mental health of those individuals we expect to govern under these increasing pressures.

The health of democracy may, to an extent, depend on the mental health and psychological wellbeing of those we elect to represent and take decisions on our behalf. The challenges of

coping with pressure remains a topic for memoirs and autobiographies but not discussable in office (see, for example, Biffen 2013). In the UK, Churchill's historical reference to his 'black dog' is famously considered acknowledgement of his own experiences of psychological ill health while in office (Attenborough, 2013). Indeed, Kjell Magne Bondevik (Prime Minister of Norway 1997-2000, 2001-2005) remains the only serving national political leader to have disclosed a mental health condition as the reason for temporarily stepping-down from office.

The shoots of a new approach to the mental health of politicians is emerging, in that the psychological impact of representing, functioning and, where appropriate, governing under significant and multiple pressures is very slowly being recognised. For example, in 2012 the House of Commons held the first ever debate about the mental wellbeing of politicians (HC Deb 14 June 2012 vol. 546 cc504-76) and, since then, a number of politicians from Norway to Australia have spoken publicly about their experiences of depression. More recently, the UK's Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) has investigated the emergence of an intensely aggressive, abusive and frequently misogynistic on-line culture towards politicians. It concluded in December 2017: 'the scale and intensity of intimidation is now shaping public life in ways which are a serious issue' (CSPL 2017, p.13). The inquiry revealed the degree to which abuse on social media inflicts a huge psychological impact and has a chilling effect on some politicians, particularly women (e.g. CSPL 2017, p.29). The aim of this article is to begin thinking about the form, nature and impact of these stressors (and therefore what might be done). The next section begins this process with a focus on what we term the macro-political stressors.

I. Macro-political stressors

Several occupations are considered highly stressful and require the management of conflicting demands. Many involve the pressures of public scrutiny (Weinberg and Cooper, 2012) but the pressures placed upon politicians appear to be, from the limited existing research, exceptionally intense. This section examines these pressures through a macro-political focus on public expectations, (dis)trust and political labour.

1.1 The Expectations Stressor

An insight from the field of occupational psychology is that unrealistic expectations are a major source of stress. And yet one of the most distinctive elements of politics as a profession is that inspiring hope, confidence and belief – '*Yes, we can!*' – is an intrinsic element of winning elections.

The demand for politicians to inflate public expectations in order to secure office is a major source of pressure and stress, especially as, once in power, they may very quickly realise that their control capacity and the available resources are insufficient for the task and therefore failure is inevitable (Blunkett, 2006). The pressure of expectations can often be almost overwhelming. 'As I walked through the iron gates in Downing Street,' Tony Blair (2011, p.1) wrote about winning the 1997 General Election, 'I could feel the emotion like a charge... It affected everyone, lifting them up, giving them hope, making them believe that all things were possible…the world could be changed…Everyone except for me, that is. My predominant feeling was fear, and of a sort unlike anything I had felt before'.

Elections can create a 'bidding war' for votes that may create an 'expectations gap' between pre-election promises and post-election performance. In the field of work psychology 'the psychological contract' refers to 'individual beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding the

terms of an exchange agreement between the individual and their organization' (Rousseau, 1995, p.9). In this case, the individual is the politician and the organisation refers simultaneously to the electorate, political party and Parliament. Unmet expectations are characterised as violations of this unwritten social exchange that can generate negative emotions (worry, anxiety, feelings of inadequacy, powerlessness, confusion or betrayal) that can severely damage the mental wellbeing of the individual (De Jong, et al., 2015). It could be suggested that the psychological contract has altered significantly as changes in the civic culture (i.e. higher levels of education, lower levels of deference, technological advances in relation to information retrieval, fact-checking and scrutiny) have increased the *demand-side* pressures of politics without addressing *supply-side* dimensions. Politicians who tell the truth about the likely limits of their impact in office – '*No, we can't!*' - are unlikely to win elections. And yet very little research has been undertaken on the psychological impact of expectations inflation (pre-election) or expectations management (post-election). This flows into a focus on political (dis)trust as a stressor.

1.2 The Distrust Stressor

Working in a low-trust high-blame environment has been shown to have a destructive impact on an individual's professional competency and upon their sense of personal worth and wellbeing (Evans et al., 2005). Operating in low-trust environments is detrimental to mental wellbeing irrespective of occupational group. Research by Hoel, Faragher and Cooper (2004), for example, showed that UK employees reporting experience of persistent criticism, attempts to find fault with their work, and repeated reminders of past mistakes, face five-fold increases in poor psychological health. There is a striking parallel to politicians' professional environment. Indeed the psychological impacts of this environment are commonly highlighted

within memoirs and autobiographies, many of which attest to the stress experienced by politicians due to feeling constantly under attack, unable to drop their guard, existing in a 'bear pit', with very few professional support structures.

At the same time, there has been a presumption that distrust in the actors and institutions of politics should be met by concerted efforts to increase the accountability function of Parliament. Internally, more than a decade of reforms to the committee system has, for instance, made Parliament far stronger in its capacity to scrutinise and influence government legislation (Russell and Cowley, 2016). Externally, Parliament has become more transparent than ever before and a greater number of people can, and do, contact their MP. Indeed, the workload imposed on MPs to field the scale of public communication they receive may be one of the most restrictive and physically (as well as psychologically) draining aspects of their daily job (Norton, 2012; Rosenblatt, 2006). The public can watch MPs work in real time through the internet or the BBC Parliament channel, and in the process it is arguable that the expressive function of Parliament and its members has assumed heightened significance. Yet in spite of efforts to increase accountability, just 29% of respondents in the Hansard Society *Audit of Political Engagement* are satisfied with how MPs perform (2016, p.29). It appears, paradoxically, that these efforts to open up Parliament may, in turn, have made its members far more vulnerable to popular cynicism, a disinterested and hyper-critical commercial media, and the immediacy of snap online reprimands.

As a by-product of this broader change in the political firmament, serious cases of stalking and harassment have become a 'common experience' for MPs (James et. al., 2016), with psychological effects including fear, perceived vulnerability and changes in lifestyle, such as reduced social engagements and greater security precautions. In the British General Election

of 2017, 56 per cent of surveyed parliamentary candidates expressed concern about the abuse and intimidation they had been subjected to; 31 per cent said they had felt 'fearful' during the campaign (CSPL 2017, p.27). Misuse of anonymous social media accounts has intensified these problems and has created a toxic environment for politicians that regularly includes online rape and murder threats (Phillips, 2017). In the months after the murder of the MP Jo Cox in June 2016, 'enhanced security' packages were provided to 85 MPs. This was in response to threats that politicians had received and which were deemed by the police and security services as both serious and credible.

1.3 The Political Labour Stressor

A key challenge for politicians is balancing potentially conflicting loyalties and demands. As Bernard Crick argued in his *Defence of Politics* (1962), the need to compromise, bargain and make deals reflects the inevitably messy nature of democratic politics; the demands of party loyalty or collective responsibility may sometimes create tensions where the views of the politician and their party, constituency or leadership group may not be in alignment. Coping with these pressures and situations demands what Hochschild (1983) labelled 'emotional labour'. This involves 'surface acting' - whereby the individual is 'managing feelings to create an impression that is part of a job' (Smither, 1998, p.43) – as their personal views may be quite different to those that their party expects them to promote on an issue (e.g. over Brexit). This is stressful and exhausting. Emotional labour is often associated with burnout (Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002).

As with the stressors of expectations and distrust, it could be argued that 'surface acting' is accepted as part of the job, yet there are hopes that politicians are free to express their personal

views on all issues as a refreshing counter-strategy to the robotic pronouncements of a political machine. It is equally true that cognitive dissonance (i.e. the tension of holding apparently inconsistent viewpoints or beliefs) is a common feature of most people's thought processes, but in the political sphere the existence of these 'normal' inconsistencies are likely to be probed, exposed, exaggerated and very often turned against the person who admits them (Owen, 1978, p.2). This is particularly the case in an adversarial system where uncertainty is often viewed as an admission of weakness. Moreover, democratic politics demands imperfect compromises. 'Out of a thousand decisions, brokered compromises and deals in corridors … a common life is stitched together that allows us to live together' (Ignatieff, 2013, p.95). This arguably creates a perception of politicians as hypocritical, although it may not be immorality but rather the pursuit of moral goals through imperfect tools. Acknowledging that 'political labour' is necessary recognises that politicians may have to compromise on their commitments, principles and values and, accepting that certain ambitions are beyond their reach, perform.

Managing the gap between public ideals and political reality demands political displays, courtships and statements. The literature on truth(fullness) and mendacity in politics provides a valuable intellectual gateway through which to understand this sub-section's focus on political labour. This body of work – including key texts such as Rubner's *Mendacious Colours of Democracy* (2006), Jay's *The Virtues of Mendacity* (2012), Runciman's *Political Hypocrisy* (2010) and Mearsheimer's *Why Leaders Lie* (2013) – all revolve around the insight that politics frequently demands the construction of fragile coalitions, the maintenance of which can very often demand a sophisticated approach to the provision of information and the use of language. Politicians may therefore be forced to engage in what Rubner calls 'benevolent lying' in an attempt to make progress towards a moral goal. Prospective and serving MPs thus find themselves in or entering a job that requires constant impression management, both at the

internal level within political parties and at the external level with the voting public. This 'messy', 'grubby' or 'worldly' vocation may, we argue, exacerbate the tendency towards surface acting prevalent in public facing job roles and in turn increase risks to wellbeing shown in such jobs (Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002).

The argument of Part I was that politicians operate in a particularly stressful and pressurised environment that is rarely acknowledged. Moreover, we know hardly anything about the impact of macro-level stressors on individual politicians. This, to some extent, reflects the challenges of undertaking research of a highly personal nature in a politically salient context. The next section focuses on three institutionally and sector-relevant dimensions or meso-political stressors.

II. Meso-political stressors

The limited body of research in this area is surprising given the longstanding psychological data linking effective decision-making with mental wellbeing (Freeman, 1991). This section highlights three specific stressors that have not generally been identified or linked to issues of mental health and wellbeing *in politicians*. Once again it is necessary to highlight three issues: (1) the inter-relationship(s) *between* these factors and with those discussed in the previous section; (2) the limits imposed by this article's predominant focus on British parliamentary politics and the urgent need for comparative analyses; (3) how each factor could easily form the entire focus of this journal article. We seek to provide an outline of the key variables as a precursor and stimulus to more detailed studies.

2.1 The Organisational Culture Stressor

The existing research base on mental health and psychological wellbeing links three issues: (1) the correlation between psychological wellbeing and adequate induction and/or support frameworks; (2) an open professional culture in which the existence of weaknesses or insecurities can be openly discussed and constructively addressed; and (3) a workplace environment in which people are not subject to threats, coercion, intimidation, aggressive behaviour, sexism or bullying. The recent Cox Report on bullying and harassment in the UK Parliament (Cox, 2018) provides compelling evidence to suggest that politicians work in an organisation that has failed to address at least the third of these concerns. Moreover, MPs and their staff operate in 'a culture, cascading from the top down, of deference, subservience, acquiescence and silence, in which bullying, harassment and sexual harassment have been able to thrive and have long been tolerated and concealed.' (Cox, 2018, p.4). Not surprisingly, as previous studies outside politics have shown (e.g. Hoel et al, 2004), the Cox Report outlines how these practices have impacted negatively on many working in Parliament, regardless of job descriptions or whether individuals are victims or witnesses to such behaviours. Above all, there is a gendered narrative at the heart of the report that reveals an embedded culture of sexual abuse against MPs and parliamentary staff that is both shocking and places the victims at heightened risk of mental ill health.

Election to the House of Commons, in particular, can be a bewildering and stressful occasion for many new MPs. Cooper-Thomas and Silvester (2014) considered the transition experience of new MPs and exposed an induction system characterised by trial-and error and largely bereft of formal support or role clarity (see also Rush and Giddings, 2011). Following a Hansard Society report on new MPs' experiences, which revealed deep unhappiness with induction activities, a cross-departmental General Election Planning Group (GEPG) was established in

Parliament to rectify this situation (Rosenblatt, 2005). However, the approach to parliamentary inductions post-2010 arguably failed to appreciate what type of training MPs required, and when and how it should be delivered.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2010 election, the GEPG arranged technical support sessions about accommodation, finance, and expenses, as well as a series of informative workshops on parliamentary procedure and services. However, only 19% of the 232 new MPs attended at least one of these sessions (Fox and Korris, 2012, p.567), frontloaded as they were in the frenetic aftermath of the election. A more extensive training programme for all parliamentary staff, organised over the duration of a parliament, would provide the opportunity not only for technical training, but also for the enhancement of soft skills designed to promote an ethical and healthy climate. With regard to mental health, there is evidence that coaching in interpersonal skills can protect individual well-being in challenging public sector roles (Grant et al., 2009).

On the whole, primary socialisation and adjustment remains an informal affair for most elected representatives in a number of parliamentary settings including the UK and New Zealand (Cooper-Thomas and Silvester, 2014). The legacy of poor induction processes and a challenging organisational culture is arguably exacerbated by experiences of a poor peer support network (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013) and compounded by the potential for loneliness (Weinberg, 2015), unremitting media intrusion, and a willingness by opponents to capitalise on human error and misjudgement (Kwiatkowski, 2012). As Isabel Hardman (2018, p. xii) notes in her recent book *Why We Get the Wrong Politicians?*, 'cultures are more dangerous than individuals'. Eschewing the trite accusations about politicians' base characters inherent in her title, Hardman reflects on her time in the journalist's lobby of Westminster and

concludes that the processes and ethos of the House risk producing ill-considered legislation as well as disabusing many MPs of good intentions. Looking backwards at the candidate selection procedure, let alone life in Westminster, Hardman (2018, p.6) reflects: '[m]arriages break down, candidates develop addictions and mental health problems, and others end up sobbing on their kitchen floors night after night reading streams of personal abuse over email and social media.' Unsurprisingly, newly elected representatives report increased symptoms of psychological strain after gaining their jobs in Westminster, the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales (Weinberg, 2012). Worryingly, significant levels of stress have also been found amongst experienced parliamentarians (Weinberg et al., 1999; APPG, 2008).

The culture of politics, and especially in Westminster-style parliaments is almost designed to embed and perpetuate an aggressive, adversarial, 'winner-takes-all' mentality that creates few incentives for politicians to acknowledge or admit personal or professional failings or weaknesses. This is exactly why the analogy to Parliament as a 'bear pit' is so common amongst political autobiographies (Collins, 2000; Blunkett, 2006). In *Black Dog Daze* (2011) the former Australian Trade Minister, Andrew Robb, provides an account of how political life affected his mental health, and highlights how concerns about the stigma concerning mental health and the aggressive nature of Australian political life prevented him talking openly about the issue. Moreover, the dominant political culture at Westminster is heavily gendered in the sense that, as Rai and Johnson's *Democracy in Practice* (2014) and Childs' *The Good Parliament* (2016) outline in forensic detail, the Palace of Westminster was built by men for men and this is manifest in the building and procedures, and arguably makes the institution a more challenging environment for women than men (e.g. Harman, *A Woman's Work,* 2017).

2.2 The Leadership Stressor

Although a huge literature focuses on the psychological characteristics of successful leaders – military, business, sporting, etc. - only a fragment focuses on political leadership, in general, and on the mental health and psychological wellbeing of political leaders, in particular. What is interesting, however, is the manner in which that fragment of scholarship relates very directly to those macro-political debates concerning cognitive and professional dissonance that have already been discussed. John Kane and Haig Patapan (2012), for example, explore the paradox of the democratic leader, whereby they must *at one and the same time* appear above us, so that the public recognises the legitimate right of elected leaders to govern, while also appearing like us, so politicians can claim to represent the public. This structurally creates contradictory public expectations about how politicians should behave (see also Riddell, 2011; Medvic, 2013). This is linked to studies, such as Hugh Freeman's review (1991) and David Owen's *In Sickness and in Office* (2011), that have documented psychological ill health amongst world leaders that range from drug and alcohol abuse to depression and bipolar disorder. However such approaches have relied on historical secondary sources (e.g. Freeman, 1991) and proxy indicators (Owen and Davidson, 2009) in order to try and gauge the functioning of political leaders.

Some people might be particularly well suited to governing under intense pressure and others suited to governing in stable times (see Lilienfeld *et al*, 2013). However, there is relatively little empirical research on the links between aspects of health and political leadership. Neuroticism (also known by its corollary emotional stability) refers to a personality trait characterised by worry, irritability and pessimism, and logically it can be concluded that an increased disposition towards neuroticism is likely to impact negatively at some point on an individual politician's capacity to cope (Dunkley et al, 2014). Silvester, Wyatt and Randall's

(2013) study of local politicians found that neuroticism was negatively related to resilience and to analytical skills, as rated by both the politicians surveyed and their colleagues, while Dietrich et al (2012) found that US legislators scoring higher in self-reported emotional stability were more interested in competing for higher political office.

Consideration of the role of personality traits flows into a focus on transitions and particularly upon what David Owen (2009) has termed the risk of 'hubris syndrome', whereby political leaders develop an inflated view of their own capacity, an inability to accept criticism, a disproportionate concern with image and excessive confidence. The paradox of the 'hubris syndrome' that seems under-acknowledged in the existing literature is the manner in which certain qualities that appear more positive, legitimate or 'adaptive' in times of crisis are seen as negative, illegitimate or 'maladaptive' in less turbulent times. There is emerging research into politicians in the UK (Weinberg, 2017), Italy (Caprara et al., 2010), and Germany (Best, 2011) which suggests the personality traits and basic values of those elected are more often motivated by independent thought and action and higher levels of ambition than the general publics. Nonetheless, we actually know very little about the psychological impact of governing in times of crisis on politicians, their advisers or even their families.

2.3 The Temporal Stressor

Insecurity is stressful. Few professions are as insecure or capricious as politics. The need to deliver within the relatively short time-frame of the electoral cycle can create irrational incentives towards achieving short-term gains at the expense of the longer-term. The need to work through the often slow and cumbersome procedures of negotiation and compromise in large and complex delivery chains (where potential veto-points are numerous) is stressful and

tends towards sub-optimal outcomes and disappointment. Whilst a literature exists on the pathologies of policy-making, what is often over-looked is the personal stress created by embarking on a political career that one knows will generally be fairly precarious. Job loss is known for its negative psychological impact (Paul and Batinic, 2010). The visibility, media glare and unpredictability surrounding politicians' sacking, enforced resignation, de-selection and electoral loss can magnify such damaging effects. MPs who choose to stand down from the job report significantly decreased symptoms of stress post-election, yet raised levels of psychological strain persist for those who lose their seats, suggesting the psychological importance of taking control over events (Roberts and Weinberg, 2016). Studies of losing office highlight a profound sense of dislocation and loss, with many former politicians interpreting electoral failure as personal rather than as a consequence of broader systemic issues (Roberts, 2017). This resonates with biographies and memoirs: 'In the weeks afterward, the solitary reality of defeat began to sink in. It turns out there is nothing so ex as an ex-politician, especially a defeated one' (Ignatieff, 2013, p.166).

'Many…described emotional devastation and a profound sense of personal failure at the loss of their position at the time of the defeat' (Roberts, 2017, p.2). Some of Roberts' interviewees experienced grief: a minority seemed clinically depressed, with one former politician telling her that, 'of course, my life is over' (p.11). Similarly, Theakston, Gouge and Honeyman (2007) noted that one third of respondents who did not expect to lose their seat at the election, consequently experienced a 'grieving process' (p.6) that for some MPs lasted for years: 'my whole world had come crashing down' (p.6). Alarmingly, 18% of survey respondents mentioned long-term problems such as exhaustion, depression, sleep deprivation, family issues and financial difficulties. Such findings are echoed in surveys of former peers in the House of

Lords following reforms to the upper chamber (Weinberg, 2001) and of national politicians following the 2005, 2010 and 2015 general elections (Roberts and Weinberg, 2016).

Contrary to popular belief, securing post-parliamentary employment can actually be very difficult. 'Politics is a non-commercial career and…the idea that there are hundreds of ex-MPs walking into cushy and lucrative jobs is rubbish' (Theakston et al., 2007, p.13). Gareth Evans, Australian ex-Foreign Minister, spoke of 'relevance deprivation syndrome', and former ministers in the UK have talked about 'the dreaded empty diary' to describe the shocking psychological impact of job loss. This insight encourages us to drill-down still further and examine the micro-political stressors of political life.

III. Micro-political stressors

Lots of professions are stressful and seek to perform under the pressures outlined in this section. However, the core argument of this article is that politics generates its own variations on these which demand scrutiny. The focus of this section is on the micro-political elements of 'everyday' life for a politician.

3.1 The Lifestyle Stressor

Politics is one among many quantitatively and qualitatively hard professions. Over 92% of MPs work over 50 hours per week (Weinberg, 2015) – compared with 34% of UK managers (Worrall, et al., 2016) - and 41% work in excess of 70 hours per week (Weinberg, 2012). It is hard on family life and relationships: over 75% say work stress exacerbated arguments at home (Weinberg, et al., 1999). The need to work away from home in the week and also to travel

frequently augment the chances of both over-working and spending too little time on family-related, social and leisure activities (Weinberg and Cooper, 2003). This is evident amongst new (Weinberg and Cooper, 2003) and experienced (Weinberg, et al., 1999) politicians whose physical symptoms of stress (e.g. sleeping problems, headaches, indigestion etc.) on average tend to be higher than comparable senior level managers (Weinberg, et al., 1999). Almost two-thirds of respondents from the Scottish Assembly and the National Assembly of Wales participating in surveys of working conditions, reported that the combination of long-hours and travel commitments negatively affected their health and job performance (Weinberg, 2012). Internationally, the negative impact of high workloads was recorded by 78% of Members of the Australian Federal Parliament (Weinberg, 2012).

Reforms to legislative timetabling curtailing frequent late night sittings and permitting more constituency time have attempted to make the UK Parliament more family-friendly for politicians. Despite changes introduced by the Jopling Committee in the early 1990s, an analysis of the impact of these by Weinberg et al. (1999) shows that MPs actually reported increased levels of stress and greater difficulties at the home-work interface, with 75% feeling that they did not spend enough time with their partner and 80% stating they did not spend enough time with their children. Longitudinal evaluation of the impact of further reforms in 2003 to the sittings of the UK Parliament also found little evidence of success (Weinberg, 2015). Interestingly, and perhaps predictably, this lifestyle stressor was particularly acute for MPs with young children whose constituencies were farther than 150 miles from London, compared to those who lived around London.

Among newly elected MPs, very long working hours were evident among those with the most symptoms of psychological strain; taking work home as part of the job was the single largest

predictor of poor mental well-being (Weinberg and Cooper, 2003). One year after election, new MPs had adjusted but the frequency of physical symptoms of stress remained at raised levels. This suggests a long-term physical impact of political work that may be linked to a lifestyle associated with the job. Added to this, the ubiquity of instant politics via social media, means that mentally 'switching off' from the job at any time, particularly during long-running issues which fuel public emotions such as Brexit, is very difficult in practice and reflects a wider societal trend. Studies in the US, New Zealand and Norway have shown that politicians feel increasingly compelled to engage with social media, but find that their idealistic ambitions of enhanced democratic dialogue are often mismatched with public approaches to such interactions (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013; Ross et al., 2015; Sweetser and Lariscy, 2008). There is a noticeable lack of comparative evidence on how and why UK MPs use social media or, more importantly, how they cope with this new, direct, and often venomous mode of public feedback.

3.2 The Control Stressor

Perceived control is an acknowledged predictor of positive mental well-being (Rotter, 1966) and politicians actually report less control over their job than occupations with high level responsibilities (Weinberg, et al., 1999). This is perhaps not surprising given the range of sources of demand, e.g. constituency, party, legislative, media and possibly ministerial. For some, being in politics but not in government also brings with it frustrations that have not been the focus of sustained research. While being in ministerial office involves extra responsibilities – adding the job of member of the government to that of constituency MP - it does bring significant additional resources in terms of staff, access to media management support, expertise and networks. However, even for those in government and with access to greater

resources, the unpredictability of critical incidents can make achieving any sense of control difficult.

A study contrasting psychological responses to events in the UK Parliament found that 14% of MPs reported high symptom levels indicative of poor psychological health following reforms to their working hours (about which they were able to vote and thereby exercise some control) compared with 40% reporting high symptom levels in the wake of the expenses crisis (exposure over which they had no control) (Weinberg, 2015). The latter is also far higher than the baseline figures for poor psychological health recorded by Weinberg and Cooper (2003) and the All Party Parliamentary Group on Mental Health (APPG, 2008) prior to each of these sets of events. Of wider concern to the electorate is the impact of negative events on politicians' ability to carry out their role. Out of responding MPs, for example, 46% found reforms to working hours had negatively impacted on their effectiveness and 74% felt the expenses scandal had negatively affected their ability to do the job (Weinberg, 2015).

Whilst a level of unpredictability accompanies the political role, the capacity to exercise control over aspects of the way one works is important for mental health across a range of occupations (e.g. British Psychological Society, 2017) and these findings suggest this is no different for politicians. As an insider's account of life in the Westminster bubble, Hardman's (2018) review of political life is once again a useful reference point. Comparing MPs to military personnel who face immeasurably more risk on a daily basis, Hardman concludes that it is the politicians who appear more brittle precisely because their fortunes rely so heavily on the whims of others they cannot see and very rarely get to meet in order to defend themselves. She argues that even the most gregarious and confident MPs are readily reduced to extreme levels of insecurity by the lack of control in their occupational lives. The specific requirement of politicians to

implement reform, deliver public policies or prevent terrorist attacks highlights how politicians exist in a social milieu fraught with challenges to exercising control.

3.3 The Skills Stressor

All jobs demand a certain set of competencies, derived through formal qualifications, experience, apprenticeship, training and continuing professional development. However, there is no established training route into politics as a career. There are recognised informal pathways – such as experience as a specialist advisor, working for a political party, serving as a local councillor or mayor – but formalised structures are either largely absent or consist of ad hoc party-based initiatives for parliamentary candidates. This skills gap is particularly challenging for new politicians as post-election training generally tends to be limited (Cooper-Thomas and Silvester, 2014). Among the skills required, political ability is likely to top the list, but what exactly is this and how well are politicians trained or ready to deliver it? Ferris (2005, p.127) defines organizational political skills as 'the ability to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives'. Accordingly, politicians' success – whether electoral survival or promotion within party or government – can depend on persuading others, negotiation, networking, championing issues and using organizational procedures (Kwiatkowski, 2012; Silvester, Wyatt and Randall, 2014). This underlines the importance of effective induction procedures, training and appropriate socialisation, which are subject to meso-level considerations such as the culture of the parliamentary institution.

Surprisingly politicians can rate their own abilities more harshly than their colleagues, which suggests uncertainty about required skill levels (Hartley, 2012). This is relevant in politics

where leadership places non-specialists in highly specialised positions, e.g. finance ministers with no financial background and foreign ministers with no diplomatic training. Naturally any question-mark over individual competence constitutes a potential threat to him/her and as such represents a recognisable stressor (Warr, 2013). The finding that critical thinking skills actually predict the percentage of votes and percentage swing of votes towards a candidate in a general election (Silvester and Dykes, 2007) confirms the importance of individual skills. As an aside, it is perhaps not surprising that resilience – the capacity to cope with considerable and competing demands – is also linked with increased levels of political skill (Silvester et al., 2014). In order to fill this 'skills gap' amongst civil servants and politicians, bespoke programmes worldwide have been designed for use by local and national level politicians (Hartley, 2012), such as the UK Institute for Government and Hansard Society, the Australian and New Zealand School of Government and the Vietnam Training Centre for Elected Representatives.

However, there is an external perspective relevant to this. To be a professional politician may be socially interpreted as a 'bad thing' as it conjures up notions of spin, party management and a lack of authenticity; whereas the notion of the amateur politician muddling through remains strangely embedded in the public psyche as a 'good thing' to be cherished and nurtured (Riddell, 2011; Allen, 2018). The challenge for politicians is therefore to be professional in terms of their capacity to shoulder the burden of office while appearing 'amateurish' to the public – to be skilled but not seen to be skillful.

CONCLUSIONS

The job of national politician is crucial for the effective functioning of democracy. We hope that growth in empirical findings will inform fuller understanding of this influential job, and that this can in part be promoted by the stressors framework provided within this article. In particular, we raise questions concerning the impact of the job on the well-being and mental health of politicians in democratic politics in an era characterised by the rise of anti-political sentiment. We do not intend to suggest this nine-part framework is fixed or necessarily complete, and we welcome future critique and refinement.

However, three clear consequences follow in identifying the patterns of stressors on politicians. First, given the nature of this area of inquiry, the research has to be undertaken in a sophisticated and sensitive manner. As such, a mixed methods approach involving surveys, interviews and possible oral histories serve to produce analyses that offer both breadth and depth, which might also involve understanding the impact on those connected to politicians. The psychological strain of political life is also felt by family, friends and personal staff in ways that are rarely publicly acknowledged. Moreover, if politicians cannot express the frustrations or pressures of office through professional channels, then it is appropriate that support networks are encouraged, as is the case with occupational health and counselling provision in the UK Parliament.

Second, there is a significant amount written about national leaders – in terms of both scholarship and autobiography – but relatively little about the vast majority of national politicians who never reach the summit and indeed may prefer to operate in the foothills of politics. The role of these parliamentarians is not necessarily any less pressurised. In order to gain a fuller understanding of the stressors facing all politicians, the role of demography is also important, whether linked to the individual (e.g. gender, ethnicity, age) or to the circumstances

surrounding their election (e.g. small majorities compared to 'safe' seats; government versus opposition).

In identifying the range of stressors on politicians in this article, we suggest that there is an urgent need for the recognition of the need for support structures and adaptations to the job, as well as a raising awareness of coping strategies. In addition, there are many predictable points at which national politicians may experience specific pressures, e.g. giving a maiden speech, participating in key debates and parliamentary set-pieces such as Prime Minister's Questions, getting elected to a parliamentary committee or gaining promotion from the backbenches.

Third, and beyond the impact on politicians, this article also highlights the need for a greater understanding between the electors and elected that includes a more explicit knowledge of the expectations that they carry. Citizenship education in schools has a particular and considerable potential for enhancing this mutual relationship (Weinberg & Flinders, 2018). Research endeavours which build on the foundations reviewed here have the potential to highlight ways in which democracy can be better served. By understanding and addressing these complex sources of stress, the potential exists to improve the emotional and cognitive performance of our elected representatives. A third of the world's population lives in parliamentary democracies; whether or not improving the mental well-being and health of parliamentarians is perceived as important, we believe that addressing the working conditions which detract from their effectiveness is a valuable contribution to democracy itself.

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Table 1. Key stressors on politicians and examples of relevant research findings

	Stressor	Meaning	Research examples
1. Macro-level (cultural)	1.1 *Expectations*	High expectations but limited resources and capacity to deliver	None
	1.2 *Distrust*	Intense scrutiny of politicians with focus on sensationalism and negativity, as well as forms of public accountability, blame and threat	None
	1.3 *Political labour*	Political labour reflects dissonance between personal and politically required views, carrying a potential personal and professional toll	None
2. Meso-level (institutional)	2.1 *Organisational Culture*	Majoritarian politics is competitive; added challenges include lack of clarity around organisational procedures and induction	Kwiatkowski, 2012; Cooper-Thomas and Silvester, 2014
	2.2 *Leadership*	The impact of leadership style and of responsibility for appropriately handling crises and daily demands	Owen and Davidson, 2009; Caprara et. al., 2010; Dietrich et al, 2012; Lilienfeld et. al., 2012
	2.3 *Temporal*	Electoral cycles provide limited time to enact change; the impact of job loss and an uncertain future after politics	Theakston, Gouge and Honeyman, 2007; Weinberg, 2007; Theakston, 2012; Roberts, 2017.
3. Micro-level (individual)	3.1 *Lifestyle*	All- encompassing, featuring long working hours. The psychological strain of political life is often felt in family life and relationships.	Weinberg et. al., 1999, Weinberg and Cooper, 2003; Weinberg, 2015
	3.2 *Control*	Limited influence over many job-related factors, lack of control over events and also conflicting professional loyalties	Weinberg, 2015
	3.3 *Skills*	Availability of appropriate training and support to strengthen competence, although reluctance to prescribe a 'right way' to be a politician	Silvester & Dykes, 2007; Hartley, 2012; Steinack, 2012; Silvester, Wyatt and Randall, 2014