
Balancing Family and Work: Challenges Facing Canadian MPs

Royce Koop, James Farney and Alison Loat

Many Canadians struggle to balance their families and careers. A 2011 Harris/Decima poll, reports that 47% of Canadians struggle to achieve a work-life balance, and family is often an important aspect of that balance. Certain professions, including that of MP, make achieving such a balance more difficult than others. This article looks at the overall nature of the strain on MPs the two strategies that MPs employ to adapt the challenges of the job, and potential reforms that might work to assuage some of the strain placed on MPs and their families. The data for this paper comes from a series of semi-structured interviews conducted by Samara, an independent charitable organization that improves political and democratic participation in Canada, as part of its MP Exit Interview Project. This paper used transcripts from the interviews of 65 former MPs who left public life during or after the 38th and 39th Parliaments. These men and women served, on average, 10.5 years, and together represented all political parties and regions of the country. The group included 21 cabinet ministers and one prime minister.

In his penetrating exploration of “the dark side” of political life in Canada, Steve Paikin saves the family for his book’s penultimate chapter. Paikin’s narrative stands as a stark warning to those entering politics and hoping to maintain a healthy family life. He tells the story of Christine Stewart, a Liberal MP elected in 1993, who attended an orientation session for rookies. “Look around this room,” warned the session’s guide. “Because by the end of your political careers, 70 percent of you will either be divorced or have done serious damage to your marriages.” Paikin reports that Stewart felt she would be the exception to the rule; instead, her seventeen-year marriage came to an end during her time as MP.

How important is the strain on families to MPs? They illustrated the importance of this strain in three ways. First, when asked to discuss the negative aspects of their political careers, many MPs immediately and without cues pointed to the pressure it applied to their

family lives. One MP from Saskatchewan, immediately pointed to such strain and the burden placed on his spouse:

It is tough on family. I knew that going in because I was a politician before that and I was away a lot. But it was a little worse than I thought... My wife was just amazing. She handled a lot of that. Plus working in Ottawa two weeks out of every month. But for me, she was supportive and wanted me to stay, but I felt bad about the family. So that was the toughest part.

Second, MPs betrayed the importance of family difficulties by celebrating the success of their own family lives. MPs are aware of the strain of political life on them, and often expressed gratitude (if not surprise) that their own family lives have not been affected too strongly. One MP made this point clearly in discussing his greatest accomplishment during his political career:

I am still living with the girl I first married 39 years ago. I have got two wonderful kids who are successful. What more can you ask? At the end of the day I did not lose a wife.

The fact that this MP highlighted the maintenance of his marriage as his greatest accomplishment illustrates his perception of the severity of the position’s strain on MPs’ families.

Finally, MPs revealed the importance of family strain

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when they were asked about whether they would recommend a political career for others, and what advice they would provide to aspiring politicians. Most MPs who were asked this question endorsed the idea of a political career, but cautioned that the toll on family life was both severe and unanticipated.

Make sure that you balance your family life, your personal life, and your political life. I have seen too many marriages go through too many problems and it is hard.

Those former MPs interviewed by Samara indicated four factors that either increase or decrease the strain: whether or not they have children and how old their children are; the orientation of the spouse to a political career; distance of MPs' constituencies from Ottawa; and advancements in communications technology and ease of travel.

MPs with young children, often felt that the job limited the time that they could spend with their children. "It is not the big events you miss at home, being away," notes one MP.

I look at some of these people who just got elected and have young families, and you do not realize what you are missing. We should give them even more support because that is what they are giving up to represent us.

In contrast, MPs who were at a later life stage were hit less hard by the family costs of their political careers. This was particularly true of MPs with grown children, as the everyday worries of raising children had by this point subsided.

I would not have thought about running for office unless my kids were all grown up. I do not know how people with young children do it. When I was down there, I was worried about my kids so much.

The second factor that affects the family stress created by MPs' careers relates to the orientation of their spouses to the job. Some political spouses are very supportive of MPs' careers and the tensions they introduce; others are much less so, and so MPs face significant stresses from time away from the family.

The crucial question appears to be whether MPs' spouses have meaningful careers that are important to them. Many MPs point out that having a career of their own means that political spouses are less likely to be affected by MPs' absences and heavy work schedules since they themselves are also busy. But political spouses with heavy work schedules of their own can complicate life still further for MPs and must face the unspoken expectation that politicians' spouses must serve as second representatives in the ridings. Political spouses that are

established in their own careers are less able to move to or visit MPs while conducting parliamentary work in Ottawa

Other MPs have partners who are not as strongly rooted in their own careers. Such partners create both opportunities and challenges for the family lives of MPs. On one hand, partners without demanding careers of their own have more time to attend to the details of home and family life, and this is particularly true of MPs with young children. In addition, such partners may take on the traditional role of MPs' partners, travelling extensively with the MPs and even participating in some aspects of the job such as representational duties in the constituencies. MPs with partners who took on such roles were invariably grateful and drew attention to this role.

And without my wife, I would not have gotten through it anyway. She made the Ottawa scene bearable.

She spent so much time with me. We were hardly ever apart, even the riding stuff. It was that kind of endeavour for us. If she were not like that, I would not have lasted in Ottawa. I would have been out within two terms. Ottawa can be a very lonely scene.

My wife was my eyes and ears in the riding when I was in Ottawa for 150-300 days of the year, so if I got an invitation to a function and I was not able to come home from Ottawa, she would go in my stead; she would lay a wreath when I could not go or speak on my behalf.

In addition, partners who are not strongly rooted in their own careers are more portable, and therefore able to move or spend time in Ottawa with MPs. But a meaningful career gives partners an identity of their own and a way to spend their time while their partners are away in Ottawa. Some MPs were grateful for their partner's careers, and speculated that partners without such occupations would be lonely while MPs were away in Ottawa.

The third factor that aggravates the stress placed on MPs' family lives is related to the distance of MPs' ridings from Ottawa. Simply put, proximity to Ottawa results in less travel time and thus less time spend away from family. In contrast, lengthy travel times can impose severe burdens on MPs as they struggle to balance both the riding and Ottawa aspects of their jobs with their family lives.

Many MPs mention distance from Ottawa as a factor in shaping the degree of difficulty they face in balancing work and family. MPs from proximate ridings recognize how lucky they are and contrast their experiences to MPs from the more far-flung regions of the country.

Participating Former MPs

Hon. Peter Adams
Hon. Reginald Alcock
Omar Alghabra
Hon. David Anderson
Hon. Jean Augustine
Hon. Eleni Bakopanos
Hon. Susan Barnes
Colleen Beaumier
Catherine Bell
Stéphane Bergeron
Hon. Reverend William Blaikie
Alain Boire
Ken Boshcoff
Hon. Don Boudria
Hon. Claudette Bradshaw
Hon. Edward Broadbent
Bonnie Brown
Hon. Sarmite Bulte
Marlene Catterall
Roger Clavet
Hon. Joseph Comuzzi
Guy Côté

Hon. Roy Cullen
Odina Desrochers
Hon. Paul DeVillers
Hon. Claude Drouin
Hon. John Efford
Ken Epp
Brian Fitzpatrick
Paul Forseth
Sébastien Gagnon
Hon. Roger Gallaway
Hon. John Godfrey
James Gouk
Hon. Bill Graham
Raymond Gravel
Art Hanger
Jeremy Harrison
Luc Harvey
Hon. Loyola Hearn
Hon. Charles Hubbard
Dale Johnston
Hon. Walt Lastewka
Marcel Lussier

Hon. Paul Macklin
The Rt. Hon. Paul Martin
Bill Matthews
Alexa McDonough
Hon. Anne McLellan
Gary Merasty
Hon. Andrew Mitchell
Pat O'Brien
Hon. Denis Paradis
Hon. Pierre Pettigrew
Russ Powers
Penny Priddy
Werner Schmidt
Hon. Andy Scott
Hon. Carol Skelton
Hon. Monte Solberg
Hon. Andrew Telegdi
Myron Thompson
Hon. Paddy Torsney
Randy White
Blair Wilson

I always considered myself fortunate though, in the sense that. I can be home from Ottawa in 45 minutes. And then my house was close to the airport, so I could be on a 6:00 flight out of Ottawa and I would actually be in my home at quarter to eight. Some of these people have to travel. I do not know how they do it. If you have a young family and your wife is not working and you are living in B.C., frankly I do not know how they cope.

MPs from distant constituencies struggle to deal with the necessary travel time. While many are reluctant to complain given their commitment to public service, the strain is evident. This is especially true for MPs from distant regions who are also representatives of rural ridings, as travel therefore entails a long plane trip from Ottawa and, subsequently, either a connecting flight or driving to reach the constituency. For MPs from far-away rural ridings or those from the northern territories, the commute is crushing.

Fourth, technology, particularly with respect to communication and travel, has altered how MPs can do their jobs and, as a result, the amount of time that is available to spend with family. Some MPs note that communication technology allows them to more easily keep in contact with their riding staff and to deal with casework requests remotely while in Ottawa.

If you have good staff in the riding, with the technology, constituency business can be conducted remotely with BlackBerries, computers, emails, etc.

While technology may assist MPs in managing the work-life balance, it may also aggravate the problem. We were surprised to note that several MPs pointed to improvements in both communication and travel technology as a burden rather than an asset, which in turn robbed them of further time from their families.

Modern communication and transportation has made it, in some respects, more difficult.

I used to be able to send correspondence and people in the constituency expected me not to be around. I think we were, in some respects, better off in 1968 and 1972. People did not expect as much travel from the MP. They were still thinking about an earlier era of train travel. They did not expect the same level of communication information on their doorstep. And they probably were just as well served.

Technology had increased expectations and thereby increased the amount of time required to do the job.

While MPs did not specifically identify them, we suspect that three additional factors affect the strain of political careers on MPs' family lives.

We believe that the presence of minority governments in Ottawa between 2004 and 2011 had an adverse effect on the family lives of MPs for two reasons. The instability of minority parliaments meant that parties must keep a close eye on the number of MPs in Parliament at any one time to avoid lost votes, so MPs' presence was more tightly monitored and their presence was more often required in Ottawa. In addition, the relatively

short tenure of these minority parliaments may have created even greater disincentives for MPs' families to uproot and move to Ottawa, particularly if MPs were not in safe constituencies.

The atmosphere of collegiality that characterized life in the House of Commons suffered under the intense partisanship and brinksmanship that characterized this period in Canadian history. Many long-term MPs in Samara's exit interviews spoke fondly of the relationships they built with other MPs early in their careers, and many of these careers crossed party lines. We suspect that the intense partisanship of this period's "constant campaigning" minority parliament strained already-tenuous relationships across party lines and deprived MPs of an important resources for mentorship and support while away from their families.

In addition, even those who feel pressure to spend time in their ridings may be doing so at the expense of family time. We suspect, that electoral vulnerability plays a role in shaping the stress brought to bear by a political career on MPs' family lives. MPs that feel vulnerable in their ridings are more likely to feel pressure to spend time in their constituencies conducting casework and attending local events in order to construct a personal vote upon which they can rely for support in re-election campaigns. In so doing, MPs who feel vulnerable increase their workload, further decreasing the amount of time that they are able to spend with their families. In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that MPs from rural ridings face greater pressure than their counterparts from urban ridings to attend a range of weekend community and personal events.

Leaving or Relocating Families

In trying to find an optimal work-life balance while performing their dual roles as both parliamentarians and constituency representatives, MPs may pursue one of two strategies. They may either maintain a separate residence in Ottawa while their families remain in the ridings or move their families to Ottawa with them. Samara's exit interviews included interviews with MPs who had pursued both options, and the interviews reveal the positive and negative aspects of both choices.

There are two primary advantages to maintaining a separate residence in Ottawa while families remain in the riding. Most importantly, doing so avoids uprooting MPs' families and moving them to a new city. This is a particularly attractive option if MPs' partners are well established in their careers and communities or if MPs have young children. The question of children

is crucial, as MPs are keen to avoid moving their children away from communities and friends, and enrolling them in new schools. As one MP simply and memorably explained why his family stayed behind in his constituency: "Our home was here."

The disadvantages of this option are readily apparent. This decision entails MPs leaving their families behind in their ridings most work weeks. The result is often loneliness during the work week in Ottawa.

I was very lonely, being away from my friends. They are at home with a life and I was away. So all the things I used to do with them, I did not do because I was never in the riding during the week. On the weekends I was exhausted or always had something to do. I basically lost eight years with them. I know my husband was very lonesome when he was in the riding. And I was lonesome down there in Ottawa. If you are a young family, if you are a young man, I think your wife should be with you in Ottawa. I really think that if a young woman has children, they have got to be there with her too.

In addition, many MPs detailed excruciating travel schedules, including late night flights on Fridays to spend more time with their families and once again on Sundays to return to work in Parliament. MPs are often robbed of even this small amount of family time on weekends by the need to attend to constituency work and attend local community events and functions in the hope of building up a reputation for local symbolic responsiveness. The result is that when they return to Ottawa, MPs may have spent surprisingly little time with their families.

A second option for MPs is to move their families to Ottawa. Some MPs enthusiastically embrace this idea. This approach allows them to spend their evenings with their families. However, there are other, substantial disadvantages of this approach that help to explain why many MPs do not embrace it. MPs are never certain about their re-election prospects. The idea of moving one's family to Ottawa with all of the difficulties associated with doing so and then losing their re-election campaigns is difficult to embrace. The job, notes one MP, "doesn't have tenure."

MPs also sometimes find that the time they intend to spend with their families in Ottawa is cut short by long workdays. While the original intention was for MPs to eat dinner with their families every weekday, many MPs find themselves occupied in Parliament into the evening.

I had an apartment in Ottawa and our home was in the riding. My wife would come down occasionally. Friends asked, "Do you go down there very often?" And she said, "No, why

would I? He goes to work at quarter to seven in the morning; he gets home at 8 o'clock at night. What is the point?"

In addition to a heavy workload, MPs are then expected to return to their constituencies on Fridays and over the weekends to tend to local relationships and casework. Some MPs who move to Ottawa find that they must therefore scrupulously limit the time spent in their constituencies.

But other MPs maintain strong connections to their constituencies and so must return when the House of Commons is not sitting to maintain relationships in the riding. Further, since Parliament sits only about five months a year, MPs may decide to leave their families in the constituencies, which is optimal for periods when the House is not sitting but which causes family stress when Parliament is sitting.

The result is that MPs confront two imperfect choices. Both entail significant costs in terms of the time that can be spent with their families. We do not believe that this is a price that should necessarily be paid by those wishing to participate in public service, and so the next section focuses on easing the problem of family stress for MPs.

Proposals for Reform

Canada's geography, the inherently competitive nature of politics, the justifiable demands for representation that their constituents place on MPs, and the commendable desire of MPs to learn and investigate in fulfilment of their oversight roles all make it unlikely that being an MP will become a highly family friendly job anytime soon. Nevertheless, a number of changes – some suggested by MPs in the Samara interviews, others carried out in other jurisdictions – suggest themselves as possible improvements. In the interviews, these changes were identified as particularly important for encouraging women to enter politics but, as gender roles around care-giving change and elder-care becomes a more and more significant social need, we would suggest that the beneficiaries of such reforms go beyond the image of young women with family that many of our interviewees identify.

Four possible reforms suggest themselves. First, a move to shorter, more intense parliamentary sessions would lessen the travel demands.

One of the practical suggestions I would have had is to shorten the Parliamentary week. Now this was hot politically and was discussed. The House sits Monday to Friday, but make it Monday to Thursday and make it the same hours of work. I would have rather worked

more hours when I was there, but been there one day less. That is one day more where I have a chance to go home, be in my riding, and be with my family.

In a similar vein, some legislatures – notably the Welsh house after devolution – have moved their regular sittings and committee meetings to between 9 am and 5 pm rather than the afternoon and evening sittings traditional at Westminster and Ottawa. While not as much of a help as a shorter week for those MPs from further away, it would still make much Parliamentary business more compatible with family life, spouses' careers, and children's care and school.

For those MPs whose spouses have a career, childcare emerged as a difficult issue, especially if they chose to move to Ottawa but generally because of the unpredictable hours of the job.

Let us say I decided to bring my kids to Ottawa. I would have had to be on a waiting list, for the daycare that was on the Hill. You can not take maternity leave when you are a Member of Parliament. In fact the MP who took over in Parliament for me, had a baby. She did not take any maternity leave. How could you?

My mother and father helped out a lot. In fact we moved into their home when I got elected and we stayed there for quite awhile, which was good for my daughters. They have a very good relationship with their grandparents and with their father, who was there when I was not there.

Moving into the parental home hardly seems a possibility for most MPs. Improving access to quality and flexible childcare in Ottawa either through increasing the number of childcare spaces available on Parliament Hill or providing subsidies for MPs to hire nannies or other individual caregivers would be an improvement. Maternity leave, while a legal possibility, seems a difficult one to square with the demands of the role.

Following the example of Yahoo CEO Marissa Meyer, it might be possible to imagine ways to build more flexibility into the job, but this would require a real culture of sensitivity on both the part of constituents and other parliamentarians to particular individual circumstances. Given Canada's changing demographics, eldercare should also be a consideration.

Many MPs identified how important their spouses and partners were in making the decision to run for office. All who spoke to the importance of family life identified this spousal support as crucial and that their partners were vital to both keeping the home fires burning and to constituent service. Some praised their

party's work at including, educating, and supporting their spouses in their new role. Others suggested that a non-partisan effort on the part of the legislature, one that introduced their spouses better to the demands of being the partner of an MP, rather than a candidate, might be helpful.

Finally, many MPs identified that the need to be open with their constituents meant that, when they were in their ridings, their schedules were often as busy as when they were in Ottawa. Some went so far as to have 'open house' at their family home every weekend so that constituents with a concern could have consistent access to them without the need for the MP to go into the office on a Saturday. Placed on top of an already demanding schedule of community events, this openness to constituents imposed real strain. Obviously, the MP must continue to be the representative of last resort for their constituents, but it is not hard to see how more staff support and more smoothly functioning ombudsperson structure in other parts of government (perhaps especially immigration) would let MPs spend more time focused on substantive representation, rather than acting as a guide through a confusing and often remote bureaucracy.

Conclusion

MPs are often derided for the perks and benefits of their jobs, and assailed by columnists and editorial cartoonists for their "gold-plated pensions." Whatever merit there is to those criticisms, those who regularly lose their outrage over the benefits of MPs' jobs rarely if ever bother to note the disadvantages of the career,

and the fact that the demands of the job and its travel make achieving a work-family balance very difficult; indeed, we suspect that few Canadians would tolerate these demands in their own jobs. In addition, we note that governments, including the present Conservative government, place great emphasis on providing support for families. It is ironic then that the elected members that make up this government are themselves subject to such costly strain on their own family lives.

At first blush, the problem examined here may seem unavoidable. MPs play a dual role. They are at once constituency representatives and members of the House of Commons—one foot in their ridings and the other in Parliament. MPs must spend time in their constituency offices listening to constituents and conducting casework on their behalf, not to mention attending the community events and making local public appearances that are essential to the cultivation of an MPs' reputation as responsive.

MPs must spend time in Ottawa serving in the House, attending caucus and perhaps cabinet meetings, sitting on parliamentary committees, and engaging in all the tasks of a parliamentarian. Time in Parliament is required, and most MPs feel intense pressure to spend time in their constituencies as well. The two demanding aspects of their job, often at significant geographical remove from each other, place very significant strains on MPs' personal lives. While all of the participants in these interviews served as MPs, it is not difficult to imagine that the conditions we have described here dissuaded many capable people from serving in Parliament. That is a shame.