



Living on high alert: why stress in political work is a risk to us all

The chamber empties – but the mind doesn't. Tension lingers. Thoughts spin. Heart pounds. Nights vanish. From MPs and ministers to advisers and aides, political work can keep the body on high alert. What follows doesn't stop at burnout – it impacts decision-making, trust and democracy itself.

POLITICAL WORK UNDER RELENTLESS PRESSURE

A career in politics can push MPs and employees to the limit. High stakes. Low control. Constant exposure. Threats come from outside – and from within: public harassment, physical danger, toxic workplaces. This pressure keeps the nervous system in survival mode, with consequences that reach far beyond the individual.

By midweek, MPs are often depleted: poor sleep, non-stop phone-checking, yesterday's stress spilling into today. How long can anyone operate in this state before it begins to shape thinking, relationships and decision-making?

WHAT THE DATA TELLS US ABOUT STRESS IN POLITICS

Few studies capture the unique stress of politics – but those that do paint a stark picture. In a recent “The Rest is Politics” podcast episode, Professor Mark Williams cited a startling study where over 70% of MPs faced very high levels of stress, anxiety or even depression. Further research conducted in a sample of the UK Parliament found 34% of MPs met the clinical threshold for ‘probable common



mental disorders'. This is more than double the rate of a high-income comparison group, drawn from the Health Survey for England.

MPs' staff, meanwhile, face levels of mental ill health similar to frontline emergency workers, with two thirds describing their work as emotionally-draining, driven by high workload and exposure to distressing events, combined with poor management and training. Globally, politicians face similar toxic cultures: in Australia and New Zealand, 96–98% experience harassment.

We've seen this first-hand. Working with MPs and parliamentary staff across four European parliaments, we found that roughly six in ten show elevated stress – double what we typically see in even the fastest-paced global corporates.

Stress at this scale isn't an individual issue – it's structural. It builds over inboxes that never empty, weekends spent preparing for the next headline, and the knowledge that one small mistake could be replayed endlessly.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN POLITICIANS OPERATE IN CONSTANT SURVIVAL MODE?

Political stress is cumulative. It's a slow burn of urgency, fatigue and unfinished business. Over time, this can have huge consequences. Chronic stress can increase heart attack risk, high blood pressure, weight gain, and immune decline – cutting lifespan by up to four years.

There are, however, four more extremely important consequences which are often overlooked:

- **Declining emotional and brain function:** Stress triggers our fight-or-flight response. Thinking narrows. Emotions run unchecked. As a result, people withdraw, become distracted and struggle to connect with others. Decisions become rash, short-sighted and reactive – far from the thoughtful leadership politics demands.
- **Increase in perceptual errors:** Military research shows heavy workloads and time pressure narrow attention, causing tunnel vision and loss of team perspective. While other sectors use resilience training to counter this, politics often overlooks it – leaving many politicians unaware of how stress impairs perception and decision-making. In practice, this could mean doubling down on an unpopular policy or missing warning signs of public concern. When leaders misread the room, who ultimately pays the price?
- **Spreading negative emotions and feeling:** Research, including by James Gross at Stanford, shows emotions are contagious: stressed people transmit tension through facial expressions, tone of voice, and other interactions. People have visceral reactions, often unconsciously, when they meet highly stressed people. They react. They withdraw. They dislike. In politics, this can reduce trust and perceived competence of politicians – causing public polarisation and undermining confidence in leaders.



- **Selection bias:** High-stress environments attract power-driven personalities. They repel those motivated by service and collaboration. Organisational psychology shows these cultures not only cause burnout but normalise stress and aggression, degrade quality of leadership, and impact who stays and who rises internally. On the political stage, this has dramatic implications for global leadership and world order.

RESILIENCE: A TRAINABLE SKILL WITH GREAT POTENTIAL

Resilience does not mean endurance. It's the ability to regulate stress, manage emotions, and adapt under pressure. It shapes whether you function with a clear head and emotional resonance – or stay stuck in survival mode.

Many skills contribute to resilience levels – and these are all trainable. Exercise strengthens the heart. It also shields us from emotional shocks. Sleep sharpens attention and emotional balance. Engaging in compassion protects against empathetic burnout. It fine-tunes our perception to others' emotions too.

Given the inherently stressful nature of politics, resilience is not a 'nice to have' soft skill. It's a necessity for self-preservation and to help pull our democracies from the emotional downward spiral they seem to be on.

INDIVIDUAL SKILLS CAN SHIFT A CULTURE

Industries such as aviation, nuclear power and the military often train resilience skills to reduce negative emotions, reward calm and clarity under pressure, and tackle ego-driven behaviours. For example, elite military units increasingly promote leaders based on emotional regulation and team stability, rather than bravado.

At a societal level, countries that invest in leadership resilience have shown that lowering stress improves judgement quality and feelings of trust. Cultures aren't doomed by stress – but escaping its traps needs resilience and human-centred leadership.

Ultimately, politics relies on sharp minds and steady hearts. We must ask – how long can politicians endure relentless pressure without the requisite skills before our societies pay the price?



***Chris Tamdjidi** is Co-Founder and Managing Director of Awaris. Awaris has worked in the Canadian Parliament, the German Parliament, the EU Parliament, the UK Parliament and currently also is co-lead on the Resilience Framework Contract for the European Union and all associated institutions.*