

## Kyoto a killer, MP says

Watson defends comments linking 'clean air' legislation to possible suicides

**Mike De Souza, with files from Chris Thompson, WindsorStar**

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OTTAWA - Opposition MPs and environmentalists are baffled and outraged by warnings from Essex Conservative MP Jeff Watson that aggressive action to fight climate change and air pollution could lead to an increase in domestic violence and suicides.

The remarks were made Thursday by Watson at a parliamentary committee studying the minority government's proposed "clean air" legislation linked to the Kyoto Protocol.

"With short-term transition toward medium- and long-term targets, there's potential for a lot of dislocation, which is a term for some very painful costs along the way: job loss, anxiety, depression, bankruptcy, domestic violence, costs to employment insurance or retraining, loss of charitable dollars in communities for people who used to have high-paying jobs but don't anymore and the social services that are funded by those, and in rare instances, suicide," said Watson.

When asked to clarify his comments, Watson, who previously ran as a federal candidate for the Reform and Canadian Alliance parties before being elected as a Conservative in 2004, said he was enthusiastic about environmental action, but equally concerned about a high unemployment rate in his riding, and the impact of tough regulations on industries such as the auto sector.

"Let's be clear, I said in very rare instances, it could lead to suicide," he said. "But there are costs, when you lose your job, or when you lose a \$30-an-hour job to work for \$8 or \$10 an hour, there are changes. You can experience depression. There could be any of a number of other social ills that cost governments, too."

Watson's comments drew an immediate reaction from expert witnesses and environmentalists appearing at the parliamentary committee, who accused him



CREDIT: Jason Kryk / The Windsor Star  
Amherstburg, Ontario - Jan 23, 2006- Jeff Watson, winner of the riding of Essex talks shakes hands with a supporter at his victory party at Pointe West Golf and Country Club.

of fear-mongering.

"No one's talking about closing down the automotive industry in Canada. No one is talking about creating unemployment," said Dr. Norman King, an epidemiologist at the urban environment and health department at Montreal's public health agency. "On the contrary. I think during the international conference in Montreal in December of 2005 there were many speakers who showed that working on the environment creates jobs, creates economic benefits, while at the same time creating better air quality and better health."

NDP environment critic Nathan Cullen said Watson should retract his comments, because they are damaging the government's credibility on reducing air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions linked to climate change.

"It's intellectually dishonest to connect what we do about our environmental obligations to people hurting themselves, or their children or wives," Cullen said in an interview.

"The more I think about it, the more ridiculous and hurtful it is to the issues that he's talking about."

Reached on Friday, Watson said he stands by his comments.

"Every day when I go to that committee, I face people who don't have an understanding of the automotive industry and what job loss can do to families," said Watson, who noted he is the only representative of Ontario and the auto industry on the committee.

Watson said suicide may be a last resort for some desperate people.

"The longer you go without a job, the deeper the problems run," Watson said.

"In the rarest of circumstances you'll find people who find themselves in a desperate situation and who feel they have no other options."

Watson said he has experienced similar situations with farmers who have been forced into desperate financial straits.

"I have lost count of the number of farmers who came into my office last summer, men in their 50s and 60s, breaking down and crying," Watson said.

Carol Mueller, the executive director of suicide awareness group Alive! Canada, said suicide is something that is the tragic result of numerous factors.

"What the research tells us is suicide is not caused by a layoff, business failure or depression," Mueller said.

"It can be a number of factors. Not everyone who has a business failure or a layoff is suicidal."

Mueller said a lack of personal and community support is more of a factor.

"You can't predict suicide," she said.

Even after the stock market crash in 1929 the suicide rate did not appreciably increase, Mueller said.

She said Watson's comments may be misguided but she will take any opportunity to raise awareness about suicide.

University of Windsor associate professor of political science Heather MacIvor questioned Watson's logic.

"If we actually take effective measures to combat climate change people will die," MacIvor said.

"It's a pretty blatant usage of demagoguery. It's really not proper political behaviour. Because (the statement) is so over the top it undermines the credibility of any rational arguments he might have in regard to climate change."

Prime Minister Stephen Harper said this week his government would respect an opposition private member's bill that, if adopted, would force it to come up with a plan to meet Canada's international obligations under the Kyoto protocol to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by more than 30 per cent below current levels.

But he has maintained the target is unrealistic and could devastate the Canadian economy.

In a Kyoto report card released on Friday, the Sierra Club of Canada noted some countries are on track to meet their Kyoto targets without any negative impact on their economies, including Sweden which has reduced its dependence on oil to 32 per cent from 77 per cent of energy needs, while it is phasing out nuclear power.

The report described 2006 as a "lost year" for Canada, in terms of fighting global warming, because of the Conservative government's decision to retreat from its international obligations and freeze spending of federal climate change initiatives before it relaunched them as new programs in 2007.

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