

A tribute to the professional life of **Bill Wilkerson, LL.D. (Hon).** 1942-2025.  
On January 26, Bill passed away at age 82. He was a Canadian pioneer in courage, communication and collaboration and a champion for workplace mental health.



Bill served us all in important and highly visible roles during his career, including:

- **Co-Founder and President, Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health** (1997-2011). Bill led the Roundtable as CEO for 15 years. He had a drive to raise awareness about addiction, mental health (particularly [depression](#)) and suicide prevention and connect these issues to their business impact on the workforce and on society in general.
- **Founder and Chairman, United States/Canada Forums on Mental Health and Productivity** (2007-2013). A series of five forums featured ambassadors, government leaders, science experts and the CEOs of major companies in banking, insurance, health care and other fields.
- **Founder and Chairman, European Business Forum for Mental Health and Productivity** (2013-2017). For its campaign to '[Target the Impact of Depression](#)', Bill travelled to 20 European capitals in 24 months to recruit major employers with more than 1.5 million employees. The Forum produced a European Business Charter and six pilot projects to test management practices aimed at reducing risk and disablement from chronic job stress and depression.
- **Co-Founder and Executive Chairman, Mental Health International** (2013-2025). He sought out experts to learn more about the interplay of mental health and brain health.
- See the MHI website for many of his writings, projects and reports throughout his career: <http://www.mentalhealthinternational.ca>

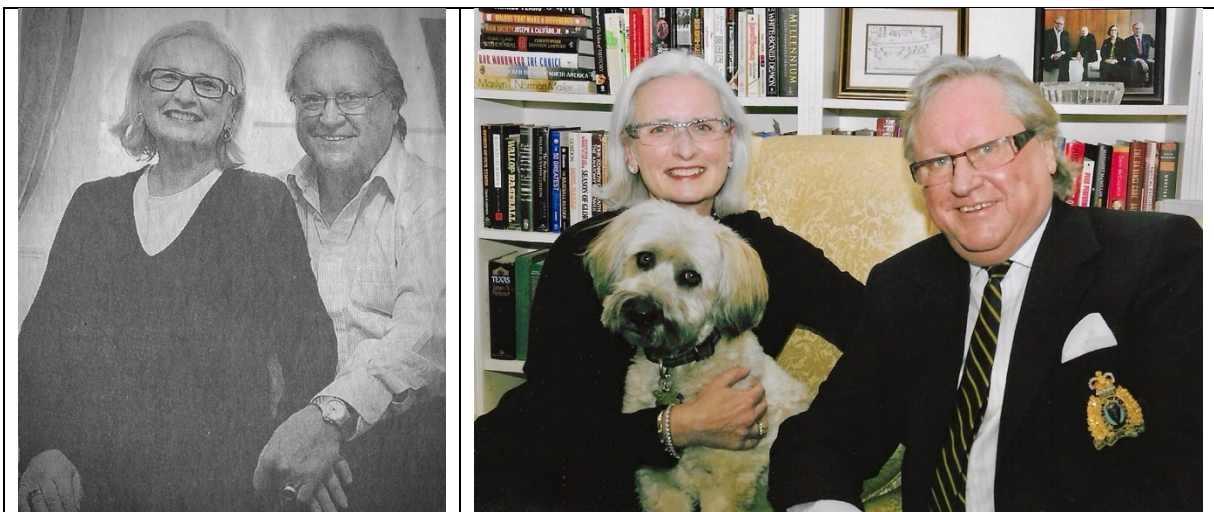
## Public Champion of Mental Health

Bill was a tireless presenter and persuader, traveling throughout Canada, the US and Europe. He was known for blending his knowledge of business with the scientific and economic issues facing employers and working populations due to depression and other behavioral health disorders. In 2009, after achieving success as an executive himself he bravely talked [publicly](#) about his own battle with depression. He encouraged other business leaders to become role models for de-stigmatizing addiction and mental health issues at their workplaces. According to the Globe and Mail national newspaper in 2009, "Mr. Wilkerson is widely credited with moving the conscience of corporate Canada by sparking groundbreaking discussions on mental health among senior executives, scientists and government policy-makers in North America and Europe."

## Relationships

Bill included other people in his journey. He was able to create genuine and lasting friendships with many people who contributed to the different organizations and international projects he created. He also had direct support from several key people in his life.

Bill's wife, [Olga Cwiek](#), was a fellow advocate for mental health rights and a loving partner who supported his changing business endeavors. In 2009, she commented in the Globe and Mail, that her husband "was the first to bring in businesses, to translate medical language into laymen's terms, and to hold Canada-U.S. forums. Nobody spoke of these things before. He was the first to bring it all out into the open. He's a pioneer." Indeed, her husband led a sustained international campaign to transform the way corporate leaders saw mental illness in the workplace. More recently, she said to me: "Bill was a remarkable person, brilliant on so many levels and had an empathy for people that knew no bounds."



Olga Cwiek & Bill Wilkerson – Married 37 Years

[Donna Montgomery](#) worked as Bill's corporate secretary for three decades. This started in the 1980s at the City of Toronto Mayor's office, in the early 1990s at CorpWorld Communications Group, in 1996 at Liberty Health and from 1998 to 2011 with the Global Roundtable.

Another reason for Bill's sustained success was the support he received from [Helen Lackey](#). She worked with him at Mental Health International and currently serves as the Administrator, Corporate Secretary and Director at MHI. Herself an advocate and volunteer for mental health, in 2021 she received a distinguished Civic Award by the Town of Cobourg, Ontario.

[Chris Keen](#) helped Bill so much throughout the years with the different business websites. His hard work and efforts on the technology side were appreciated. It meant a lot to Bill that Chris stayed engaged and committed to the cause.

## **Early Career History**

William Edward Wilkerson was born in 1942 in Niagara Falls, Ontario. He was one of five children. Wilkerson's professional career focused on banking and insurance but also spanned crisis management, journalism, broadcasting, government service, politics, the arts, and major league sports.

He started in journalism and worked for CBC Television and Radio, co-founded CorpWorld Communications Group and later became a Vice President at International Telephone and Telegraph (ITT). His public service included working as Chief of Staff for the Mayor of Toronto and for the Government of Ontario and nationally with the first Trudeau administration. He was proud to have known the US President Jimmy Carter and First Lady Rosalyn Carter (see photo on next page).



1992 - Bill Wilkerson, Rosalyn Carter, Jimmy Carter, Olga Cwiek

He moved to working at the Royal Bank of Canada and later was the President of Liberty Health (formerly Ontario Blue Cross). It was in the insurance field that Bill became aware of the significant costs to employers associated with addictions and mental health disorders. He was CEO for the Toronto Symphony Orchestra during a crisis period. He launched a crisis management company and consulted on behavioral health risk management strategies. He advised sports organizations on mental health, including the National Hockey League, the Toronto Blue Jays, the Canadian Football League, The Sports Network (TSN), CTV and SkyDome and the new Rogers Centre in Toronto.

He also consulted with the Canadian Military and with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police on advancing mental health supports for service members. The photo below is the happy day in 2008 when Bill signed his engagement papers with the RCMP. Officer Rich Boughen and he worked together to develop a "Healthy Workplace Strategy," which today remains important to the long-term success of the RCMP. Bill proudly wore the RCMP crest on his blazer.



2008 – RCMP Officer Rich Boughen, Bill Wilkerson

Bill Wilkerson, LL.D. (Hon).

## Advocacy Organizations Created by Bill

**Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health.** Bill co-founded and led the Roundtable as CEO from 1997 to 2011. Over 15 years he led many projects bringing together leaders in business and science. One of the first projects was to write a book, co-authored with Edgardo Pérez of Homewood Health (a leading national provider of employee assistance counseling services) entitled [\*Mindsets - Mental Health: The Ultimate Productivity Weapon\*](#). The Roundtable hosted a series of five executive-level meetings held across cities in North America. Senior executive representatives of national government organizations were partners and presenters at the Forums. These included Canadian and US ambassadors, deputy prime ministers, and the heads of national research institutes, and major

foundations. The second forum was held in 2007 in Ottawa and hosted by the late [Honorable Michael Kirby](#), first chair of the Mental Health Commission of Canada. These initial pair of meetings followed the commission's 2006 landmark government report [Out of the Shadows at Last: Transforming Mental Health, Mental Illness and Addiction Services in Canada](#). Other forums were also held in Washington DC (2007), Toronto (2008), at Harvard University (2008) and finally again in Toronto (2013). The final report includes summaries of the four prior meetings: [The 5<sup>th</sup> US/Canada Forum on Mental Health and Productivity: Reference Report of Presentations and Proceedings](#).

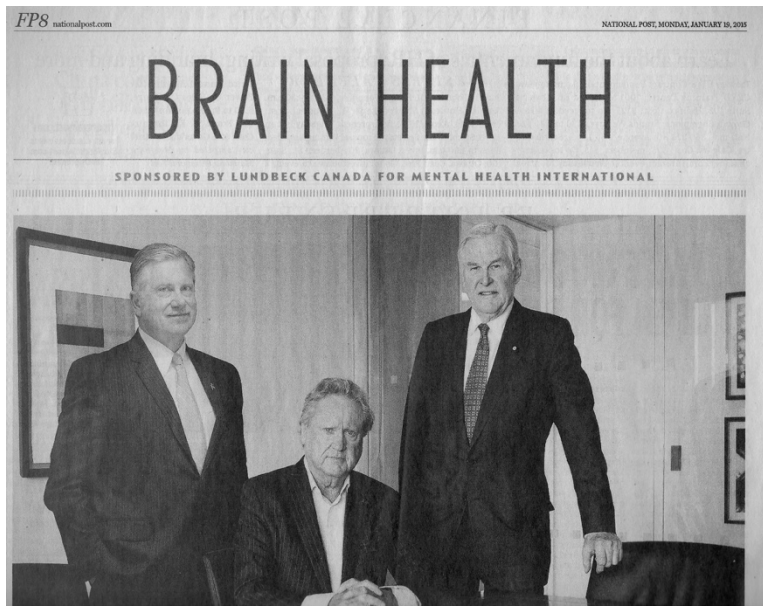
Through these Forums, he "connected the dots" for business leaders by creating opportunities for them to meet with the leading scientists who studied mental health at major academic centers in Canada, including the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), , Douglas Institute for Mental Health, the University of British Columbia, the University of Ottawa, and the University of Toronto). American scholars from Harvard University, Johns Hopkins University and the US National Institutes of Mental Health also participated.

A colorful presenter and forum host, Bill was also known for wearing his trademark "red socks" when delivering many of these interviews and meetings.



2009 - Bill Wilkerson

Bill's work with the Roundtable led to a remarkable 23-year collaboration with the late [Honorable Michael Wilson](#), the former finance minister and Canadian ambassador to the United States. Wilson's son Cameron had developed severe depression and in 1995 committed suicide. Thus, they shared a passion for educating others about the risks of untreated mental illness and prevention. In 2011, the two co-authored the report: [Brain Health + Brain Skills = Brain Capital](#), published by Mental Health International and sponsored by Lundbeck Canada. It featured trends in neuroscience and understanding the brain.



2015 – Patrick Cashman (President of Lundbeck Canada), Bill Wilkerson, Michael Wilson (the National Post)

Bill's greatest contribution was to challenge the CEOs of major businesses to take a leadership role in supporting workplace mental health. He pioneered the engagement of corporations in workplace mental health in Canada to combat the effects of mental disorders through business investments, human compassion and enlightened self-interest. Great-West Life Assurance Company was his major financial sponsor of the Roundtable and the five U.S.-Canada Forums. Great-West also created the renowned Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace (now the Canada Life [Workplace Strategies for Mental Health](#)). Some of the other funders and partners included Alcan, Barclays Financial (Canada and London), British Telecom (London), Brookfield Corp., Canada Post, Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (CIBC), Champignon Brands, Edper Group, Deutsch Post (Bonn), European Central Bank, Homewood Health, Lundbeck Canada, Kaiser Foundation, Royal Bank of Canada, Royal LePage Ltd., Scotiabank, Standard Life Insurance, TD Bank, Torstar, and Unilever Europe.

**Mental Health International.** For his last organization, Bill was the Co-Founder and Executive Chairman of MHI for 12 years (2013 to 2025). MHI continued the traditions of the Roundtable to bring together business and civic leaders with the best new science on addiction and mental health issues and the central role of the workplace as both cause and cure.

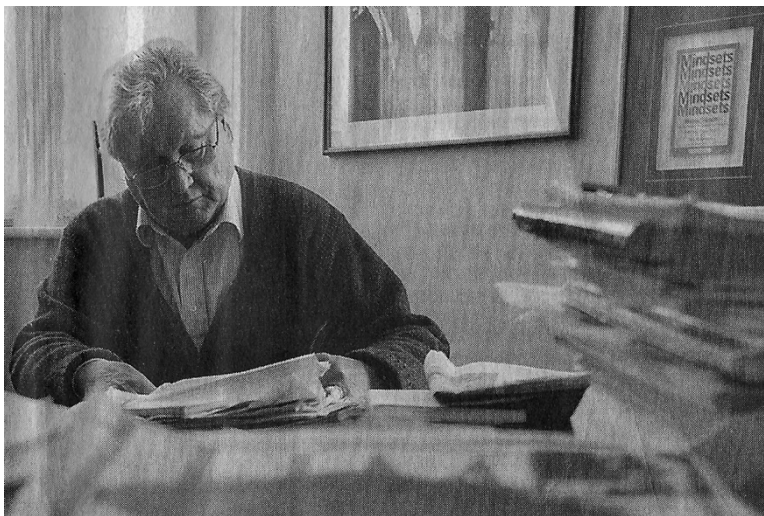
During this period, MHI created the **European Business Forum for Mental Health and Productivity**. Bill was the Founder and Chairman of this initiative for five years from 2013-2017. It moved the successful model of the US/Canada Forums across the pond into the western European part of the world. For its campaign to '[Target Depression in the Workplaces of Europe](#)', Bill travelled to 20 European capitals over a 24-month period to recruit major employers with more than 1.5 million total employees. Major executive-level meetings were held in London in 2014 and 2016 and Rotterdam in 2015. The Forum produced a European Business Charter and six pilot projects to test management practices aimed at reducing risk

and disablement from chronic job stress and depression. National business roundtables were established in Copenhagen, Brussels and Rome.



2015 – Bill Wilkerson (the Financial Post)

Later in his career, Bill focused on trends in [artificial intelligence](#) for advancing treatment and the growing need to re-train workers for the future. The [final report](#) from Mental Health International - with support from the Ontario Brain Institute - was released in 2023. The 90-page report calls for Canada's science and business sectors to come together for taking action to improve the quality of mental wellbeing and work conditions. It examines a combination of trends in research, business and technology that suggest that the prevention of mental disorders is a realistic course of action based on advances in epigenetics and brain science. The report was dedicated to Michael Wilson (who passed in 2019).



2021 – Bill Wilkerson (the Globe & Mail)

## Honors & Awards

Along the way, Bill received many awards for his international leadership in mental health. The most significant was the [Honorary Doctorate of Laws](#) he received from McMaster University in 2015, where he also was Industry Professor in International Mental Health.

He also won awards from:

- Canadian Psychiatric Association
- American Psychiatric Association
- Association of Public Executives
- Canadian Manufactures and Exporters Association
- Homewood Health
- Schizophrenia Society of Canada

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Personally, I first met Bill in [2007](#). I knew him from several writing projects we did over the years with his colleague and friend Joseph Riccui. They invited me to be on the board of directors at MHI during its start-up year in 2013. I admire the impact that Bill was able to achieve by drawing together so many leaders in the corporate world across multiple countries and to sustain that positive energy for over 25 years of dedicated work. I know he had so much he still wanted to do. But in the time he had, he genuinely made a difference in an important area of human well-being. His unique collaborative approach is unreplaceable.

Respectfully,

*Mark Attridge, PhD, MA*  
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