



EUCN European Parliament Internship Report

Nicholas Smith

September – December 2010

Introduction

In 2010 I had the privilege of undertaking an internship at the European parliament jointly facilitated by the European Union Centres Network (EUCN) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT). The prospect of working at the European Parliament intrigued me on a number of levels: it represented a chance to challenge myself at an important international political institution, a chance to gain world experience and network with young professionals, and ultimately an exciting opportunity to travel and further my studies. Indeed, the three months I spent at the European Parliament generally met my expectation and on the whole was a fabulous experience. This report offers a chronology of the MEP internship process where I intend to share my experiences and observations, which hopefully aids future applicants and recipients.

The application process

I think it is important to start with a few thoughts on the application process. For me, the application process (which mimics a process you would expect to face when applying for a job) was an invaluable experience. Prior to the MEP internship, I had few experiences of job interviews in front of a panel. Although this was somewhat nerve-racking, it was great exposure to the realities of professional job interviews. My advice for applicants would be to not sell yourself short; exemplify your qualities, project confidence, and be as professional as you can be. Furthermore, I made a conscious effort to learn and understand as much as I could about the European Parliament; its role in the EU, its internal structure, the names and roles of the committees, the political parties (also the parties and MEPs who with my thesis topic) and the day-to-day running of the parliament (and the likely role of an intern). Lastly, in the interview I attempted to highlight the ways I would positively represent New Zealand, seeing as the position was co-organized by MFAT, I felt that highlighting the positive ways I would represent New Zealand was paramount to my chances and in essence one of the key motivations for offering this position. Overall, I learnt much from the application process which has put me in good stead for future job applications.

Preparation

I was fortunate enough to make contact with an MEP shortly after receiving the internship. Nevertheless, nailing down a concrete placement in the office of an MEP proved to be a difficult task given the sheer demand and over-capacity of many offices. Nevertheless, through initial contact with Vittorio Prodi's office I was able to eventually find a placement in one of his colleagues, Francesca Balzani's office. Once getting confirmation of a placement I was able to book my tickets to Brussels for September. My advice for travel would be to fly to one of the larger European airports such as Paris or Frankfurt and then train to Brussels. Finding flights directly to Brussels tended to be far more expensive and required a number of changes and delays. Also, I gave myself 10 days in Brussels before the internship started, basically in order to acclimatize and familiarize myself with the new surroundings. The best website for all your queries and questions on living in Brussels is undoubtedly <http://brussels.angloinfo.com/>, this website has guides for all aspects of life in Brussels and a forum if you have questions which aren't covered.

Visas

A visa is not necessarily a requirement, but I would strongly advise people in applying for a 1 year working holiday visa. The application is time-consuming and expensive but having that flexibility is worth it. I wish I had heeded such advice, as I only went to Belgium on a temporary three month visa, after being given some out-of-date advice. Given the rigid and complex nature of Belgian bureaucracy, applying for an extension or an alternative visa once living in Belgium is not only impossible but applications have to be filed from your country of residence. My experience should be a cautionary tale for prospective recipients. I was enjoying my time in Brussels so much that I negotiated with my MEP to remain on as intern for an extra 3 months, assuming I could re-apply for a three month visa or apply for a working holiday visa by proxy (i.e. from the UK), I was shocked and bitterly disappointed when told there was no way I could legally remain in Belgium without returning to New Zealand first. Therefore, if you feel that there is a chance you may stay longer than three months, then bite the bullet and get the one year working holiday visa, the flexibility will mean that if you get opportunities like I did, you will be in a place to prosper from them.

Accommodation

I used the ten days I had in Brussels before the start of my internship to find accommodation. Through looking at the website <http://www.immoweb.be/> and visiting a number of local agencies, I was able to visit a number of places in a number of different areas. I was concerned about not finding a place before I left for Brussels given the apparent lack of accommodation for September (internship season!). However, there are still viable options if you decide to take

my approach and find accommodation once on the ground in Brussels. My criteria for finding a flat was simple, I wanted somewhere which was in walking distance to the European Parliament and from major shopping areas. I ended up finding a place in Etterbeek, a commune which borders the European Parliament. My flat ended up being situated in a lovely alcove with a communal park, really quiet residents and at only 15 minutes walk from the parliament, an ideal location. For me, Etterbeek is a great place to live, the city centre is easily accessible via bus, Flagey (a vibrant student area) was within walking distance, Brussels Midi train station was a short tram ride away, and the supermarket was 5 minutes from my house. However, I would strongly recommend against using the agency that set me up in my flat, NADIMMO proved to be highly incompetent and downright unhelpful. It took them 3 months to pay back the 1400 Euro bond I paid on the flat and only after I asked my lawyer friend to represent me. Colleagues of mine were able to find places through online ads which did not require the payment of a bond; I would recommend looking at these options before committing to an agency. The following websites may prove useful:

<http://www.thebulletin.be/>

<http://www.vlan.be/>

<http://www.stagiaireinfo.eu/en/>

Social Life

In my opinion, the easiest way to integrate and settle in a new city is through generating a decent social network. In Brussels, I fell on my feet rather well, I immediately joined the Brussels expat rugby team (<http://www.Brusselsceltic.com>) which cater for all skill levels, both males and females (touch rugby and netball are also played). Playing rugby in Brussels was great on so many levels, I made some great life-long friends, I played competitively for the 1st team and got to travel around Belgium every weekend, and the social side of things was great fun. Through the rugby club I was able to tap into the vibrant expat community in Brussels, people really look out for one another and this aided my integration greatly. My social experience in Brussels was so warming and enjoyable that I could definitely see myself being able to live in Brussels full time. That is not to say avoid interacting with the locals, far from it! I found the locals really friendly, helpful and hospitable.

Language

As I didn't speak French or Dutch, I had to solely rely on English while in Brussels. At times this caused issues when shopping or searching for accommodation. However, if you try and learn some French and make an effort, people respect that and tend to be really helpful. As is the case with most places in Europe, it is quite easy to get by only speaking English. In terms of the

parliament, English is essentially the working language; very rarely did I experience any communication difficulties when working there. I would highly recommend taking French lessons (I was unable to because of rugby, but colleagues of mine did) as a way of improving your ability to exist in Brussels, but also as a way of meeting like-minded people.

The Parliament

I found the Parliament to be like an adventure playground, I really enjoyed being a part of the vibrancy and progressiveness of the people that worked there and the copious amounts of visitors that would grace the parliament on a daily basis. The parliament is a really pro-active place with countless promotions, seminars, hearings, meetings and events which cater to all spectrums and interests. My personal favourite was to attend the numerous seminars on topics ranging from democracy in Turkey, fisheries exploitation in Western Sahara, human rights violations in Libya, and so on. These events usually involved high-ranking officials such as MEPs, Commissioners, or outsider experts. Listening to the Prime Minister of Ukraine was a memorable highlight. Ultimately, if you have a passion for international relations then it is very hard to become bored or disinterested in the parliament.

The Internship

During my three month internship at the European Parliament I experienced both highs and lows. I was very grateful to Francesca Balzani for taking me on. It was quite an interesting situation when I arrived; Mrs Balzani was 8 months pregnant and about to commence maternity leave. This meant that the majority of my internship was spent working closely with her assistant Francesca Lazzaroni. In the initial couple of weeks I was brought up to speed on the day-to-day running of the parliament and the role of the assistant and intern. This was exciting and fruitful as it gave me a first-hand insight in the dynamics of the parliament, something which you have to really experience to fully understand. I went in consciously trying to project enthusiasm and work ethic in order to get the most out of the internship; I was well prepared to work as many hours as they wanted in order to gain invaluable experience. Sadly this did not pan out as I had hoped. Although the internship was great, I felt that I was completely underutilized by Mrs Balzani's office. It struck me that they were somewhat reluctant to over-work me and they often encouraged me to focus on my own interests or areas related to my thesis, which I was grateful for, but I really wanted to make solid contributions to their work. I did work on a couple of projects related to trade in bananas and EU health policy which allowed me to immerse myself in research and analysis. I would say my most important role was the monitoring of the International Trade Committee (INTA). Mrs Balzani was a substitute on the INTA committee and due to her important role on the Budget Committee she was usually unable to closely follow the INTA meetings. My job was to attend

meetings and take notes of importance. I thoroughly enjoyed this, many important topics were discussed in the meetings and feeling like part of the decision making process was a thrill. Retrospectively, perhaps I went in with too ambitious expectations, it is unrealistic to expect an MEP to placate to the demands of an intern, and in reality the fact they gave me an opportunity to experience life at the European Parliament, is in itself a great opportunity. Thus, in the case that you find there is not much work for you to do, I would recommend to remain pro-active and self-reliant, make the most of the short-time you have in the parliament to explore and immerse yourself in the festivities.

Conclusion

The three months I spent at the European Parliament and in Belgium rank as some of the best memories of my life to date. All in all, I made some great friends, gained fruitful experience, forged some great business contacts and really had the time of my life. I would consider moving back to Brussels in a heartbeat. So to all the prospective applicants out there, all I say is make sure you apply for opportunities like this one, the chance to travel and gain world-experience is a huge competitive advantage and a rare opportunity for New Zealanders. If you are fortunate enough to receive an internship, make sure you embrace all facets thoroughly from social networking, to the activities at the European Parliament, to making a contribution and representing New Zealand