

*European Parliament
NCRE Internship Report
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Introduction

To enter the European Parliament building in Brussels after the first week of the Parliament being convened was, in a word, interesting. The building itself is as impressive in design as it is in size. Standing from the front of the building, the right wing is occupied by the political right, and the left side by the political left. Inside the building is divided into ASP (Alterio Spinelli) and SPA (Henri Spaak). As it was the ASP that I was housed in I had every hope and expectation that by the end of the internship I would be familiar with every nook and cranny, and would certainly not get lost in that side of the building. With the ASP building, the interior is divided into an alphabetical ordering “A” through to “H” (as well as the normal numerical ordering of the floors). Giles, Natalie and I were housed in 14E, in offices 259-261, and having priority – due to Giles being the Chairman of the Industry Committee – of meeting room 14E257. So if anyone wanted to meet with us, they were told to come to 14E257/259/261. Well, my ambitions of not losing myself in the hull of the Parliament were to come to naught, when, in the last month of my internship I was asked to deliver some signed off accounts to the group accountant. I had been there once before and was positive I could find my way on my own as Natalie (my office mate) had other things to attend to. I needed to go to section 2H2, I knew where the office was once I was in the general area. Well, without going into the extremely painful details, 20 minutes later I returned from what should have been a 5 minute errand. I would like to say here, that putting up fire wall things in front of people can be...diverting!

The Internship

The first half of my internship was amidst the flurry that can be expected from a new Parliamentary Term. Especially, when approximately 70% of the MEPs are new to Brussels and the European Parliament.

Being placed in the office of Mr Giles Chichester, MEP for the South West of the UK, was to place in an extremely busy office. Mr Chichester was not only the Chairman of the Industry and Research Committee (ITRE), he was also the Vice President of the European Energy Forum (formerly the European Energy Foundation, of which, by the end of my internship he was to become the President), and contender for the position of EPP leader with the EP. For all this he had only one assistant, Ms Natalie McCoy. But by no means was he short of staff. Natalie has been with Giles for 3 years, is fluent in four languages (English and Spanish (Native) and French and Italian (fluent)), with a relatively good understanding of Dutch to boot. It was odd to share an office with a woman who spoke with an American accent, yet spent more time speaking in French and Spanish than in English. I soon found that roughly half of the British (Conservative) assistants spoke English and French, with a small number of them speaking a third language to a degree, and though not all were fluent in any language except English. Our offices were on the fourteenth floor, in section E. This meant that on the floor above us (the top floor) were one of the two floors of German Democrats, below were their (our) French counterparts. On the elevator to our floor one could hear a plethora of languages spoken, and even with elementary German, I was soon fascinated by trying to listen into as many conversations as possible to a) determine what language was being spoken (an interesting task with the 10 new member states in the building) and b) to see if I could understand anything of what was being said (this was obviously easier when the language was English or

German!). I was quickly able to discern that there were two very good reasons that Giles had Natalie as his only Assistant to date. Firstly, she was all that he had ever had and all that he had ever needed. She was extremely efficient at her job. Secondly, he had never had a busier term, and, if I dare say, he had possibly underestimated the amount of work that his new positions created for his office, as he was usually in meetings rather than busy hosting lobbyists in his office.

The busy nature of the office was quickly to shape my role within it. Natalie set my tasks, with Giles' approval, giving me three main areas within which I would work. Research, research, and in case I was bored of the former and the latter, research. The first two instances were cases of updating information that was to be redistributed at a UK (South West) level and then an EU wide level. The first being information for Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to assist them in gaining information, funding, advice on a range of matters. Fortunately having worked seven months for Canterbury Manufacturers Association in Christchurch, I was familiar with much of the technical language, and hence was able to work efficiently to see its conclusion relatively quickly. The second major task apportioned to me was to update information for those within the UK (again predominantly those in Giles' constituency) that were looking for career opportunities abroad (primarily, but not exclusively within the EU). My third function was to assist with the research and formulation of responses to the correspondence from those within Giles' constituency. Whilst there were moments of extreme frustration and irritation with the content of some of the correspondence, there was also hilarity, pity, sorrow, and joy when the answers were found. This aspect of my role was to send me traversing through pieces of EU legislation and regulations as diverse and varied as the countries and cultural backgrounds represented and the languages spoken of all the MEPs combined!!! To give an indication of areas that I looked in to the following list may be something of an aide; Agricultural Land Parcels, Angling and Boating legislation and regulations in Spain, Aviation (the Single Skies initiative), Cetacean deaths in the English Channel, EU funding to the Palestinian Authority, EU Arms trade with Israel, Human Rights (ranging from Arabs that have converted to Christianity, Burma, Monks in China, and so forth), Housing scams in Spain, Short Sea Shipping (confusingly nicknamed "The Amsterdam Agreement"!), Trade between the EU and Israel and the cost of travelling by ferry from Plymouth to Roscoff.

To see the areas where the European Union had dared to intrude into the lives of the farmers in the South West of the United Kingdom, compared to the lack of intervention in what are now, for all intents and purposes, EU waters (e.g. the English Channel) was intriguing. To respond to mail that at times condemned the EU as an intrusive waste of space while calling upon one or other of the institutions to preserve a piece of national heritage or save someone being persecuted on the other side of the world seemed at times an absurdity, and almost served as an acknowledgment to the validity and value that such institutions as those found within the EU structure must be credited, even by those who seek the cessation of activity by those said institutions. Such anomalies were not left to the reserve of Giles' constituents. Many MEPs exposed the complexity of the anti-EU operation by making similar complaints and pleas as the constituents mentioned above.

In addition to these tasks, which comprised the majority of my time in Giles' office, there were things such as speech writing, the various forms of paper work (invitations, letters, general office tasks). For a few days I held the fort while Giles was in Strasbourg and Natalie overseas. It was at this time that I felt the keenest appreciation of the main working language of the Parliament being English.

One area in which I was surprised, and very impressed, was with Giles' ability (and, ofcourse, Natalie played a role here) to limit time spent with lobbyists. As important as it is for lobbyists to be heard, as well as to listen to what MEPs have to say in response, Giles had an uncanny way of ensuring that lobbyists would attempt to woo him, without much or indeed any success, yet went away (or hung up the phone) feeling – or at least sounding – as if they had heard something to satisfy them.

The Commissioner Hearings – Part One

The second half of my internship at the Parliament was first overshadowed by the Commissioner hearings, of which Giles chaired four; after the hearings, my internship quickly became shrouded with the murmurings of discontent at some of the Commissioner-Designates, and the impending doom of the Socialists almost decisive action in possibly voting down the entire new Commission on account of approximately four of the Commissioner-Designates, but one in particular. Email compounded upon email, and soon it was clear that even were the Commissioner-Designates to be voted in, a strong message of discontent would be sent to the EU Member States at the quality of the Candidates and what would be expected in the future. Then, of-course, the October Strasbourg sitting happened, and Barroso withdrew from the table all 25 Commissioner Designates with the promise of a reshuffle.

Though the media became almost obsessed with the Parliament's new found political strength coupled with the will to use it and the positive implications that this held for the democratic nature and perception of the European Parliament within the EU, within the Parliament it was business as usual, overshadowed with a concern at the inconvenience of a delayed start to the Commissions term and some concerns over the signing of the Constitutional Treaty being signed in Rome the following week. As with anywhere, there were those who ran with the heat of the moment, letting the proverbial fur fly with the emails, and attempts to throw the (again proverbial) baby out with the bath water – calls for rallying support for Barroso to lose his position began to creep into the background, with some MEPs wondering aloud whether there was any legal basis upon which he could remove the Commissioner-Designates from the table?

At the end of the day however, it was business as usual, and in hindsight the behaviour of some MEP's can be explained away as your typical political grandstanding.

Strasbourg

The reasoning behind uplifting a Parliament and shifting it to another city, in another country, has never appeared to be entirely logical to me. As my time of venturing with the Parliament to the city by the Franco-German border drew near, I took the plunge and asked an impartial Belgian, who works for the Secretariat, why the European Parliament took such pains to do something that was so expensive, not only in literal cost, but in time (5 hours one way by train) and energy, not to mention the packing and unpacking of the MEPs cantines (of which at least 5 were lost every month). His reply, whilst said with a smile, bears a sad ring of truth. "If you are talking to a French

man, Strasbourg is the official seat of the European Parliament, if you talk to anyone else; it is Brussels, with Strasbourg there to appease the French man". Such is European democracy then. For the sake of one, all will make a sacrifice.

My travel to and sojourn in Strasbourg was made much easier by the kindly assistance of Giles (who paid for my accommodation and travel) and Natalie, who made all the necessary bookings and, in an extraordinary event not to be taken lightly, made the trip down with me (she has only been to Strasbourg one other time in three years at which time she swore that she would never return).

The Commissioner Hearings – Part Two

This particular trip to Strasbourg (in November) was unique in that it was the second round of Commissioner Hearings, and that the vote on the new Commission was (with much relief) successful this second time around. This meant that all other business which is usually conducted in a Strasbourg week was repacked into two and a half days, creating organised chaos, and for Natalie and myself it created a lack of time in which to familiarise ourselves to any great extent with the city of Strasbourg itself.

The Strasbourg Parliament building reminded me of a circular garden hedge maze. The maze being somewhat self explanatory, as well as its circular aspect given the shape of the building, the garden hedge comment may need some extrapolation. - Inside the building, there are some floor-to-ceiling plants of relation to the vine, creating the effect of the green aspect of the hedge, whilst not obscuring ones view as the hedge might.

Similarities And Differences To Other Interns

There were a number of similarities and differences to my internship.

As with the previous interns, Lucy Cassels and Jeff McNeill, my experience in the European Parliament was exciting and informative. As with these other interns I found trying to be more useful than not a driving and motivational force.

As Jeff's internship was coloured by the 2004 Parliamentary elections, mine was coloured by the election (or initially, non-election) of the European Commission by the Parliament.

Jeff also spent time following a certain directive through it's legislative process, I too actively watched two very distinct pieces of legislation; namely the "Software Patents" (ironically not actually involved with patenting software), and the banning of trawling in EU waters (this was watched due to the high level of interest in cetacean deaths in the English Channel by Giles' constituents).

, like Jeff I made the observation that the committees are about politics more than about administration. So too did I witness the problem MEPs face with extremely technical information needing to be understood by all on the committee. Then the realization that I think will be share by all interns: the acute difference between learning something from books and experiencing it for yourself.

Unlike Lucy and Jeff, I spent absolutely no time in the Parliamentary Library. My research was all conducted through the Parliament's intranet research resources, the majority of my time was dedicated to serving Giles' constituents.

Personal Highlights

The opportunity to interact with those who had formerly been delegated the role of almost story book characters was too thrilling an opportunity to allow to go to waste. With Giles chairing four Commissioner Hearings, I had the opportunity to meet those who would soon be well known, the feeling that I knew something (real or imagined) ahead of others was inexplicable.

Of all the opportunities that were presented to me, these selected few stand affirmed at the front of my mind.

- Attending the B'nai B'rith Europe Conference in the Commission Building to listen to Jews, Palestinians, Arabs, Europeans and Americans come together to discuss, first the difficulty of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, and then to attempt to build a constructive dialogue on how to move the conflict forward to a point that peace could be seen as a likely outcome. Whilst this is not an area that has formed a large part of my studies, the opportunity to see first hand such dialogue on an issue that I am interested in personally was too great to pass up.
- During my time in the Parliament I had the opportunity to attend a number of meetings relating to defence issues, which is the primary area of my Masters research. The most intensely interesting of these, though not directly related to the focus of my research, but definitely on the fringes, was a dialogue between the Russian Anti-Terrorism Advisor to President Putin, in which after a 15 minute speech he took questions from the floor (MEPs only). As the meeting took place two weeks after the Beslan School tragedy, many MEPs expressed their condolences, which, while imminently appropriate, unavoidably took a proportionally large part of their question time which was strictly limited to two minutes. The questions from the floor was varied, some choosing to focus their questions to areas of possible cooperation and collaboration between Russia and the EU in the area of the speakers portfolio, while other chose to be accusatory and condemned the seeming constriction of democracy under Putin in the wake of the Beslan tragedy. Above and beyond the topics of the discussion, I was struck with the familiarity, the informality of the dialogue. Much like one could expect from two friends placed in a formal setting, recognising their need to be formal, but still comfortably familiar with one another.
- I also had the opportunity to sit in on a discussion of the Kangaroo Group (deceptively lacking any Australian content!). This was a group of EPP members involved in the area of EU defence. The keynote speaker was at the last moment unfortunately unable to attend, and the meeting instead became a general discussion of the concerns of the defence industry in achieving the goals/ambitions of the EU in terms of the military capability. This was exactly were I had hoped that the discussion would go, and soon I was privy to not only this, but that the Parliament was extremely sensitive to the role of NATO and the EU being one of cooperation and collaboration on all fronts and avoiding duplication wherever possible. This was a thrilling moment for me, as this was one conclusion that I had happily come to in the course of my research, and reassured me that I was on the right track.

- Of a more amusing nature, I quickly became concerned that the former Prime Minister of Poland, Mr Busek might think that I was stalking him, as he was at almost every meeting I attended, including those that I attended for my own personal benefit, such as the aforementioned Kangaroo Group meeting on European Defence issues.

Final Thoughts and Acknowledgements

My time in Brussels (and Strasbourg) was varied, informative and interesting. The first hand view and knowledge of how the EP functions in the literal sense, as opposed to only the theoretical, has amused, enlightened and informed. The firsthand witnessing of the dynamic relationships between the institutions, but also within the Parliament itself, has given me invaluable insight into extremely complex institutions. So much so that towards the conclusion of the internship I found that processes were finally becoming familiar to me and the feeling of regret at the brevity of the internship began to take form. The level of collaboration between national parties and across ideological boundaries was a pleasant surprise, and finding that it also included other member states was even more so – the level of scraping between member states being much lower than I had anticipated. In an environment in which natural alliances become partially obsolete, due to the size of the institution, respect of other MEPs managed to transcend individual and political ideologies. To future internship hopefuls I recommend the submitting of the application form and subsequent prayers of acceptance. To the NCRE and its Board of Advisors, I thank you for the most excellent opportunity of expanding my knowledge, acquiring contacts, and familiarising myself with processes that otherwise would have remained forever foreign to me. To the staff at the New Zealand Embassy in Brussels – particularly to Janet and Stephen Lowe – thank you for your advice, support and hospitality, all of which made my stay in Brussels infinitely easier and even more pleasant. To Giles and Natalie, many gracious thank you's and good wishes.