

EUCN 2012 European Parliament Internship Report

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I can without any reservation highly recommend this internship to other postgraduate New Zealanders. The experience helped make 2012 a year I will never forget. If you are up for a challenge and want to widen your horizons while gaining invaluable first-hand experience at the European Union, then this internship might be for you too!



(kiwi in the Veneto mountains)

Selection Process

For such a fabulous internship, the selection process is not overly gruelling, however the best advice I can give to those interested in the future is to present a strong and thoughtful application form. As was in my case being a student at the University of Auckland, we do not have a European Study centre, but during my courses in French and political studies I had given presentations and written essays on European related topics, I made the effort to highlight what these had taught me about Europe and the EU. The instructions on how to send your application form along with your academic transcript and CV with references is very specific, it is extremely advantageous to follow these formatting instructions carefully.

It felt like a rather long time had passed until I received an e-mail inviting me down to Christchurch for an interview, so don't lose all hope if you feel it is taking awhile! My best advice for the interview if you make it to this stage is to simply be yourself and be confident. If you have made it to the interview stage they obviously see the merits in you potentially being an intern, so there is no need to be too nervous. Make sure you walk into your interview knowing why you would be the best candidate for the internship, how you will be a good representative to be sent by the NCRE and most of

all, a bit of knowledge on how the EU functions is vital. From memory I received the good news by e-mail the following day, just after my wisdom teeth surgery! It was a very good incentive to continue working hard for the rest of my honours year.

Plan before your trip

There are a few important things I would recommend thinking about after you have received a place and before your internship in Brussels begins. Firstly, if you will be doing your Masters during your internship year, think about if you will be still able to complete it in one year. I personally enrolled in full time semester one in New Zealand, and then in part time for semester 2 when I was away, and then now in 2013 I have one more semester enrolled in part time to finish off my thesis. I decided to travel with a friend in the mid-semester break in Europe, and then do a bit of research for my masters in Europe before my September start. However, once my internship started it was pretty much a full-time job. So I believe that if I had tried to do my MA and complete it during my internship, I would have been exhausted and extremely rushed. You want to be able to fully get everything out of the Brussels experience that it has to offer!

September-December 2012 at the EP, Brussels

Luckily for me I speak fluent French. This made my arrival in Brussels much smoother than some of the stories I heard. However, it is possible to live in Brussels without French, considering thanks to the EU and NATO and general immigration in Belgium it is one of the most multi-cultural cities in Europe. However, French is widely spoken in Brussels so if you can learn the basics even numbers and how to order a coffee before you go, *la vie sera plus facile*. I had found a room in a big house in Schaerbeek a month prior to my move and it was a great way to meet other interns and ARASMUS students from around the world. I was lucky enough to meet my office colleagues in July when I passed through Brussels so I was excited to see them again and get started!

I could not have been luckier with the office I was placed in, everyone was extremely welcoming and I fitted in quickly. The one barrier I immediately faced was that the main language of my office was Italian, and my MEP Mara did not speak any English. However, as I am a keen language learner I rather quickly enrolled in Italian classes at the *Instituto Italiano* attached to the Italian embassy in Brussels. Mara's three wonderful

assistants (Antonella, Fabio and Roberta) however all spoke English and French too, so communication was not a barrier. Rather quickly after arriving in the office I was introduced to the task of the written question (WQ) to the Commission or the High Representative. WQs are one of the ways the parliament holds the Commission accountable. I was lucky enough to be allowed to write some of these questions for my MEP on issues she was concerned about.

Also luckily for me, Mara is the chairwoman of the EU Delegation to New Zealand and Australia (DANZ). The work I got to do with Mara and Roberta on DANZ was one of the most interesting parts of my Brussels experience. It was great to view a delegation from the perspective of the chair. I was able to teach my office more about New Zealand and Australia and I had the privilege of accompanying them to receptions at the New Zealand Embassy Residence, and to numerous other functions between the EU and Australia or New Zealand. The highlights would have to be my talk with the now former Australian Ambassador and meeting his office, when you are far away from New Zealand, it is a pleasure to meet Australians, and it was great to learn about their work with the EU.

Kirsten, who was my fellow intern (and now great friend) and I were fortunate enough to spend an evening with His Excellency Vangelis Vitalis, New Zealand Ambassador to Belgium and the European Union. As a Russian speaker myself it was great to speak a bit of Russian with him, and for us to learn more about his job. We were both very grateful he took time out of his extremely busy schedule to spend time with us. On the topic of the New Zealand Embassy I would like to thank Melanee Beatson for all her guidance and time spent with us both over coffee in Brussels. Melanee plays an important role in helping place the interns with suitable MEPs and she very generously gave time to us to check how our internships were going, and told us about her life working for MFAT.

As I mentioned earlier, my office was Italian. This came with challenges but overriding these were many benefits. When doing my work for the office on issues important to Northern Italy and the Veneto region where Mara is from, I had to think from their perspective. This was a great exercise in learning the nuances in Italian politics and its

complex relationship with the EU, as well as the differences between New Zealand politics and Italian and EU politics. For me the larger political spectrum in Europe was fascinating and I learnt that some parties cannot be so simply classed as left or right, there are various issues facing Europe right now that have caused policies within parties to be on different parts of this spectrum. Experiencing this was invaluable as it is highly different to in New Zealand.

I was lucky enough to travel to Italy twice during my time in Belgium. The first time, I spent a long weekend traveling around the north with one of the Italian interns that was finishing off her internship during the first few weeks of mine. Chiara, now a dear friend, showed me around the beautiful Veneto region and introduced me to the political structures. We spent a lovely oddly warm autumn Sunday in Venice and attended a political gathering of Mara's political party in Italy. It was a unique experience in the sense that in New Zealand never would that many people congregate together for a political rally. It was a great opportunity to learn more about politics of Northern Italy and of course to see Venice. After my internship I returned for Christmas to complete my tour of the north.

Something that really completes the internship experience is accompanying your office to one of the parliament's Strasbourg sessions. As all the seats but one on the fast train were booked, Antonella was too lovely and took the slow regional train to Strasbourg with me. The Strasbourg parliament is beautiful, but the offices are a bit smaller, but to compensate the view over the river is nicer! Strasbourg is a very stressful week for everyone involved. There are so many things to prepare running up to the votes and then the explanations of votes to write, so the public knows how the MEPs decided to vote and why. It was great for Kirsten and I to attend the DANZ meeting in Strasbourg; at the time they were planning their trip to Australia. The week is exhausting as an intern, so try and imagine how the assistants and the MEPs feel. But, the Strasbourg voting sessions are integral to how the EU works, and the city is beautiful, try and go into the city for lunch one day, you get a real feeling of German and French culture.

Finally I would like to thank Mara for taking me in as an intern and Antonella, Fabio and Roberta and the rest of the wider colleagues in the party and on the floor for welcoming

me into the work family. Thank you for speaking to me in Italian when at first I didn't understand, it helped me improve drastically! Also thank you to Martin Holland and Sarah Christie and others behind the scenes at the NCRE that helped make this internship possible. It was an invaluable experience to make my MA thesis stronger, gain skills that will be very useful in future jobs and the people I met there will be friends for life. For this I'm very grateful and wholeheartedly recommend this experience to others. There are not many other opportunities like it for young New Zealanders!



(2012 November Strasbourg Session, photo taken by Kirsten)