



European Parliament Internship

Report of Jordan Carter

Internship: Sep-Dec 2007



Introduction

This report records my experience as a European Parliament Intern, organised by the European Union Centres Network, during the period September – December 2007. I outline the motivation for attempting the internship, what local preparation was involved, the organisation of my placement and then aspects of the internship experience in the capital of Europe.

My aim is to give a flavour for what the experience was like, some of the lessons learned, and to note some important recommendations for future interns. Any expansion of any of the points discussed can be happily provided by the author, whose contact details are at the end of the report.

Motivation

“Europe” as a place and an idea has always been of interest to me. From my first trip there in 2003, on a range of different private, political and business travels, the diversity and tightness of the continent has made it a fascinating place. My family’s origin in the UK and my own experience being put through French immersion schooling as a child growing up in Western Canada may have added to this mix.

So when at the end of Honours I was casting around for my next project, the suggestion of a masters degree with a comparative analysis in a particular area of policy between European and New Zealand frameworks led to an immediate follow-up question of whether there would be a chance to spend some time in the EU. There was, through this internship, and so the invaluable opportunity to spend some time in Europe absent the constant rush of social or work travel presented itself.

As someone interested in a career in public life, I think that the importance of Europe is too often ignored in the slipstream of our own debates in New Zealand. Future decision makers can only benefit from time coming to understand the nature of what has been and will be for centuries one of the most creative, dynamic, interesting, wealthy and important locations on the planet.

Preparation

It was in preparing for the internship that the first (and last) major mistake in the process occurred. I was intending to arrive in Europe in time to attend another event of some interest (the centenary celebration of the International Union of Socialist Youth, in Berlin in late August). This meant that I would have around three days to find accommodation in Brussels before the start of my internship. My response was to use various online services (thanks to Gina Deerness-Pleisner, my predecessor as an Intern and someone whose report explains these in detail) to source a room in an apartment in advance of arrival.

The tragic error was to pay a deposit in advance. The deposit has never been returned. Tenancy law in Belgium is complex, but one thing it does not provide for is a tenancy bond being held in a public agency. The only way to secure your bond is to ensure it is deposited into an account with joint signatories – yours and your landlord’s. You can only do that on the ground.

Future interns are therefore strongly recommended to book a hostel for a few days on arrival, and to find accommodation once in Brussels. You are more likely to find a place with people you like, in a useful area, and to be able to make arrangements (including a proper

joint account for your bond!) for taking up a tenancy without the risk of being cheated of your money. I am happy to provide the name of the landlord concerned to any intending interns, with strong advice to stay as far away from him as possible.

Aside from this, preparation for me involved sorting out my placement (see following section), brushing up my French with French-speaking friends at home, and saving as much money as possible to allow for a range of weekend excursions that could not be financed within the constraints of the Internship's tight financial provisions.

Placement

My original placement was with a British Labour MEP called Brian Simpson, from the North-West of England region. However around the time I departed New Zealand his office employed an agricultural policy specialist to commence six weeks after I would have done, and so there would have been little space and less work to do.

Brian's assistant Mark went to some considerable lengths to secure me an alternative placement, however, and this worked out extremely well, with a colleague of his in the European Parliamentary Labour Party, David Martin MEP from Scotland. David and his assistant Kate had had an assistant recently depart at short notice to work in the UK and so had a vacancy which had to be filled. This worked out well for all concerned. The only downside was a week's delay in the beginning of the internship, which meant a week's time with nothing to do in Brussels, which was a mixed blessing.

I was initially slightly wary of being placed with a British MEP, due to the slight 'detachment' that is apparent between the UK and the EU, but was aware of the great positive of the arrangement: that all my immediate colleagues would be using English as their office language, and indeed as their social one as well. This made life in a social and work sense much easier and probably more fulfilling than the different challenge of learning the basics of another language would have been.

The Internship

Strasbourg

Starting with Strasbourg may seem a strange place to begin, but I had one meeting with Kate Murray in late August, and it was decided between her and David Martin that my first task would be to attend the plenary session of the Parliament in Strasbourg in September. This meant the first formal act of the internship for me was boarding a train at Gare Luxembourg at 7.50am on Monday 3 September, for a five hour trainride to Strasbourg and a room number to find on arrival, as well as a hotel booking, and one face I could recognise on the trip down.

The Strasbourg experience is a ridiculous waste of public funds. The entire Parliament and its staff depart Brussels for a week to conduct plenary debates in Strasbourg, a situation which will not change (as it cannot change without the agreement of all EU members, and France shows no desire to do so). All the Committee work and political group discussions happen in Brussels, but the formal debates are played out in Strasbourg.

For me the experience was a case of finding my feet, meeting my MEP for the first time, and trying not to make any mistakes while tied to a phone to Brussels to work out what to do when. It was also a chance to get to know some of my fellow stagiaires and assistants, as in Strasbourg there is little to do after the long work day (often 8.30am to 9pm) except go out for dinner and drinks. Fortunately, being the first plenary after the summer recess, the pace

of legislative action had not picked up and so there was not an impossible amount of work to do.

The Strasbourg setting, in small pokey offices, in an expensive French city but in beautiful locations around the River Lille, is worth experiencing. The city is very beautiful and well worth a visit, but it seems that plenary weeks attract far higher than usual prices for everything, be it accommodation, food or entertainment.

The MP – Mr David Martin (Labour, Scotland)

David Martin is the senior Scottish MEP in the Parliament, having been a Vice President for the 1999-2004 term. He has been a Member since 1984, and currently focuses his efforts on being an effective member for his constituency (which under the electoral system for UK MEPs is the whole of Scotland) and being a heavy hitter in the International Trade Committee of the Parliament.

David is a solid centre-left Labour MEP, with a comfortable but intense style and an ability to kick back for a good story over a drink or a meal. His policy knowledge in the areas he has focused on is deep and extensive, and he has built up strong links internationally due to the extensive delegations programme the Parliament conducts.

Besides ITRE, David sits as a substitute member on the ENVI (Environment) and CLIM (Temporary Climate Change) Committees of the Parliament. More on the work of these committees is in the section below. He is also a member of a number of delegations, including the EUROLAT (Europe – Latin America) delegation and the Australia-New Zealand delegation, from which is interest in having a Kiwi intern arose.

The period of my internship coincided with Labour Party nominations for the 2009-14 European Parliament, and David will be standing for a further term. Given his record of successful advocacy in Scotland and seniority, I expect to see him selected at the top of the list and returned to the Parliament for another term.

David's assistant is Kate Murray, from Edinburgh, a trade policy expert and brilliant colleague. She was ever helpful in keeping me on track, explaining the arcane processes of the Parliament, introducing me to useful and friendly people around the Parliament. Having a good stagiaire is important to an assistant, but having a good assistant is even more important to a stagiaire who has just landed in the city and is only there for a few months. Working with Kate and David was interesting, enjoyable and worthwhile.

Brussels

As mentioned, the European Parliament meets in plenary session in Strasbourg. Aside from occasional mini-plenary sessions in Brussels, the main business in the city is the political group and parliamentary committee work of the institution. Brussels is also home to many other EU institutions, including most importantly the Commission which is the executive arm of the Union, and the large and well-staffed permanent representations to the Union from member states. (As an aside, the UK permanent representation would seem to have as many people as New Zealand's entire foreign service.)

Brussels therefore is where much work back with national governments occurs; where a lot of the lobbying of MEPs by various commercial and civil society interests happens; and where the dense network of policy, advocacy, political, business, military, trade union, diplomatic and other interests exists. It is a true capital in many respects, simply of a non-state, non-sovereign federation.

CLIM Committee

My main task in the work I did was to follow the work of the Temporary Committee on Climate Change (CLIM), of which David is a substitute member. The Committee was established in 2007 composed of members from all of the Parliament's other committees, with several related tasks: to ensure that the whole Parliament's work programme could be infused with knowledge and political energy about climate change issues; to develop a policy position for the Parliament to advocate during the start of the process to develop a post-Kyoto climate change framework at the intergovernmental conference in Bali in December 2007; and to respond to the intense political difficulties of coming up with workable policies to mitigate the impact of climate change and to over time reduce it.

In following the Committee I read the papers, attended the meetings of the Committee and of the Socialist Group working group on Climate Change, and then provided summary notes of the discussions and the context in which they occurred to my MEP. What I hoped to do but was not able to achieve was a better liaison with other UK Labour MEPs working on the committee, but this did not particularly negatively effect our work. I also helped research some work David was doing to contribute to Socialist Group policy work on climate change issues.

Because the Committee is both temporary and devoted to informing and developing positions for the Parliament, it does not (or did not) have a particular "legislative" load. Most people who work at the Parliament are involved in a busy process of dealing with a stream of own-initiative policy reports, or developing legislation proposed by the Commission. That is what almost all the other Committees do. So to not be active on that sort of Committee meant a lesser insight was gained into the parliament's formal legislative process than would otherwise have been the case.

On the other hand, climate change is one of the key policy challenges of our times. And New Zealand has a vital interest in the debates that Europeans are conducting on the future of climate change policy. It matters to us if Europe adopts border taxes against countries without effective emission trading or carbon tax regimes; it matters if consumers in one of the wealthiest regions of the world form earnest but misinformed impressions that goods and services from far away are worse for the environment than those which come from closer to home. To have the chance to focus on these debates, to occasionally chip in with a New Zealand perspective, and to be able to sit down and read many of the reports that are talked about in the media was a privilege and also immensely useful.

European Parliamentary Labour Party

The nineteen Labour MEPs from the UK, working with their approximately fifty staff and stagiaires, form the EPLP. An interesting, small political caucus, the EPLP meets on regular occasions to debate and decide political strategy for their group, and for their input into wider Socialist Group positions, as well as to maintain their relationship with the UK Government and the wider British Labour movement.

Being a member of a fraternal Labour Party I was able to attend caucus meetings, and was accepted early on as a friendly and engaged actor debating many issues in a New Zealand context similar to those facing British Labour people and the wider social democratic movement in Europe. It was a fascinating chance to see the operation of a parliamentary grouping at close quarters, their internal modes of doing politics, and to note the similarities and differences with home.

19 MEPs is the smallest British Labour caucus for some time. Labour in the UK in 2004 was under siege due to the fallout from the Iraq war, questions over Tony Blair's leadership, and

a resurgent Liberal Democratic party. It seems possible that at the time of the next elections, in 2009, the political situation in Britain will be somewhat different, and that there will be more UK Labour MEPs following those elections.

A final note is that I was, at first, surprised at the extent to which the EPLP operated as a team. Many of the staff and stagiaires spent most of their time together, in and out of work; the amount of engagement with the locals in Brussels or indeed with other delegation's people within or outwith the Socialist Group was much less than I had somewhat naively expected. This is either for political reasons (for those from the same country), or for linguistic reasons (for those from the same group). This sort of expatriate environment, with people coming and going on a regular basis, leads to intense and tight social relationships forming and dissolving. In other words it was easy to make friends quickly with some really bright and intense people, and hopefully those relationships can be carried on at a distance until my next visit to Europe.

The Socialist Group

The various socialist and social democratic parties in Europe are organised into the Party of European Socialists on an organisational level. The parliamentary grouping however is the PSE – the same thing in French, but a different entity. And most common references to the Group are as that – the socialist group in the European Parliament.

Because the Group is so broad, both in parties covered, in political cultures included, and in national interests at play, it is much less tightly organised than a “party” in the traditional sense could be. The role of the Groups is privileged in the Parliament, and so much policy development and dialogue occurs intra-Group before being taken into legislative or non-legislative reports in the parliamentary committees.

The Labour MEPs were active among the 220 Socialist Group MEPs, and some held spokesperson roles in various Working Groups and committees for the Group, but on some issues the UK government's point of view, given the party in power at Westminster, meant that UK Labour MEPs sometimes differed from their PSE colleagues in the way they voted, either at plenary or at committee levels. This was not however confined to UK Labour: other national delegations in the Group also did this occasionally.

So the metaphor of “party” is not really appropriate. A looser notion of cooperation between parties that share at least formally a common ideological base is a more realistic way to think about the Group. Which leads to interesting further questions about the future role of the Groups as the parliament develops into a more significant component of the legislator in the European institutions. The Reform Treaty currently being ratified by member states gives far more legislative power to the Parliament, including the right for the first time to initiate legislation. Will this lead over time to tighter party disciplines that in turn unleash a dynamic of conflict between the Parliament and national governments? How will this fit into the ongoing tension between a Europe of States on the one hand, and the vision of Ever Closer Union on the other?

Work

Aside from following the committees, I did a fair amount of the work that most MP's offices do. Managing diary commitments for the MEP, correspondence (both email and physical), paper flows for parliamentary work, party correspondence, representation at meetings, and so on.

I had done this sort of work before, being at Parliament in New Zealand working for David Cunliffe in 2002-03, so the expectations and surprises of Parliamentary life were not entirely

unfamiliar. The biggest difference is the calendar, with weeks successively devoted to group, committee and then plenary debate, rather than having some of each in each week. This allows longer lead times to prepare for each sort of work, which has some advantages.

Aside from the session I attended in Strasbourg, the other out-of-Brussels experience for the position as stagiaire was to attend a set of meetings in London. The EPLP goes to the UK a couple of times a year for meetings with UK government ministers and party organisers, and I attended one of these with my MEP and Assistant, which offered an interesting insight into the way the UK Labour government relates to the EP on its home territory.

My Assistant (the term for the permanent staffer/s in an MEPs office), Kate Murray, was a brilliant colleague: patient in dealing with my lack of knowledge about the institution, and helpful in making sure I stayed focused on the work that needed to be done despite the endless plausible distractions of working in a foreign Parliament.

Kate and David Martin together were a pleasure to work with and for, and I cannot thank them enough for the fun we had and the chance to see a different political world. The content I got to focus on, the debates in that evolving institution, were instructive and interesting as well.

Living in Brussels

This section gives some advice to future interns.

Accommodation

The key piece of advice is to look for a place to stay once you arrive. Any of the hostels will be reasonable to base yourself in on arrival. You may like to hold off until you have started your internship and met a few of your colleagues in your political and national group, or you may choose to just find a place on your own bat.

Brussels being a bilingual city (Flemish and French) with many English speakers, you can almost choose a language zone. Generally speaking the communes closest to the inner city are most French, and the further out you go the more likely the local shops and restaurants are to be mainly Flemish (as Brussels is the capital of Flanders, the Flemish region in Belgium, despite being 80% French-speaking).

If you want to stay in an expat zone, many English-speaking people congregate around Place de Chatelain. Another nearby location is Place Flagey where English-speaking people live. Or you can find a place in the rather dull but practical zone around the Parliament (called Schuman). You should aim to spend no more than around €400 a month for a furnished room, sharing with others. You'll pay much more to be on your own, and the hassles of setting up utilities and dealing with rents are not worth having.

Living simply

Wherever you live, make sure it is near a public transport service, either Tram or Metro. Metro tickets are €11 for a ten-ride slice, or €40 for an unlimited month pass. Helpfully for single or ten-ride tickets, they are cross mode (bus, tram or metro) and there is no zone system, the whole network is available at a flat price. This means you can nip out and do your shopping and get home on one ticket, if you are quick.

Supermarkets lack basics like fresh milk. The two chains are GB and Delhaize, and they all close at 8pm, with very few if any open on Sundays. So plan shopping in advance and don't rely on large numbers of corner stores.

Buy a SIM card for your GSM mobile phone early, BASE works well. They are not expensive except if you use them to keep in touch with people back in New Zealand, in which case it would be worth shopping around providers.

Try to walk around Brussels as much as you can if you are spending time there. It is not always the prettiest of cities but there are ample rewarding vistas if you seek them out in and around the city.

A basic budget for a simple life in Brussels excluding rent would be €120 a week. This will give you funds for transport, basic groceries and lunches, the odd drink and meal out, and transport. If you have more you will easily spend it, but you do not have to do so. I was surprised at how affordable life was: a very good pizza and beer for dinner for €10, and rarely more than €30 for a week's groceries. Alcohol is a little more expensive than in New Zealand, but clothing is far cheaper.

Social life

First lesson: meet as many of your fellow assistants and stagiaires in your political group as you can as early as you can. Different groups will have different styles, but many of the people from the Parliament congregate in the pubs directly in front of the building (Place Luxembourg), often every night of the week. The crush on Thursdays and Fridays is actually quite impressive.

Second lesson: join the Stagiaire's Association. It is a group of mainly younger stagiaires and a good way to meet people from other political groups and other national delegations. They run parties (which you should go to), drinks functions, and the odd political event pressing for better terms and conditions for stagiaires, some of whom are horrifically abused by their MEPs.

Third lesson: remember this is a parliament full of people from different countries and full of lobbyists trying to make a point. You can attend as many receptions and social events for free as you like, and New Zealanders as a rule always have a story to tell that can interest people. If you're good at working a room you can meet an incredibly wide range of people and probably even make a few friends while doing so.

The Brussels experience will stand or fall, in an enjoyment sense, on the people you meet and get to know. Do as much of it as you can, as soon as you get there. You will not regret it.

Other Travel

I was lucky enough to be able to make several trips out of Brussels while there for my internship. Brussels is a hub for some low-cost airlines and even ordinary airfares are not too expensive in Europe (though you will not be doing much extra travelling if you are reliant on the NCRE Scholarship as your main source of income).

The major trip I did was to attend the British Labour Party's conference in Bournemouth in September 2007. I was able to gain access to the Conference as a New Zealand Labour Party official, and my MEP was happy for me to attend. It was Gordon Brown's first conference as Leader, at which he went down very well, and as an event is unparalleled as a

festival of political events that take over the centre of the town for the five days of Conference sessions. There were other colleagues from the NZLP present, and many colleagues from the EPLP as well.

I also attended the 100th anniversary celebrations of the International Union of Socialist Youth, in Berlin in August (before the beginning of the internship). This was my first chance to go to Berlin, and the city is a sight worth seeing.

A third political trip was the celebration of the fifteenth anniversary of ECOSY (the European Community Organisation of Socialist Youth, the youth wing of the PES), which was held in the Hague, Netherlands in November.

I visited friends in London multiple times (you can get Eurostar tickets for as little as €60 return, make sure you use the Belgian version of the website for cheap fares!), and friends in Prague, Paris/Reims, and Stockholm. I visited Barcelona on my own for a weekend away. Such short trips open one's eyes to the incredible diversity and wealth of Europe. It is impossible not to come away inspired to do more travelling on this remarkable continent.

I also had the opportunity to keep in touch with Alison Pearman at the NZ representation in Brussels, and through her attend a speech by Helen Clark, the Prime Minister, in Brussels early in the internship. Seeing a familiar face in a foreign city is always a pleasure and speaking with the PM and her staff was a nice opportunity when so far from home.

Conclusion

This internship was a remarkable opportunity for me. It came at a point in my own career and life when I could take the time away without too great upheaval, and gave me a much-needed break from academic, work and political commitments at home. In the subjects I learned about, the institutional dynamics I saw at work, the issues of the day (from sustainability to Reform Treaty to the sudden downturn in British Labour fortunes) and the new friends I made, it has been an experience I will never forget.

I can only urge anyone interested in Europe to consider applying for it.

Finally is the task of thanking a few key people. Sarah Coleman for the organising of so much of the Internship, working with Prof Martin Holland, also at NCRE. John Leslie, my supervisor at VUW, without whom I would never have known about the Internship let alone applied. Gina Deerness-Pleisner, for her endless helpful advice and information about what lay ahead.

Alison Pearman and her colleagues at the New Zealand Embassy in Brussels, for their support and encouragement. Kumardev, Julie, Julien and Matti, for being good flatmates. Without exception the staff and stagiaires of the EPLP, who made life fantastic, naming no names to avoid leaving anyone out!

And last but not least, David Martin MEP and Kate Murray, for being wonderful officemates, inspiring friends, and teaching me again that politics is about values, ideas and being at the service of the people.

Jordan Carter
March 2008

jordan@jordancarter.org.nz || +64 21 442 649