

Report:

**NCRE European Parliament
Internship**

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Introduction

The European parliament internship is designed to provide post-graduate students with the experience and privilege of working within the political heart of the European Union (EU). Organised by the National Centre for Research on Europe (NCRE) in association with the New Zealand Embassy in Brussels and the members of the European Parliament (EP), post-graduate students are able to assist a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) for a period of three months. During the time spent in Brussels, it is hoped that the student will gain significant vocational skills and learn of the many complexities that exist within a dynamic, multi-cultural and political environment. Even if working within the parliament may not explicitly relate to a student's research, I have no doubt the experience will be implicit to any study involving the EU and directly benefit the student from a social and vocational perspective. The following describes my experiences and personal reflections as an intern in the EP. It is hoped that this report will aid future interns before they embark on an incredible three months in the epicentre of Europe.

Motivation

Since I was a child, Europe has always fascinated me. The wondrous assortment of cultures, languages and architecture, combined with my father's stories of travelling throughout Europe, sparked a keen interest within me. This curiosity grew as I travelled through Europe, studied at a German High-School and learnt about European history as an undergraduate at both Canterbury University, New Zealand and the University of Konstanz, Germany. As a graduate in the National Centre for Research on Europe I was introduced to the stimulating and highly interesting area of European Union studies. By applying for the internship I hoped to receive the privilege of working in the EP in order to obtain a deeper understanding of the EU institutions, while enhancing my own vocational and personal skills at the same time. I also hoped that by working in the Parliament, my ability to analyse the EU would mature and my motivation to continue in my EU focused academic pursuits would develop. I also entertained the idea that through establishing a better knowledge of EU institutions, I could contribute towards my studies as a masters student.

MEP placement

Due to my knowledge of the German language and culture I attempted to secure a placement in a German MEPs office, through the assistance of Ms Janet Lowe, Councillor at the New Zealand Embassy in Brussels. Unfortunately, I was unable to find a position in a German's office; however, Janet was able to place me with a British MEP, whose interests paralleled with mine. Janet could not have arranged a better MEP. Dr Charles Tannock is heavily involved in Human Rights issues and international relations. My academic and general interests in foreign affairs meant that this particular posting was highly rewarding, exciting and very interesting.

Dr Charles Tannock MEP

Dr Charles Tannock is the Foreign Affairs Spokesman for the UK Conservative delegation and is Vice-President of the Parliament's Human Rights subcommittee. He was elected to the UK Conservative delegation Bureau in December 2005. He is also Vice Chairman to the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Cooperation Committee. Charles is a member on the Committee on Foreign Affairs and Temporary Committee on the alleged use of European countries by the CIA for the transport and illegal detention of prisoners. He is also a substitute member on the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs, Delegation to the EU-Russia Parliamentary Cooperation Committee. Apart from these roles, Charles is also Founder and Coordinator of the EP Friends of India, founder member of the EP Friends of the Commonwealth, a member of the UK Parliamentary Friends of Armenia, honorary EP Parliamentary Adviser to Save the Assyrians Campaign, Anglicans for Israel and the UK Friends of Falun Gong. He is on the Executive Committee of the Conservative Friends of Bangladesh. Charles is also fluent in Portuguese, Spanish, French and Italian.

Assistants and *Stagières*

Silvia Janicinova was Charles full-time assistant and my work colleague. Although the standard work load was often stressful, I was impressed with her ability to keep afloat. Her relaxed, yet professional attitude made working in the office an enjoyable time. I was

quickly given tasks to assist in lightening the load of office work that Silvia had to cope with. I considered myself fortunate to be in an office space, where I was the only other assistant. This meant that I was given more meaningful and interesting tasks and was, thus able to learn a considerable amount of new skills. A usual MEPs office would hold at least two if not three full-time assistants, often with one or two *stagiaires*. One particular office had three assistants, and four *stagiaires*. This meant the *stagiaires* had to ‘fight’ for a task. Due to the immense amount of interns, I did not feel alone as a *stagiaire*. There are often events that bring together interns, such as dinners or receptions, where one is able to meet and make friends with other people of similar age and interests. This is also a good way to ask questions about any difficulties experienced in your office and get some good tips on the inner workings of the Parliament. Most staff are friendly and more than willing to help you find your way in case you get lost.

EPP-ED

Charles is in the largest political group in the Parliament, the European Peoples Party-European Democrats. There are 277 members out of the 785 MEPs (37% of total), which gives the party considerable strength. Indeed, the EPP-ED Group Members hold a range of key positions within the Parliament - including the chairmanships of nine of the EP's 22 committees or subcommittees, seven of its 14 Vice-Presidencies, and three of its five Quaestorships.

Strasbourg

I was fortunate enough to travel and work in the European Parliament in Strasbourg. It was a great experience to be part of the ‘travelling circus,’ - the temporary re-location of the entire European Parliament - for one week. This was, perhaps, the most stressful week for me in the European Parliament. The main reason for this, was that after only being in the EP for two weeks I had to effectively become the primary assistant for one week. It did not start well. Upon arriving to the Parliament after a long five hour journey, I found that the printer was broken, which was a vital piece of equipment in the office. This would not have proved to be a problem except upon leaving the office to find a new cartridge, I could not find my way back; I was utterly lost. To make things worse a

majority of the people I approached for directions spoke little English. Feeling a large responsibility and urge to make a good impression on my MEP, I hurried back with a cartridge 30 minutes late. I don't think he even noticed or cared. Other than this, I soon got into the rhythm of the parliament and found that by the end of the week I was starting to enjoy myself. Indeed, the food in Strasbourg (outside of the Parliament) was fantastic.

Tasks and Responsibilities

I was gradually given more tasks as I proved my abilities and efficiency in the office. I started with general administrative duties. These included answering the phone, e-mailing, filling, organising interviews, dinners, and the occasional reception. I also had to familiarise myself with the various internal and external EP computer programmes, which would enable me to find various texts, drafts, reports or minutes that Charles would demand (for future interns I would stress the need to learn about these various programmes as soon as possible, as it will make your time in the EP a lot less stressful). I would also conduct the occasional research for Charles in order to satisfy his demanding curiosity or contribute to one of his parliamentary speeches. There was also specific parliamentary work that I conducted. This was primarily writing Parliamentary Questions (PQs) to the Commission or Council. This was possibly one of the most enjoyable tasks in the office. It involved, at times, extensive research on a particular question, such as EU administered aid for the prevention of HIV/AIDS in Angola. I would have to write a small and precise statement asking a direct question to either or both EU institutions, which was then checked and signed by Charles (sometimes also co-signed by other MEPs). Apart from this I also attended various committee meetings and took notes for Charles when he was unable to attend. I also contributed to various speeches, such as 'The EU's economic and trade relations with India' or the political dynamics present in Famagusta/Varosha.

A Day in the office of Dr Charles Tannock MEP

Although two days in the Parliament were never the same I will attempt to usher you through a normal day in Charles's office. This, I hope, will provide some insight into the mandatory, day-to-day running of a MEP's office and give an idea as to what future

stagiaires may expect. My day would start with a brisk walk to the parliament. Upon entering the impressive building and passing through the security I would check Charles internal and external mail on my way towards the E block and up to the 14th floor. I would then answer or discard incoming e-mails (an on-going process, which took some time to acquire a sound judgment as to what was important and what was not). Charles would then ask me for (for example) the Karim report and the amendments for another report. I would, at times, be assigned to complete some research on a particular matter that my MEP would need to know. I might then accompany him to various committee meetings depending on which ‘week’ it was (the work in the EP follows a four-week rotational schedule. This would often be divided into committee week, Group Week, Strasbourg week and finally a mini-session week) Silvia and I would also attempt to be at meetings or committees where Charles would speak. Afterwards, we would occasionally comment on his speech, offering praises and the odd bit of constructive criticism. I might then write or research a topic for an upcoming parliamentary question. The day was divided by lunch, which would often mean going into the EP canteen along with everyone else. If I were busy, there were also other cafes in the EP offering a much needed coffee or sandwich. If you had time, there was also a hairdresser, supermarket, Gym and even a meditating room all housed within the EP. At the end of the day – depending on the work-load, usually around 17:30-18:30 – I would make my way home.

Outside the European Parliament

I was fortunate enough to flat with two other kiwis during my stay. They were very helpful and hospitable, helping me with the much needed French phrases, taking me to the best and most bizarre antique markets and providing wholesome friendship. I also meet various people through the European Parliament who quickly became good friends. I cherished the opportunity to learn about different cultural quirks through the various people I meet. Indeed, the main friends that I made held the following nationalities: German, Swedish, Dutch, Portuguese, Slovakian, and Mauritian. Brussels itself has a lot to offer. Some of the highlights were the Horta museum, the Leon Spillaert exhibition at the National Art Gallery, Tunisian and Italian restaurants, Christmas markets, the Manneken Pis (?), Belgium beer, cafés, chocolateries, and amazing art nouveau

architecture. I was also fortunate enough to visit the New Zealand embassy on numerous occasions. HE Mr Wade Armstrong, Janet Lowe and the rest of the staff made me feel very welcome. It was a great reassurance to know that I had someone to turn too if I had any problems.

Personal Reflections

Looking back at what has possibly been the most extraordinary three months of my life, various observations that I made have either reinforced or shattered my pre-conceived ideas of the EU and politics. I came to the Parliament with an understanding that it played a vital role for the EU, but maintained limited power to actually affect EU legislation. I quickly learned that despite the limited capabilities of the EP, its parliamentarians had a voice and made themselves heard. Although, I personally feel there remains a lack in transparency between European Politicians and their constituencies, I was surprised at the amount of interviews taken by major European television, radio and News Paper networks. Indeed, my MEP was interviewed by BBC, Live French television, Spanish radio and various other reporters. My MEP once stated that media was the 'life-blood' of his office. Another interesting element in the EP that I had not expected was the amount of 'wining and dining' between the MEPs and various embassies. This not only reflected the rising importance of the EP, but also illustrated which countries felt that influencing the MEPs would contribute to their own agendas.

Politicians seldom differ from country to country; my interest and knowledge of New Zealand's political landscape and its diplomatic efforts have increased. Living and working in such a dynamic and multi-cultural environment also brought me closer to the social and political issues facing Europe. One issue in particular was Islam in Europe: an important and contentious topic that is becoming sensitive to almost every European citizen, including the European Parliamentarians. It was fascinating to hear a wide range of views from well educated and intelligent people, who would condemn or praise Islam in Europe. As this is not a topic so widely discussed in New Zealand, it was interesting to understand the views and convictions of people from a relatively non-biased position. Other issues discussed put flesh on the bones of issues that I had previously learned from

text books. This has not only given me a fresh zeal for studying European Studies, but added to my perspective on a number of topics from the Swedish economy, Danish political elections, EU aid development in Angola or the EU's police force in Israel.

I was also pleasantly surprised at my MEPs passionate commitment to democracy, Human Rights and rule of law. Although not all MEPs are as ideologically motivated as Charles, it was a pleasure to observe someone who was willing to push political boundaries, keeping the people of Europe at the heart of his political agenda. Unlike Charles, there were certainly other MEPs who were not as committed. I often attended committee meetings with very few parliamentarians and heard stories of some who would not even turn up in Brussels for weeks.

When opportunity knocks

There were countless opportunities to meet people, network and learn about the diversity existent in European culture and politics. Numerous receptions were held in the European Parliament. These could range from the promotion of new EU-transport legislation to traditional Mongolian singers, musicians, food and wine. Most of these were open to *stagiaires*, who took full advantage of this special, European-style 'education.' Other conferences, summits and meetings were also possible to attend, as a representative of my MEP. This provided me with a great, general overview of current EU relations with other international actors. A few highlights of speeches or meetings I attended included: a NATO conference entitled, 'NATO: Overdue or Over-stretched,' designed as a lead up to its Summit in Riga; a speech in the EP by Javier Solana; a special political meeting with the Venezuelan political opposition; a speech by General Pervez Masharraf; the annual EU-Indonesia summit; and a speech by Ukrainian Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich. If there was one piece of advice to give to the next intern it would be to take advantage of every opportunity – make the most of your time!

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