

## **Internship report**

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### **1. Introduction**

This report describes the time I spent as an intern at the European Parliament in Brussels, from May to the end of July 2006. The EU internship programme forms part of the EUCN's wider objective to increase New Zealanders' awareness and understanding of the European Union. The internships are designed to provide post-graduates with an opportunity to experience working for an MEP as well as to assist their own research. This report will outline my motivation for applying for the internship, the MEP I was assigned to, Dagmar Roth-Behrendt, and my experiences during the internship itself.

#### ***Motivation for applying for the internship***

I have always had an interest in Europe, and with a Swiss mother I grew up with a strong connection to Europe (although not necessarily the EU as Switzerland is not part of it). My academic background was originally in Natural Resource Management but more recently I was working in and doing a PhD in agricultural economics, focusing on the impact of agricultural and trade policies on the environment. The Common Agricultural Policy of the EU featured strongly in my research and I found it fascinating. As I was coming to the end of my PhD I felt the internship would give me a unique opportunity to experience life in one of the central decision-making institutions of the EU. I saw the internship as a way to kick-start a career in Europe, and to dispel any potential criticisms of my perhaps not having as strong an understanding of the EU as Europeans do (interestingly I was to learn that the knowledge of even well-educated Europeans of the EU was surprisingly poor!). Although I had studied specific aspects of European policy I had never studied the EU as an institution in itself nor its processes in any detail, so I was sure the internship would provide me with a first-hand understanding of the role and the processes of the parliament, as well as its relationship with the Council and the Commission.

#### ***Preparation***

Once I learnt that I had been successful in applying for the internship, it was left to the capable hands of Janet Lowe at the NZ Embassy in Brussels to match me with an

appropriate MEP. As I speak German, it was thought it would be interesting to match an intern with an MEP from a non-English-speaking country for the first time. Janet managed to arrange a position with a German Socialist MEP, Dagmar Roth-Behrendt. I was a little nervous about being plunged into a German-speaking environment at this level, but thought it would be a very worthwhile challenge. I spoke with one of Dagmar's assistants first on the phone first, I think to 'test' my German ability!

Since applying for the internship I had actually already accepted a three-year contract at the University of East Anglia in Norwich in the UK, which was to start in March 2006, but I still wanted to go ahead with the internship, and fortunately my new employers were willing to let me start work with them in March and then be away from May – July. I therefore was already living in the UK by the time I was due to go to Brussels. In some ways this made the planning and organisation easier, and my new colleagues in Norwich gave me helpful advice and tips about many aspects of Brussels, from their own experience. In addition, Brussels was now only a Eurostar journey from my new home so it was perhaps not such a big move as if I'd been going straight from New Zealand.

## **2. Dagmar Roth-Behrendt**

Dagmar Roth-Behrendt is an active member of the parliament. At the time I was there, she was a vice-president (one of 14 vice-presidents) and a very committed MEP. As such, this was to be a very stimulating and challenging experience. Trained as a lawyer, and working in local politics in Germany from 1985, Dagmar has been an MEP since 1989, and a vice president from 2004 until the beginning of 2007. She is a member of the Environment, public health and food safety committee, and on the delegation for relations with Switzerland, Iceland and Norway and to the European Economic Area (EEA) Joint Parliamentary Committee. From 1989 – 2004 Dagmar was the Socialist Party Group spokesperson for the Environment, Public Health and Consumer Protection. In 1997 she was chair of the temporary committee instructed to monitor the action taken on the recommendations made concerning BSE. Currently she is the Representative of the European Parliament at the High Level Pharmaceutical Forum, Chairperson of the Mirror-Group of the European Commission's Partnership for Alternative Approaches to Animal Testing (EPAA), Chairperson of the European Parliament's Working Party on Parliamentary Reform, and a Substitute Member of the Committee on Legal affairs and the Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection. Dagmar is also a member of the

Parliamentarian Intergroup on Welfare and Conservation of Animals and on Consumer Rights.

### ***The staff***

Dagmar has two permanent assistants, Frank Buecheler and Cecile Feuerhahn. Frank is also a lawyer by training and provides the main substantial assistance to Dagmar, particularly in drafting and going over legal texts. Many assistants have a legal background and I can see why this is invaluable. Cecile provides more administrative assistance, although she has a masters degree in political studies. In addition to the expected tasks such dealing with enquiries, attending meetings, drafting letters etc, Cecile's job description was extensive, including visits to Dagmar's house in her absence to give instructions to the cleaning lady, as well as more routine tasks such as organising travel and hotels for Dagmar. Both Frank and Cecile worked dedicatedly and very long hours.

In addition to Frank and Cecile, Dagmar had a further assistant, Michael Manz, who was there to provide support for her in her role as vice-president. I never quite grasped what these duties were, despite sharing an office with Michael and becoming good friends with him!

All of the assistants were fluent in German, French and English, and Michael in Italian and Frank in Spanish. It was truly humbling to listen to them answer the phone and then carry out a conversation in any one of those languages. I felt very inadequate with my rusty German and school-girl French; although I was able to help them with their English, as well as provide considerable amusement to them with my Swiss accent and occasional accidental use of Swiss dialect words instead of High German.

### ***The office***

I feel Dagmar's actual office warrants a mention in this report. Because of her vice-president role, Dagmar had a very spacious corner office on the 12<sup>th</sup> floor of the parliament building, with two separate offices in addition to her own office and bathroom, with fantastic views over Brussels. This was also fortuitous for me, as there was enough space for me to have my own desk and computer, something not to be taken for granted as an intern (or stagiaire). Dagmar's own office was the size of a good sized living room, complete with couches, tables, and TV, which proved to be an excellent venue for hosting other German assistants during the Football World Cup

games! Interestingly, the one thing Dagmar's office was missing was a computer, in fact Dagmar hardly used a computer at all. All emails and anything requiring a computer were dealt with by her staff.

### ***The Socialist Party***

The Party of European Socialists (PES or PSE in German) brings together the Socialist, Social Democratic, and Labour Parties of the European Union. There are currently eight parties in the EU parliament. MEPs are grouped by political affinity and not by nationality; therefore the physical location of the office was in the same part of the building as other PES members. Initially I was slightly sceptical about what a socialist party was all about – but I soon realised they were not radical communists but actually held similar values and beliefs to my own. The party stands for, among other things, defending human rights, protecting the environment, creating jobs and prosperity, and equality. The PES party is the second largest in the parliament, after the European Peoples' Party and the European Democrats (EPP-ED).

### **3. Life as an intern**

The first day at the parliament was somewhat nerve-racking. I was apprehensive as to how my German would fare as I was a little rusty, especially speaking with actual Germans! The first day was a little overwhelming as I adjusted to the different accents and settled into my desk and was introduced to my colleagues and other MEPs and their assistants. Dagmar was due to come in that day (she travels a lot so is often not there) and the assistants were focused on preparing for her "arrival". Dagmar appeared almost larger than life when she arrived, with incredible energy and speed and personality. She paid me the honour of having lunch with all of us in the canteen (which I was to learn was very unusual as she doesn't like the office being unattended).

Unfortunately however that was the first and only day I would spend with Dagmar at the parliament. The following day she was diagnosed with breast cancer and had to begin treatment immediately (she has since made a full recovery and is back at work). This clearly left the office in disarray and I was left to myself to a large extent for the next week or so while they sorted out what was to happen. Luckily (for me!) I had some minor work to do on my Phd before it was submitted so these unfortunate circumstances gave me a chance to work on this.

### ***My responsibilities and duties***

The office continued running while Dagmar was away, on a much quieter and more relaxed scale however. Dagmar was a large personality and clearly demanded a lot from her staff, so it was a shame not to be able to experience working in that sort of environment. It was also a shame not to be able to witness her in action in debates or committee meetings. I heard her on tapes and videos and she appears to be a very strong-minded charismatic person. However, there was still plenty to do. My tasks included answering the phone (which was initially rather traumatic, not necessarily being able to either understand the question, or if I did, to be able to answer it!). My German did improve significantly during the time I was there. Other tasks involved writing letters in English, or summarising English texts. Occasionally Frank asked me to go through legal documents in English with him and I became very aware of the important subtleties in legal language, and was very impressed with Frank's ability to pick this up in a second language.

I was also able to attend Environment Committee meetings and hearings, which were invaluable experiences for me in relation to my current job. At the time the Environment Committee was dealing with a Thematic Strategy on Air Quality, which I was able to follow through from early meetings to the decision to carry out an impact analysis during the summer break, before it was finally voted on. This was a fascinating process to experience, as each political party had its own agenda, and reaching a compromise was not easy. In the beginning Frank gave me a summary of various key MEPs and their political views and habits in meetings. Various experts from academia and industry came to provide evidence at hearings, which was then either taken into account or ignored depending on the ultimate agenda of the MEP. One thing I found slightly frustrating was not being able to ask questions or participate myself in these debates, particularly in the hearings as being an academic myself it is second nature to question and become involved. Before Environment Committee meetings, the PES members of the Environment Committee would have a preparatory meeting to discuss updates, their strategy, and which way they would vote if necessary. This also provided a fascinating insight into the way the parliament works.

I also occasionally attended socialist party meetings as well. There were also several one-off experiences, such as showing German school pupils around the parliament, and attending various drinks receptions and dinners.

Initially simply being in the meetings was a novelty which I enjoyed. The endless water bottles and the waiters who came round serving tea or coffee were an unknown luxury. The simultaneous translations into all EU languages was very impressive and I have huge admiration for the translators. Also the relaxed manner in which proceedings were carried out, with people wandering in and out and moving around to chat to their colleagues (of course always about very pressing political matters!) was not something I was used to. It was also impressive to be walking through the parliament building and see politicians being interviewed live by television crews.

I am convinced however, that if Dagmar had been at work the experience would have been very different. As it was, my days were relatively relaxed, beginning around 8.30 – 9am with a coffee for Frank and myself, and I usually left around 6pm. When Dagmar was around, Frank and Cecile would often be working till much later, often till 9 or 10pm. In addition, Cecile and I in particular would go out for lunch and sometimes a coffee in the afternoon, which apparently was never possible in normal circumstances. Our afternoon routine was for someone (usually Cecile or I) to run down to the shop to get a “ballisto” (chocolate covered cereal bars we convinced ourselves were good for us). So while it is a shame that I was not able to experience Dagmar in action, the experience I had was certainly more relaxed

### ***Strasbourg***

Because Dagmar was not on board, Frank and Michael only went to Strasbourg occasionally, and there was no need or opportunity for me to make this trip. I have to say although it would have been interesting to experience, I was quite happy not to participate in what I personally feel is an unnecessary and exorbitant waste of taxpayers’ money, not to mention the waste of fuel and resources in travelling there. The cost of sending the same people to travel to Strasbourg each month to have exactly the same meetings that they would have in Brussels, does not seem to me to be justified in any way. Interestingly, the perception is widespread through the UK at least, that the parliament is based permanently in Strasbourg.

### ***Social life in the parliament***

There are many stagiaires in the parliament, however I was generally older than them (some of them were straight out of school or perhaps doing their first degree) and not having so much in common with the ones I met regularly in the German offices, I tended to spend my time with Dagmar’s assistants and their friends. I think if I had been in an English-speaking office I may have had a different experience. Although

my German is reasonably fluent it is not my first language and I never felt as at ease and able to express myself as I do in English. In addition, there are subtle (!) cultural differences in sense of humour which play a role in social settings. However I did feel very welcome with Frank, Cecile and Michael who were fantastic to me: they showed me around the parliament as much as they could, they gave me advice for things to do in Brussels, they included me in their office gossip, they introduced me to their friends and included me in their social activities.

A major theme throughout my time in the parliament was the football world cup. This may sound trivial but it is one of my overriding memories of my time there. When I began, Michael informed me of the number of days till it began, and I was completely disinterested. However, being in an office of football crazy fans begins to rub off, and with many of the nations being represented at the parliament, the atmosphere was charged. I of course had to support Germany, and depending on what time the game was played, we would either watch it in Dagmar's office, with many other German supporters coming to use our facilities, or we would congregate at a bar on Place Lux outside the parliament. It was an incredible experience as so many of the nationalities were represented in the parliament. The world cup served to remind me what a truly international institution I was a part of.

### ***A New Zealander in the parliament***

Why a New Zealander should be doing an internship in the EU parliament was a difficult concept for many to grasp. Most people were of course very interested in New Zealand, however the connection or the relationship with the EU was not clear to many, particularly other German stagiaires or assistants. Again, I think if I was in an English-speaking office there would be a greater understanding perhaps of the relationships between the EU and New Zealand (or I would be able to explain it better in English at least!). In addition, the fact that I had a Swiss accent was slightly confusing as well so I think many of my co-stagiaires and assistants regarded me as something of an anomaly. However, I did my best to discuss and inform people about New Zealand as a country and its relations with the EU.

I had practically no contact with English-speaking MEPs, assistants or stagiaires while I was at the parliament, which had a significant effect on my experience. I was immersed in a German world during my working days, which provided me with a cultural and a language experience in addition to the parliamentary one. I enjoyed the challenge and the insights this gave me, however as I mentioned previously,

sometimes it would have been a relief to interact with English-speakers, just to be able to express myself more easily. Although most people in the parliament are able to speak English, they speak “Euro-english”, and I felt it was better to speak German wherever I could. My colleagues in Dagmar’s office joked about how the English need to learn to speak Euro-english and then they would be more easily understood. At times I felt frustrated as I was sure I would have been able to contribute more as a stagiaire if I had been working in English; however overall the opportunity to gain the additional benefit of a different language and culture was definitely worthwhile.

### ***Life in Brussels outside the parliament***

I lived in a one bedroom apartment not far from the parliament. This was perhaps not the cheapest option but it was convenient. This area of Brussels is not as lively as others during the weekends, as it is populated by EU employees who often return to their homes during the weekends. However, Brussels is a very compact city and it was a 25min walk into the centre, and the neighbouring suburbs of Louise and Ixelles provided plenty of opportunities for entertainment. Living in Brussels was for me as much of the experience as working in the parliament. I found Brussels an interesting and lively city, if sometimes somewhat frustrating with the Belgians’ less than efficient attitude to many things. The summer was stiflingly hot, with temperatures sometimes reaching 40 degrees C, and the streets had the smell of cities with lots of dogs and drains that may need replacing...! However aside from this, there was never a shortage of things to do. I had several visits from various friends so became quite a proficient tour guide. The endless selection of Belgian beer, together with the moules and frites with mayonnaise are some of my best memories! There is a beautiful forest on the outskirts of the city and several parks (which proved to be a lifesaver in the hot evenings), and the Parc Cinquinaire became my favourite for early morning runs. The shopping is quite good, and the exclusive chocolate shops/galleries in Sablon are a must-see. I was certainly never lost for things to do. Contrary to my expectations, opportunities for excellent dining are plenty. Belgian coffee and chocolate were also a pleasant surprise. In addition, Brussels is well-placed for visiting other parts of Europe: I of course went back to the UK several times, however Amsterdam is only a two hour journey. Antwerp is a stylish and pleasant city to visit; Bruges is pretty if somewhat touristy. The seaside is only an hour’s drive from Brussels by car.

Janet Lowe and her colleagues at the NZ Embassy were a great source of support, especially during the preparatory stages of my time in Brussels. It was reassuring to

know that they were only a phone call away if anything went wrong, and Janet very kindly invited me for several meals and visits to the Embassy.

#### **4. Conclusion**

My time at the European Parliament was unforgettable, and the insight I gained is unparalleled. In terms of understanding the EU institutions, actually participating in one is the best way to really comprehend the process. The experience of living in a city like Brussels was also a novelty for me, one which I enjoyed very much. I occasionally go to Brussels in my current job, and am always reminded of my time there. I would recommend the experience to any prospective interns; it's an opportunity that doesn't present itself very often and will have lifelong benefits. I agree with other interns that it can be very disruptive to one's personal life; however certainly from a professional perspective the benefits are worthwhile.

I would like to thank the NCRE for the opportunity and particularly Martin Holland for his efforts in making this internship possible. My gratitude and thanks goes to Janet Lowe for her kind support in facilitating my placement and ensuring my time in Brussels ran smoothly.

In addition I would of course like to thank Dagmar herself and particularly her team who made the experience personal, memorable, and fun: Cecile, Frank, and Michael. Also thanks to the other assistants and stagiaires who made me feel very welcome.