
Profile of a Unique Educational Experience

The British Columbia Legislative Internship Program

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Canadian legislative intern programmes trace their roots back to March 10, 1969, when Alfred Hales, the Member for Parliament for Wellington, presented a motion to the House of Commons proposing an internship program be established to promote a better understanding of the national legislative process. This motion, gained the support of The Canadian Political Science Association, the Speaker of the House of Commons and party leaders. By September 1970, ten of Canada's brightest university graduates were invited to Parliament Hill to participate in what former Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson described as, the most important experiment in parliamentary activity since 1867. Inspired by these events in Ottawa, the late Dr. Walter Young, a political scientist at the University of Victoria, advanced the idea of a political internship program catered to the needs of the British Columbia Legislature. By January 1976, Dr. Young secured the necessary support of the Speaker of the Legislature and BC's political parties and opened the doors to British Columbia's brightest university graduates for a five-month legislative internship program. This article describes the evolution and innovations of the BC Legislative Internship Program (BCLIP). It is written from the perspective of five interns who served in the 2003 BCLIP.

BCLIP is a six-month program for recent university graduates seeking to supplement their academic interest in politics with hands-on experience in the Executive and Legislative branches of government. The program operates from January to June each year, coinciding with the province's spring legislative session. While initially modeled after Ottawa's PIP, the BCLIP has developed several unique characteristics that distinguish it from its federal counterpart. While the PIP and other provincial legislative internship programs receive funding from both public and private sources, the BCLIP relies solely on the public funds provided by the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. Remaining publicly funded reaffirms the program's non-partisan and public status. The BCLIP is also distinct

from the federal program in that it offers Interns the opportunity to experience the executive branch, whereas the federal model focuses exclusively on the legislative. This aspect of the program will be discussed at length below.

Throughout the course of the program, Interns gain experience in three distinct areas: Administrative, Legislative, and Academic. Each of these phases offers a unique learning experience in public affairs; by observing the daily workings of the Executive and Legislative branches, Interns supplement their theoretical knowledge of politics and parliamentary democracy with hands-on experience that cannot be replicated in any other environment.

The Canadian Parliamentary Internship Program: British Columbia and Ottawa

| Program | Founded | Number of Interns | Number of Applicants (Approx.) | Duration of Program (Months) | Source of Funding | Monthly Stipend (\$) |
|------------------|---------|-------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| British Columbia | 1976 | 10 | 100 | 6 | Public | \$2,300. |
| Ottawa | 1970 | 10 | 400 | 10 | Private ¹ | \$1,450. |

1. The PIP obtains annual administrative grants from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada that covers approximately 25 percent of the budget.

Administrative Phase (Ministry Assignment)

At the beginning of the program, Interns are given the opportunity to spend six weeks in a ministry office. Interns submit the names of three ministries of their choice, and with luck, Interns are almost always placed with a portfolio of their choosing. During this period, Interns are immersed in the daily operations and functions of government ministries by working as researchers, junior policy analysts, or administrative assistants.

In the 2003 BCLIP, Interns were assigned to the following ministries: Attorney General and Minister Responsible for Treaty Negotiations; Children and Family Development; Community, Aboriginal, and Women's Services; Competition, Science and Enterprise; Finance; Intergovernmental Relations Secretariat; Public Safety and Solicitor General; Transportation; Sustainable Resource Management; Water, Land and Air Protection.

Ministry experiences and assignments varied extensively among interns. While one intern flew to Vancouver and met with B.C. First Nations' Chiefs, others assisted in drafting legislation. One intern spent an entire week in Vancouver consulting with the Directors of provincial multicultural agencies, while another intern worked on a protocol manual for visiting foreign dignitaries and drafted briefing notes on the implications of free trade.

The 2003 Interns experienced an innovation in the Administrative component of the program through the implementation of a mentor model, whereby senior ministry staff helped ease Interns into their ministry experiences. This model helped to establish a comfortable and informal relationship between Interns and their ministry mentors, where education and learning were the primary considerations. This year's Interns felt that the mentor model and the ministry assignments were ex-

tremely useful in introducing interns to the administrative processes of government.

Legislative Phase (Caucus Assignment)

After completion of the administrative phase, Interns were sent to the Parliament Buildings to work in a party caucus. While Interns have the opportunity to submit their caucus preferences in confidence, each person must be prepared to work for either caucus, keeping with the program's non-partisanship. Interns also submitted a secret ballot indicating how they thought the group should be distributed within the caucus assignments. In the end, seven Interns were assigned to Government Caucus, with a breakdown of four to research, one assigned to the research director, and two to communications. Three Interns were allocated to Opposition Caucus. The selection process resulted in a satisfactory arrangement for all Interns and caucuses involved.

The duties of Interns in caucus assignments varied greatly. On the government side, Communications Interns worked for Caucus at large which gave them a wide variety of perspectives. They wrote news releases, speeches, responded to correspondence and worked on MLA websites. The Research Interns in Government caucus were assigned to a particular Research Officer or to the Director, filling a myriad of research requests ranging from the answer to a single question - to a project that might last two or three days. Research Interns did extensive media searches, dug through Internet websites, scrolled through Hansard and collected news releases.

Opposition Interns participated in activities around Question Period (QP), estimates and legislation and wrote speeches, articles for newspapers, radio addresses and responded to correspondence. They had significant daily contact with their MLAs and participated in tasks or projects that had immediate impact on the work of caucus. As one Opposition Intern describes, "Joy

[MacPhail] and Jenny [Kwan] know who we are and are always grateful for the work we do for caucus. From Day 1, we were immediately incorporated into caucus and were given work of the highest confidence and importance. There is a feeling of cohesion and trust that develops quickly... and you get to see your work in action in the House almost immediately."

On the Government side, a new innovation was introduced for the Legislative phase. Interns were given the opportunity to have an MLA mentor, who they could accompany to their home constituency to observe the workings of a local constituency office. Some interns accompanied Cabinet Ministers to their home ridings and attended formal meetings and luncheons, while also gaining the opportunity to get to know the MLA as an individual. All government interns appreciated the opportunity to get to know their MLA mentors and the opportunities for learning they provided throughout the caucus assignment.

The 2003 BCLIP had to cope with two interesting dynamics that would influence the Legislative experience. The first, a product of 'first past the post' electoral system and unique to this 37th Parliament, was that the Government held a significant majority in the House with 77 seats, with only two seats held by the Opposition. Due to their small number, the Opposition does not hold Official Opposition status, and consequently, they operate with a somewhat reduced budget and limited resources. In addition, Opposition member Jenny Kwan left for six weeks maternity leave during the Spring session. As a result, the Opposition interns were desperately needed to assist in the additional workload pressures. In such a small Opposition Caucus, interns found they were quickly immersed in responsibilities as equal members of the team.

Government interns were also impacted by the size of the majority. With such a large majority in the House, the workload on Government Caucus staff was greater than some previous years and as a result Interns were challenged with a fast pace and constant deadlines. In addition, a large staff meant compressed workspaces and close contact with other staff. Interns were essentially located in the connected spaces between research and communications officers, and as a result the through-traffic included MLAs, Ministers, and an occasional surprise visit from the Premier. The atmosphere was both intense and collegial, allowing for lively and thought provoking discussions and strong group camaraderie.

The second dynamic affecting Intern caucus experiences is a characteristic of British Columbia politics and is likely to be a recurring theme for interns in the BCLIP. As an academic and non-partisan program, Interns were

faced with the challenge of entering a highly politicized and partisan caucus assignment. BC politics continues to be, even in an unbalanced House, highly polarized. The challenge for Caucus is to take *carte blanche* ten academically oriented, strong-minded and non-partisan individuals and bring them into a position that requires discretion and utmost confidentiality. Interns must keep their own views somewhere behind the screen within this adversarial climate, where the "other side" is generally characterized by its most extreme political positions. This combative and competitive environment also has an impact on the Interns as a group. The Caucus experience, by necessity, separates the Interns into two groups, in which their activities must be secret and discussions about their experiences somewhat guarded. Immersed suddenly into partisan perspectives that hold a long history of relationships and events, the Intern cannot help but be affected. The climate is both tremendously exciting and also at times disconcerting. But above all, the experience in the Legislative branch was fascinating for all Interns, regardless of their position.

Academic Phase

The third feature of the BCLIP is the academic emphasis of the program. Interns supplement their academic training with experiential learning by participating in educational and intellectual activities. This academic emphasis is reflected in the program's association with British Columbia universities, which provide credit for students already enrolled in a Masters program in political science.

Interns participate in a variety of activities that enhance and provide an academic 'grounding' in relation to the Intern's experience in the program. The Academic Director, Professor Paul Tennant of University of British Columbia, and the Program Director, Ms. Karen Aitken, coordinate these activities. On Academic Day, professors from universities across British Columbia came to the Legislature and conduct presentations on contemporary political issues, followed by an open and critical exchange with Interns. These presentations provided the Interns with valuable academic critiques surrounding current issues in British Columbia politics.

Interns also participated in Education Week, an opportunity to meet with British Columbia's prominent political and community leaders. In their three days in Vancouver and two days in Victoria, Interns met with a variety of people including Mayors Larry Campbell (City of Vancouver) and Alan Lowe (City of Victoria), Michael Walker of the Fraser Institute, Seth Klein from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, labour leader Jim Sinclair, non-profits such as the Vancouver

Food Bank, and dignitaries such as U.S. Consul General Luis Arreaga.

There have been two recent innovations in the BCLIP geared toward academic and educational experience this year. First, the addition of a Judicial Day allowed Interns to meet with members of the court bench and observe a variety of proceedings in the Law courts. This year, Interns were fortunate to meet with the Ernest Qwantz, provincial judge, who provided invaluable insight into the role of the judiciary. Second, a Mock Parliament Day was initiated, giving Interns the opportunity to emulate and experience the political process from the position of an MLA. Interns debated sections of legislation currently before the House in an attempt to understand the com-

plexity of the issues and the importance of debating controversial policy changes.

Conclusion

Since the early 1970s, parliamentary and legislative internship programs have become important parts of Canada's political landscape. While their reach is limited to a select few university students, the impact of these programs has been immense. The BCLIP has quickly evolved into a unique educational experience for its participants while helping to build the public's knowledge about British Columbia's legislative and political processes.