
Observations on Youth Engagement in Parliamentary Politics

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Low levels of youth voter turnout in recent elections have caused public concern about the disengagement of young people's interest in parliamentary politics. In this article, the authors argue that legislative internship programmes and the presence of young legislators are both counter-examples to the trend of youth disengagement and evidence that some young people are actively involved in parliamentary politics. Drawing upon their experience as legislative interns in British Columbia, they offer a few strategies for youth engagement.

In recent years, parliamentarians and the public alike have decried the decline of youth engagement in parliamentary politics. This disengagement is most clearly evident in low youth voter turnout for provincial and federal elections.¹ For example, in the 2011 federal election 38.8 per cent of eligible voters aged 18-24 years cast a ballot.² In the 2009 British Columbia provincial election, only 26.9 per cent of eligible voters aged 18-24 years voted and 33.69 per cent of eligible voters aged 25-34 voted.³ Many young people are not voting which threatens the representative nature of our democratic institutions.

Although low youth voter turnout indicates disengagement, counter-examples to this trend exist. As current legislative interns in B.C., we contend that some young people are meaningfully engaged in learning about and participating in parliamentary politics. In addition to the existence of legislative internship programmes across the country, there are youth who are actively involved in parliamentary politics as federal and provincial legislators. The purpose of this article is two-fold: first, to discuss the role of legislative internship programmes in engaging youth in federal and provincial politics; and, second, to document the presence of young legislators in Ottawa and B.C. We conclude by offering a few suggestions for youth engagement strategies inspired by our experiences as legislative interns.

Internship Programmes as a Path to Engagement

Legislative internship programmes give recent university graduates the opportunity to participate in the provincial or federal legislative process. For example, during the six-month B.C. Legislative Internship Programme (BCLIP), interns are assigned to a caucus, either Government or Opposition, while the House is in session. In addition to working with a Caucus, interns take on a placement in a provincial Ministry. Legislative internship programmes across Canada have competitive application processes and attract a significant number of applications. In the past three years, the BCLIP has received 196 applications for 30 positions (10 each year). David Mitchell, a former B.C. legislative intern writing in the *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, said that internship programmes in Canada “provide long-term benefits to the country by educating a knowledgeable group of young people about the parliamentary process.”⁴ In effect, legislative internship programmes create parliamentary ambassadors.

During the BCLIP, interns engage with other federal and provincial interns through educational visits that provide an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of other parliamentary jurisdictions. This year the B.C. interns were fortunate to travel to Ottawa and Olympia, Washington to visit with Parliamentary Internship Programme interns and the Washington State legislative interns, respectively. In addition, the BCLIP hosted the Washington State interns, and the Ontario Legislative Internship Programme (OLIP) interns in Victoria.

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Travelling to other jurisdictions and hosting interns in Victoria presented an opportunity to compare internship programmes and share stories about different programme experiences. For example, the Ontario interns were interested in learning about the BCLIP's unique Ministry placements, and as such we were able to share our thoughts on the differences between caucus and Ministry work. Accordingly, we were able to learn about presenting academic papers at the Canadian Political Science Association annual conference, which is a programme component unique to the OLIP.

In addition to engaging in discussion, visiting and hosting interns also provided an opportunity to compare parliamentary practices in other jurisdictions. While in Ottawa, we attended federal Question Period and noted how it differs from Question Period in B.C., most obviously in its scale. In Washington State we were able to observe a bicameral system at the state level, which contrasts the unicameral system in B.C. Overall, internship exchanges provide important opportunities for interns to network with other politically engaged youth, including young legislators, and to broaden their knowledge of parliamentary politics.

The number of BCLIP alumni who continue to participate in parliamentary politics throughout their careers is a testament to the value of the programme. Former BCLIP interns have held cabinet positions in B.C., and become Deputy Ministers, assistant Deputy Ministers, communications directors, and government and opposition research officers. Although employment data on former BCLIP interns is incomplete, it is clear that many programme graduates work at legislatures or in the public sector. Mitchell described legislative internship programmes as a "unique Canadian success story."⁵ Perhaps, the greatest indicator of their impact has been their ability to inspire youth to pursue careers in which they continue to be engaged in parliamentary politics.

Young Legislators in Canada and B.C.

In addition to legislative internship programmes, the presence of young representatives in federal and provincial legislatures is convincing evidence of youth engagement and has the potential to inspire greater youth interest in politics. Young parliamentarians have a role to play in mentoring and advocating for youth. For the purpose of this paper, we borrow Lewis' definition of young legislators as those aged 40 and under.⁶ As legislative interns, we had the opportunity to meet and work with young parliamentarians both in Ottawa and at the B.C. Legislative Assembly.

The 2011 federal election saw an increase in the number of young MPs. The average age of parliamentarians dropped from 52 in the 40th Parliament to 51 in the 41st Parliament and there are currently 51 MPs under the age of 40 representing various regions of Canada at the federal level.

During our visit to Ottawa, we had the opportunity to meet with some of these young MPs. For example, we met with NDP MP Pierre-Luc Dusseault who was 19 years of age on election day, making him the youngest MP ever elected in Canada. We also met with NDP MP Laurin Liu who was elected at the age of 20. Both Dusseault and Liu spoke about the challenges of sitting in the House as a young Member, including media scrutiny. The 'Orange Wave' of newly elected NDP MPs, who formed the Official Opposition, has also created a youth caucus where young MPs meet to discuss issues relevant to Canadian youth.

The federal Liberals did not share the same boost of youthful representation in the 2011 federal election; however, the party elected Justin Trudeau, 42, as their new leader in 2013, making him the second youngest leader in the party's history. At our meeting with Trudeau in Ottawa, he described engaging with youth as a priority for the Liberal Party under his leadership. He said he sees youth as an integral part of Canada's future and their participation and voice as necessary in Canadian politics.

Trudeau's recent win in the Liberal leadership race has provided a Canadian example of harnessing the power of social media to engage young Canadians. During the leadership campaign, Trudeau had more Twitter followers than the other five candidates combined. Trudeau now has over 230,000 followers on Twitter, many of whom are youth, and connects with Canadians on an almost daily basis via social media tools including Facebook and Instagram.

Conservative MP Andrew Scheer became the youngest Speaker of the House in Canadian history at age 32 following the 2011 election. During a meeting with the BCLIP in Ottawa, he spoke about the honour of the role and the challenges associated with managing a House of 308 members. Both Trudeau (despite being slightly older than our definition of young politicians) and Speaker Scheer represent young people with positions of great political importance.

In contrast to the federal parliament, the B.C. legislature has seen fewer young legislators elected in recent years; however, in a similar light to the federal level, young MLAs in B.C. do hold important positions within the Legislative Assembly. For example, B.C.



The 2013 B.C. Legislative Interns (left to right): Vanesa Tomasino Rodriguez, Braeden Wiens, Thomas Lattimer, Emma Fraser, Jared Marley, Rebecca Whitmore, Stephen Satterfield, Maya Fernandez and Kate Russell.

Liberal Michelle Stilwell, elected in 2013, currently holds the position of Government Caucus chair. Across the aisle, both Michelle Mungall and Spencer Chandra Herbert of the B.C. NDP are responsible for significant critic portfolios. Mungall, who was first elected in 2009 when she was 31, currently serves as Opposition Critic for Social Development and previously served as chair of the NDP's Women's Caucus. Chandra Herbert, 33, has held a number of critic portfolios and was appointed Opposition Critic for the Environment during the first session of the 40th Parliament. In the wake of the 2013 election, Jennifer Rice, 38, and Jane Shin, 34, joined Mungall and Chandra Herbert as young NDP MLAs. Participants in the 2014 BCLIP will have the opportunity to work with and learn from these young legislators.

As the debate on youth apathy in parliamentary politics continues, Canada and B.C. have seen a strong contingent of young representatives emerge. By prioritizing meetings with legislative interns and

other youth, young legislators can help counter the stereotype of youth disengagement.

Recommendations for Enhancing Youth Engagement

A majority of young Canadians are not voting, and youth in general are often disengaged from the electoral process and parliamentary politics. This is a serious concern because it threatens the political representation of youth and stalls progress on issues that impact young people. While Canada and B.C. have young legislators, more work on the issue of youth engagement needs to happen.

As engaged youth who have gained parliamentary knowledge from our internship experience, we propose three recommendations for increasing youth engagement in parliamentary politics:

1. We recommend that legislative internship programmes continue at both the provincial and federal level. These programmes give youth opportunities to work in parliamentary politics and to learn about the systems

through which policy decisions are made. The expansion of these programmes to all provinces and territories would provide a means to encourage young people across Canada to become parliamentary ambassadors.

2. More opportunities for young legislators to meet with and mentor young people could inspire greater youth engagement in parliamentary politics. Young legislators bring issues that are important to youth into the political sphere. They also act as role models, allowing young people to see their contemporaries working in parliamentary roles.

3. Continued use of social media to publicize the workings of parliamentary democracy would be beneficial as a means to capture the attention of digitally engaged youth. Legislative assemblies and political parties across Canada have been incorporating social media into their work, and they should continue to learn about new technologies to assist them in communicating with youth.

Unfortunately, young people continue to lag behind older cohorts when it comes to voter turnout and being card-carrying members of political parties, both of which are central to the traditional sense of political engagement. Nevertheless, political parties, advocacy groups and legislatures are increasingly developing non-traditional strategies to engage youth, including the use of social media. As new attempts to engage youth are being explored, there is still value in acknowledging the ongoing success of internship

programmes such as the BCLIP. For decades, legislative internship programmes across the country have provided an effective means to connect politically engaged youth with parliamentarians and with each other. We suggest these programmes be continued and, where possible, expanded.

Notes

- 1 Amanda, Clarke, "A Dialogue on Youth and Democracy," *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, 33:2, Summer 2010, p. 25.
- 2 Elections Canada, *Estimation of Voter Turnout by Age Group and Gender at the 2011 Federal General Election*, June 23, 2013, accessed online at: <http://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=res&dir=rec/part/estim&document=index&lang=e>
- 3 Elections BC, *Report of the Chief Electoral Officer on the 39th Provincial General Election and Referendum on Electoral Reform*, May 2009, p. 39.
- 4 David Mitchell, "A Most Important Experiment: Parliamentary Internship Programmes in Canada", *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, 5:1, 1982, p. 12.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 J.P., Lewis, "Identities and Ideas: Participation of Young Legislators in the Canadian House of Commons," *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, 29:2, Summer 2006, p. 12.