

# A MOST IMPORTANT EXPERIMENT: PARLIAMENTARY INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS IN CANADA

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**Parliamentary internship programs are one of the most interesting developments in Canadian legislatures during the past decade. Parliament as well as four provincial legislatures have established programs varying in terms of administration and organization but with similar goals and a high degree of success in achieving them. The programs provide long-term benefits to the country by educating a knowledgeable group of young people about the parliamentary process. At the same time they provide a valuable service to individual legislators. In this article the author compares and contrasts parliamentary intern programs in various Canadian jurisdictions.**

The idea of a parliamentary internship program had been discussed in Ottawa as early as 1965, however, the program was not established until 1970. Much of the credit for the inauguration of the program must go to Mr. Alf Hales, who served as federal Member of Parliament for Wellington for seventeen years. After winning the approval and support of The Canadian Political Science Association, The Donner Canadian Foundation, the Speaker and House Leaders, Mr. Hales introduced a proposal to the House of Commons in the form of a Motion on March 10, 1969:

That in the opinion of this House the Government should give consideration to the advisability of establishing a form of intership program in the House of Commons; the purpose of said program being to better equip outstanding young political scientists, journalists and law school faculty members, with a better understanding of the national legislative process ....

The Motion which was referred to the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization, had wide support in the House and formed the basis of a proposal which culminated in the establishment of Ottawa's parliamentary internship program. In 1970 ten of the brightest university students in Canada were brought to Parliament Hill to take part in what former Prime

Minister Pearson referred to as "the most important experiment in parliamentary activity since 1867". It is now widely agreed that the experiment has been a success.

The Ottawa program is designed on a ten-month basis (September-June) in order to approximate an academic year of study. The ten interns, chosen by a selection committee from among several hundred applicants, are assigned to individual Members of Parliament and serve as "special assistants." The exact nature of an intern's responsibilities is a matter to be resolved between the individual intern and Member of Parliament but usually involves research, committee work, speechwriting and some constituency work. Interns are not supposed to be assigned partisan political tasks. Halfway through the year, each intern switches to an MP from another political party. The success of the program is evidenced by the fact that there are now always more Members anxious to have the services of interns than there are interns to go around.

In addition to their work for Members, the interns participate in a variety of other activities including: academic seminars, hosting inter-parliamentary delegations and travel to other legislatures including London,

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Washington and Bonn. At the end of the ten-month period each intern is required to submit an analytical paper on an aspect of the legislative process in Canada. The Ottawa program sees itself as being independent to both government and parliament; as a result, it is administered completely by private funds. The Canadian Political Science Association provides an academic director for the program. Interns receive a monthly stipend and some travel expenses, with the remainder of the program's budget being devoted to administrative costs. Support services for the interns are provided through the Office of the Clerk of the House of Commons.

The first province to establish an on-going parliamentary internship program along lines similar to the one in the national capital was Alberta. With the success of the Ottawa program in mind and after much discussion among members of the political, legislative and academic communities, the Alberta Legislative Internship Program was launched in 1974. As outlined in the current "Alberta Interns' Handbook" the program strives to achieve two main objectives:

First, it gives outstanding graduates of Alberta universities an opportunity to understand better the legislative and governmental process. In so doing, the techniques of traditional education are not strictly adhered to. Rather than simulation or speculation as to how the system works, the interns are involved in a real work situation. As a result, their perceptions of the Legislative Assembly and government are more sharply focussed than those of students restricted to a classroom-lecture atmosphere.

The second object of the program, of course, is that Members of the Legislative Assembly have available to them, competent research staff to assist them in their duties. The interns' educational experience is enhanced through this work for Members since they are given a unique opportunity to observe governmental and legislative processes from the point of view of the legislators themselves. In turn, Members may benefit from the enthusiasm and ideas of each new group of interns.

Like the Ottawa program, the Alberta legislative internship operates on a ten-month basis. Approximately eight interns are chosen each year as a result of a competition among graduates of the province's universities. The first month is devoted to orientation: the interns meet with officials of the Legislative Assembly, government departments and obtain a general introduction to the environment they will be working in. Interns are then assigned to a party caucus where their workloads are designed to reflect the multiplicity of tasks undertaken by Members of the Assembly. Rather than

working with a single Member, interns are assigned to a party caucus and serve a general research function. Midway through the program, interns are assigned to a different legislative caucus thereby ensuring that each person has the opportunity of working with both government Members and opposition Members.

In addition to caucus assignments, interns participate in academic seminars, monthly meetings with the Speaker and engage in some travel within the province. Travel outside of Alberta is not a regular component of the program. Each intern receives a monthly stipend and the cost of some travel expenses are covered. At the conclusion of the program interns submit a research paper on a specific aspect of their internship experience. The province's universities accept participation in the internship program for course credit at the graduate level.

The administration of the Alberta program is notably different from that of the Ottawa parliamentary internship. The individual in charge of the program is the Speaker of the Alberta Assembly. He makes all policy decisions affecting the program and serves as Chairman of the program's advisory committee. In addition, the Alberta Legislative Internship Program is entirely publicly funded by appropriation through the annual estimates of the Legislative Assembly.

The idea of a parliamentary internship program was advanced in British Columbia as early as 1973. After securing the active support of the Speaker and all political parties represented in the Assembly, a five-month internship program was established in 1975. Ten interns were selected and the program commenced in January 1976.

The British Columbia program differs markedly from the one in Ottawa. It is designed to approximately coincide with the province's spring legislative session and therefore operates from January to May each year. The interns, graduates of British Columbia universities, first go through a thorough orientation to the political process in British Columbia. Following this, they undertake the administrative phase of the program, working in a government ministry. During this period, they study and explore the operation and functions of government departments by working as research or administrative assistants wherever they are assigned. The legislative phase of the program consists of an assignment to a party caucus where the interns are attached to Members of the Legislative Assembly. One intern is assigned to the Speaker's Office. During the legislative phase of the program, interns do not switch from one caucus to another.

Travel to other jurisdictions is an important part of the program. In the past, this has included visits to legislatures in Alberta, Quebec, New Brunswick, Washington State, and the Parliament of Canada. The academic component of the program includes fortnightly seminars conducted by faculty from the province's universities. Interns are required to submit written reports at various points during the program. The internship program is recognized for credit in graduate schools of British Columbia universities. Interns receive a monthly stipend and travel expenses.

The British Columbia Legislative Internship Program is administered through the Office of the

The Ontario Legislative Internship Program operates on a ten-month basis and is closely modelled after the Ottawa program. After a competition among graduates of Canadian universities eight interns are selected. Following a brief orientation period, each intern is assigned to a backbench Member of the Legislative Assembly where they are given specific responsibilities according to Members' priorities. Halfway through the program, interns rotate to serve with a different backbench Member. The program is designed to allow each intern an opportunity to serve one term with a government backbencher and another term with an opposition backbencher. Throughout the program and on a group basis interns meet with elected politicians



Speaker of the Legislative Assembly. A staff member of the Speaker's office serves as program coordinator. In addition, the program maintains an academic director who plays an important role in terms of organization and support. The program is fully publicly funded.

In 1976 Ontario established a legislative internship program similar in nature and purpose to the one in Ottawa. The development of such a program was first recommended by the Ontario Commission on the Legislature (Camp Commission) in its Second Report, December 1973. Discussion subsequently took place between officers of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario and the academic community which culminated in the establishment of the provincial program in September 1976 in cooperation with the Canadian Political Science Association.

and public officials. In addition, they participate in regular academic seminars and prepare a paper dealing with some aspect of the legislative process in Ontario. The interns also travel to Ottawa, Quebec and elsewhere with the aim of acquiring a comparative understanding of legislative processes in different capitals. Interns receive monthly stipends and financial assistance is provided for travel expenses.

The Ontario internship is largely publicly funded, although private donations have been an important element in financing the program. An academic director provides guidance for the program which receives valuable support services from the Office of the Clerk of the Ontario Legislature.

In the Province of Quebec a parliamentary internship program was established as early as 1974-1975. However, after two years of operation the program was discontinued. In 1979 a new program was established under the auspices of the Fondation Jean-Charles Bonenfant, a special foundation for the study of Parliament and political institutions, created by an Act of the Quebec Assembly.

Each year four interns are selected to serve for a ten-month period with the Quebec National Assembly. The internship is regarded as an educational program allowing recent Canadian university graduates an opportunity to acquire practical knowledge of the operation and function of the Assembly. As in Ottawa, Quebec interns serve as a kind of special assistant to an individual Member of the Assembly. At the mid-point of the program, interns switch to serve with a different Member; an effort is made to have interns serve with both a government and opposition Member. The

Quebec program has a strong academic emphasis. Each intern is assigned an individual tutor from the Assembly's Research Library staff. At the conclusion of the program, interns submit a research paper on an aspect of the legislative process in Quebec. The interns also travel to Ottawa to observe Parliament.

Although the Quebec internship program is operated under the auspices of the Fondation Jean-Charles Bonenfant, for all practical purposes it is publicly funded. Interns are paid through Foundation scholarships. The program is coordinated by the Assembly's Inter-parliamentary Relations Office and is directly responsible to the Speaker of the Assembly through the Clerk's Office.

The following table illustrates the similarities and differences in programs and raises some questions that deserve serious consideration. For example, should an internship program be publicly or privately funded? The

## PARLIAMENTARY INTERN PROGRAMS IN CANADA

Program	Established	Number of Interns	Duration of Program	Source of Funding	Monthly Stipend to Intern	Total operating budget 1981-82	Administered by
OTTAWA	1970	10	10 months (September - June)	Private	\$ 800	Approx. \$130,000	An Academic Director; ancillary services provided by the office of Clerk of the House of Commons
ALBERTA	1974	8	10 months (September - June)	Public	\$1100	\$128,273	Office of the Speaker
BRITISH COLUMBIA	1976	10	5 months (January - May)	Public	\$ 800	Approx. \$ 65,000	An Academic Director co-ordinated through the office of the Speaker
ONTARIO	1976	8	10 months (September - June)	Public (some Private)	\$1000	\$ 97,800	An Academic Director; co-ordinated through the office of the Clerk
QUEBEC	1979*	4	10 months (September - June)	Public	\$1000	\$ 75,000	Office of the Speaker through the Clerk

\* Original program commenced in 1974-75 but was discontinued.

only wholly privately funded program is Ottawa's which from the beginning placed a great emphasis on being independent of Parliament and government. Every few years the Ottawa program is forced to scrounge and scrape for donations from private sources in order to continue. Much to its credit, after more than a decade the program is still in operation. However, if it was forced to compete for funds with the various provincial programs, the story might not be so triumphant. Fortunately, provincial programs have opted largely for public funding. This has created a sense of security and permanency for those working with and benefiting from the programs and, as far as can be seen, the provincial programs are every bit as independent as their federal counterpart in Ottawa.

Some controversy exists over whether intern programs should be used primarily as a service to legislators. Undoubtedly, some Members who have had the assistance of capable interns view the programs as one form of research assistance available to them. But, strictly speaking, interns should not be lumped together or confused with Members' services. First and foremost, parliamentary internship programs are an extension of an educational experience designed to offer practical working knowledge of parliamentary processes. Certainly, Members do benefit in a variety of ways from the help offered by eager and enthusiastic young assistants. But, to a large extent, and for the internship experience to be successful, the Member must be willing to serve as both teacher and counsellor for the intern. This requires time, effort and patience. Clearly, an internship program is a two-way street.

Another question can be raised about the selection of interns. Existing programs are made up largely of recent graduates in Political Science. Perhaps it would be desirable to open up the selection criteria to encourage applications from graduates in other academic disciplines. Also, it may be of some benefit to look beyond the crop of recent university graduates for prospective interns. Persons with related work experi-

ence but who do not possess university degrees could be considered as potential interns. Indeed, mature persons might offer new and interesting perspectives for internship programs.

It was noted above that the British Columbia Legislative Internship Program included an "administrative phase" consisting of serving with a government department in a research/administrative capacity. This is a unique feature among Canadian internship programs. It raises another interesting question: Should parliamentary internship programs be devoted strictly to the legislative experience, or can they successfully combine an administrative overview of the executive function with an understanding of the legislative process? The British Columbia program, although only half as long in duration as other Canadian internships, adapts both aspects admirably. Perhaps this feature should be looked at by other jurisdictions in order to offer interns a closer understanding of the working of government bureaucracies.

These are only a few of the many important questions that can be raised on the subject of the operation of parliamentary internship programs. Other areas worth exploring include: administration of programs, reporting structure for interns, the academic components of programs, including the role of academic directors, and the place of Clerks and legislative staff in the day-to-day organization and operation of programs. Of course, each program must be carefully tailored to the distinctive legislative and political climate it operates within. It would be unwise and undesirable to propose a single-formula internship program to suit every jurisdiction. Flexibility in organization and design is of paramount importance and is one reason for the great success of the various parliamentary internship programs in Canada. And, while it is too early to offer a definitive judgement on former Prime Minister Pearson's prediction that parliamentary internships represent the "most important experiment" in parliamentary activity in Canada's history, it is possible to say that they are a unique Canadian success story.

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