

THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL INTERNSHIP PROGRAM – EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS

– Hannah Richardson

The last time I had been to Canberra was in 1998; my mother had felt that my education would not be complete until I saw our nation's capital. So, when I returned to Canberra in the grey hours of 30 July 2009, with all my belongings in a pack on my back, Canberra for me was a hazy childhood memory. I had arrived from London, via Melbourne, to do an internship at the Australian Institute of International Affairs ('AIIA') as part of the Australian National Internship Program ('ANIP').

For the year preceding my arrival, I had been perusing commercial law, but I was curious about the public sector. Yet, despite trawling government websites for internships, I was surprised to discover that most departments do not provide opportunities for youth involvement. ANIP is perfectly positioned to address this. Combining both academic study for credit and practical involvement in governments and non-governmental organizations, ANIP harnesses selected students' research skills for real-world use in offices of Members of Parliament, Departments and key political players such as think-tanks and lobby groups.

When I arrived in Canberra on that dreary winter's day, having not been in Canberra since the tender age of thirteen, my internship was a dream as hazy as my memories of Old Parliament House. I had many questions and many expectations as the bus ambled towards my new home on the Australian National University campus – expectations that, as the semester wore on, were consistently exceeded.

As a law student in the twilight years of my degree, I had been considering my future direction. I had already had a clerkship in a commercial law firm, and was impressed by the possibilities available there, and the ability of large firms to attract the most capable young minds. The public sector, for me, was an unknown and I considered it a risk to apply for any government graduate programmes without first experiencing Canberra, and the public sector. I saw my internship in Canberra as a test-drive for a possible future career in the government. But I was concerned: would my internship be no more than writing an essay and ensuring the photocopier didn't jam?

This fear soon evaporated on my first day at the AIIA. The AIIA is a bulwark of the Australian international affairs landscape. A grand old institute of 76 years, it is older than even the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade ('DFAT') and rivals in age – and status – bastions of international affairs such as Chatham House, its British cousin. A not-for-profit organisation that prides itself in promoting international affairs in a neutral and bi-partisan manner, it survives on a limited budget from DFAT and the passionate contributions of its staff and members. The staff – as I rapidly discovered on that first rainy day in August – is almost exclusively voluntary. From the treasurer to the librarian, AIIA staff members are fuelled not by burgeoning pay packets but by a common commitment to international relations and Australia's interests in foreign affairs. I knew from a quick tour of the office – a two-storey 1960s shrine to concrete and trellising – that as an intern I wouldn't be guardian of the photocopier. For starters, the AIIA didn't have a photocopier. More importantly, it was clear that interns did a lot of the substantive work at the AIIA. So, I knew there'd be plenty of work, but what type of work?

After arriving at AIIA's Deakin office, I met with the CEO of AIIA, Melissa Conley-Tyler. An expert in peace and conflict studies, she holds the impressive position as not only CEO of the institute in its prime, but also committed mother of a young family that lives in Melbourne. I was instantly impressed by her clarity of thought,

personable manner and commitment to the organisation. When applying for ANIP I envisioned being put in a corner of an office and asked to write paper, possibly with the opportunity to watch others do tasks, or conduct meetings, like the an understudy to the Prima Dona. After a short conversation with Melissa Conley-Tyler, it became abundantly clear that I wasn't about to become someone's understudy – I had a task of my own.

I was given the task of organizing a conference to mark the 50th anniversary of the Antarctic Treaty. Having never had such a task before in my life I was thrilled – and scared – about the responsibility this entailed. Such a practical event was a complete surprise to me, and looking back, I realise now that I learnt more in those short weeks leading up to the conference than I have in many a classroom. I learnt how to work in a small team, to think rationally through the logistics of event-organisation, and to achieve tangible goals with a very limited budget. These skills, I am sure, will be invaluable for any future career.

When applying for ANIP I was told that interns would be given a research topic, so I was expecting, on my first day at AIIA, to be assigned topic. But as my meeting with Melissa Conley-Tyler wore on, it became clear that she wanted me to choose a topic. Such freedom was as unknown, and thrilling, to this undergraduate as driving a convertible is for a sixteen year-old – and nearly as dangerous. I wondered: what topic would I choose, and how would I choose it? How could I choose a topic without knowing the area, and could I choose something that could contribute to the AIIA?

After a panic-filled fortnight of proposal and counter-proposal, I settled on the definition of the use of force in international law and whether it applied to new forms of intervention such as cyber attacks. As the prohibition on the use of force is one of the cornerstones of the international legal system, I thought that an analysis of the principle, and in particular its application to force other than conventional military force, would be straight-forward. I was very wrong. Whilst it is clearly a peremptory norm of international law, few have attempted to define force, and there is significant difference between those who have. Indeed, not even the International Court of Justice or the General Assembly has enunciated a clear definition. I felt unqualified to fill this definitional lacuna. Despite my doubts, Melissa Conley-Tyler was consistently encouraging and optimistic and through regular discussions was able to steer my paper towards the finish line, even going so far as to suggest that I ought to publish it.

My internship at AIIA not only gave me practical experience and academic freedom, I soon realized as I emerged from that meeting on my first day that I, and all the interns, enjoyed practical independence around the office. As our CEO commuted from Melbourne every second week, and supervision from the Deputy Director was part-time, we were often left to run the office ourselves. I took advantage of this opportunity and started up the AIIA Social Committee. I became the first president – or as the other interns affectionately titled me, the benevolent dictator – of this fledgling committee. The AIIA, and in particular our CEO, allowed and encouraged me in establishing fortnightly intern events. Our inaugural event was a team building exercise that I organized at Koko Black – a two hour chocolate-making and tasting indulgence. Who would have thought that an internship in foreign affairs could taste so good?

So, my expectations of my academic work, and practical involvement were exceeded. Yet, my expectations were exceeded in so many other ways. The conference I helped to organise on Antarctica was not the only event at the AIIA. I was constantly impressed by the events held at the AIIA and the string of important

speakers they drew, from a member of the Serbian Parliament to the Chinese ambassador. Interns were fully involved in all these events, and I relished the opportunity to rub shoulders with Canberra's foreign affairs elite.

My ANIP internship at the AIIA was much more than an opportunity to write a paper: it taught me practical skills, allowed me reign to set up the AIIA Social Committee, and gave me a valuable insight into the public sector. The expectations I had on that dreary day I arrived in Canberra, were consistently exceeded.