

WASHINGTON DC LIFE AS A CONGRESSIONAL INTERN.

BY CHRISTOPHER JAMES FORD

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“AN UNPARALLELED EXPERIENCE...”

During the summer I was presented with the unique opportunity to undertake an internship for the renowned and, at least in some circles, infamous Edward Kennedy. I had always been fascinated by the hyperbolic nature of US politics and when I stumbled upon a website offering a chance to work on Capitol Hill I knew I had to apply. The internship is organised and sponsored by the English Speaking Union, an enigmatic institution, mandated under its royal patrons to “promote communication through the medium of the English language”. Through its Washington branch, coupled with the cooperation of DC universities, the ESU arranges for ten of the UK’s brightest university students to travel to the US and observe, first-hand, the inner workings of American politics. After a rigorous application and extensive interview I was delighted to be accepted into the scheme and was particularly excited to learn that I had been placed with Senator Kennedy. He is without doubt one of the most active members of the senate, a member for nearly fifty years and recently noted for his tough stance against the Iraq war and his work to reduce defence spending to divert

to improved medical care provisions for the many American citizens without medical insurance. His staunch liberal stance in the senate has changed very little while others have come and gone during his epic career.

Upon arriving in DC, I settled into what proved to be somewhat luxurious accommodation provided by George Washington University, only yards from the White House and equipped with every modern convenience. What one first notices about Washington, other than the infinitely impressive monuments, is that the city literally lives and breaths politics. Unlike Westminster, DC exists purely for this singular purpose; a city designed, quite deliberately, to be a capital. Unlike your typical American city, whether one finds oneself in the reception room of a government building or the local bar, the conversation is not that of some baseball score, but rather the next Presidential, supreme court nomination or the latest scandal involving staff from the executive branch. It can be somewhat overwhelming at times as it can feel that there is no escape from it but it also guarantees that any gaps in your knowledge of US politics are

soon filled.

The work itself was extremely varied. A portion of the time was committed to admittedly mundane tasks such as filing and cataloguing letters from constituents into categories. One of these tasks included answering phones which proved both very enlightening and, on occasion, very amusing. Many a phone call involved a concerned citizen, irate about the senator meddling with their constitutional right to own an assault rifle, only for them to be appeased within seconds of opening my mouth by a ‘charming’ British accent, much to the amusement of my somewhat cynical supervisors. On a serious note, handling calls was very rewarding providing the opportunity to deal with the American public. It is from this task that one becomes acutely aware of the American enthusiasm for their constitution and democratic process. One of the more sought after tasks was attending hearings chaired by influential senators and on a particular policy (ranging from agriculture to defence) in order to take notes for a staff member. It was this activity that provided the ability to learn the ropes of the senatorial process and allowed me to stay on the



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cutting edge of the most poignant domestic and international affairs of state. I had the opportunity to talk personally with the recently instated ambassador to the UK and C.E.O.'s of influential institution such as the American Broadcasting Association. In addition to the prestige of working on the hill, riding the senate subway system and working 9-5 in a building that people usually only get to see on television, Congress organised a series of intern lectures which gave the opportunity to meet influential statesman such as White House Chief of Staff, Andrew Card and Senator's John Kerry, Baroque Obama and Presidential hopeful Hilary Clinton. One of the most memorable events, was

playing a baseball game with the staff of my office against a team that included John Kerry. Only in DC could one hope to play sport against a man that only a year earlier was tipped to become the next US President.

Throughout my time in the United States I was struck by the warmth of its people and the hospitality shown to me by all those I encountered. Many of my fellow American interns offered their homes as places to stay and, indeed, a group of us had the opportunity to stay in New York and watch the Mets from the vantage of a sky box. The ESU in Washington also organised a number of extra curricular events which included British themed cocktail parties, pool side barbeques and,

on one occasion, a ball hosted by the British ambassador. During this predictably elegant affair there was the opportunity to meet the ambassador and his wife while socialising with some of the most influential people in both the United Kingdom and the United States.

The final element that completed this wonderful odyssey were my fellow ESU interns. From a variety of backgrounds the British contingent in Washington were some of the finest young men and women I have had the pleasure of meeting and provided a commonality that helped to stave off even the slightest pang of homesickness.

It is my belief that while the trip has been an extremely enjoyable one its

primary purpose is that of its academic value. The insight I have gained into US politics could simply not have been attained in any other way, making this prestigious internship the perfect foundation for building a career in politics. While reflecting upon the events of the last few months it remains only for me to say that the ESU internship is an adventure without parallel: one that I also vigorously recommend to any ambitious young person.

WORDS OF THANKS.



THE ENGLISH SPEAKING UNION: LONDON HQ AND WINDSOR & SOUTH BUCKS.

My sincerest thanks are extended to all the staff at the English Speaking Union in London. By organising this exchange the ESU have provided a unique opportunity that I will remember with great fondness for many years to come. Particular thanks are extended to Vivienne Thomson and James Probert for their invaluable efforts in helping to organise VISA applications and other administrative issues. I would also like to thank Roger Tilbury at the ESU Windsor and South Bucks area office for providing the grant that helped make this once in a life time opportunity a reality.



THE ENGLISH SPEAKING UNION: WASHINGTON DC BRANCH.

I extend my utmost gratitude to the wonderfully hospitable people of the ESU, Washington branch. From providing cooking utensils to organising balls with the British Ambassador, the ESU ensured that our stay in DC was like living in a home away from home. I would like to thank Sue Fratkin in particular for her tireless efforts to keep us involved in the cutting edge of politics during our stay in DC, and also John Andrews for helping me settle in during my early arrival.



THE UNITED STATES SENATE: THE OFFICE OF SENATOR EDWARD KENNEDY.

To all those at the Kennedy office I thank you for your hospitality and constant efforts to educate and inform. Daniel Wackerow is mentioned for his dedication in finding challenging work for all interns in difficult circumstances. Kevin Richards is thanked for his efforts in organising our place in the office, while Andrew Wiener-Berliner is noted for his contributions to organising extra curricular activities. I also thank all my fellow interns for their faultless hospitality.



THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. ANDREWS: NORMAN KEMP SMITH AWARD.

I thank the University of St Andrews for awarding me the Norman Kemp Smith Travel Award. By helping to defer some of the cost of travel during this expedition the university has helped release some of the financial burden imposed during the final year of a four year MA Hons. Degree.