

# **Research and the Parliamentarian: An Analysis of the Victorian Internship Program, 1990 to 2006<sup>#</sup>**

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## *Abstract*

This article analyses the Victorian Parliamentary Internship Program, which has operated since 1990 and has provided undergraduate university students the opportunity of a placement with a member of the Victorian Parliament. The article considers the 676 research reports that have been submitted in the program to the Victorian Parliamentary Library between 1990 and December 2006, and presents information concerning the scope and subject areas of the research topics, the trend of key issues over time, the party affiliation of host members of parliament, and investigates whether certain topics are favoured by members of particular political parties. Finally, the article investigates the impacts, including policy impacts, which the program has had.

## *Introduction*

The Parliamentary Internship Program is a partnership program involving the Parliamentary Library, the University of Melbourne, Monash University and Victoria University, which gives opportunity for study and research undertaken in a parliamentary environment. The program provides placements with members of parliament for over 50 undergraduate students per year, with the principal objective of producing a research report on a subject chosen by the MP. The program is a listed unit of study for each of the participating universities, and student participation is by competitive entry. With almost 700 reports completed within the program, the Parliamentary Library now holds a body of high standard research work reflecting an extraordinary range of contemporary research interests centred on Victoria. This body of work reflects, of course, members' particular concerns

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and political and research interests, and many reports are devoted to topics within members' electorates, which have obvious political benefits. Notwithstanding this inevitable political dimension, the reports provide a valuable insight into both the contemporary research concerns of members, and the development of emergent issues over time. This article draws on a database of all internship reports, compiled by former intern Felicity Lane. The database lists every internship report submitted to the end of 2006 and contains: the name of each intern, the title of the report, the year of the report, the name of the host member, and the political affiliation of the host member. Each report is also grouped in the database according to its principal subject matter, so that, for instance, a report on a local bus service will be listed as a 'transport' report.

### ***Background***

The program began in 1990 when twenty-one University of Melbourne students completed internships at the Victorian Parliament. Professor John Power recalls (personal communication, 25 January 2007) instigating the program following an approach in the late 1980s from an academic who was seeking placements for interns from the United States. Power had previously visited Penn State University, and went on to model the Victorian program on the Penn State parliamentary internship program. Power recalls receiving strong support from the Victorian Parliament's Presiding Officers — Alan Hunt, the President of the Legislative Council, and Ken Coghill, the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly — as well as from the Parliamentary Librarian, Bruce Davidson. Rosemary Kiss at the University of Melbourne also played a vital role in the early years of the program. Power would later establish the Commonwealth Parliament's internship program with the Australian National University. It is worth noting that all mainland states, and the A.C.T., now run parliamentary internship programs.<sup>1</sup>

In 1994 Monash University joined the scheme with Professor Brian Costar, now Professor of Victorian Parliamentary Democracy at Swinburne University, playing a leading role in ensuring the program's continuation through the late 1990s and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Monash University and the University of Melbourne typically have up to 15 students enrolled in the program in any one semester. In 2004 Victoria University joined the program, and have usually had two to four students enrolled each semester since then. The number of students involved in the program has more than doubled since its inception in 1990, with between 50 and 62 students participating per year since 2001 (see Table 1 below).

The academic coordinators of the program have played the key role in selecting interns and in grading their work. At the same time various individuals at the Parliamentary Library have taken responsibility for coordinating the involvement of

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<sup>1</sup> The internship program with the NSW Parliament run through the School of Politics and International Relations, University of NSW commenced in 1988.

members of parliament. This has involved a range of tasks, from encouraging members to host interns, to providing advice on particular research topics. For many years Bruce Davidson, the Parliamentary Librarian between 1986 and 2002, fulfilled this coordinating role. In 2003 Greg Gardiner, one of the authors of this article, was appointed Senior Research Officer in the Parliamentary Library and he has been the principal coordinator of the program since that time. One of the authors of this article, John Chesterman, became the academic coordinator of the program at the University of Melbourne at the end of 2000.

Table 1 shows the growth of the program since 1990.

**Table 1: Number of Interns by Year**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Interns</b>
1990 (University of Melbourne)	21
1991	17
1992	15
1993	22
1994 (Monash University joins the program)	26
1995	33
1996	36
1997	43
1998	43
1999	38
2000	38
2001	58
2002	56
2003	58
2004 (Victoria University joins the program)	62
2005	60
2006	50
<b>Total</b>	<b>676</b>

### ***How the Program Works***

The Victorian Parliamentary Internship Program involves a student being placed with a member of parliament, for the duration of one university semester, which is typically thirteen weeks in length. The aims of the program are essentially twofold. The first aim is to provide politics or public policy students with an opportunity to develop research and report writing skills in a parliamentary context, to learn more broadly about the structures, history and processes of parliament, and to gain an understanding of the role of the parliamentarian. The second aim of the program is to provide participating MPs with a capable researcher who can provide him or her

with much needed information and analysis on matters directly relating to his/her electorate or policy concerns. The coordinators of the program cooperate to ensure that both aims are met.

The number of places has always needed to be limited, given the finite number of members and the need to arrange individual placements. The maximum number of students involved in any one year (over two semesters) was 62. When that number was reached, in 2004, there were 132 members of parliament, which meant that roughly one in four members hosted an intern each semester. Entry to the program is by competitive selection, which means that most students entering the program do so with high average grades. Students are matched to MPs by a combination of research interest, expertise, political affiliation (where relevant), and geography.

The principal outcome of the internship program is the research report, a substantial piece of writing of 6,000 words. All research reports are housed in hard (and, in the case of reports in recent years, in digital) copy in the Parliamentary Library. The report will focus on a topic which has been selected by the MP, however, the exact nature of the report topic is often determined through a dialogue between the MP and the intern, a process which is encouraged by the coordinators. The other research requirement has been the submission of a 2,000 word 'reflective essay', which is graded and is only read by the relevant academic coordinator. In these reflective essays students are asked to detail the ways they have negotiated the challenges presented to them by their research, and to report on their reflections about the work they have done, and the parliamentary setting in which they have been operating. While parliamentary supervisors are invited and encouraged to contribute their views as to the merits of their interns' research reports — and many do, at often considerable length — the final assessment decision concerning each internship report and reflective essay rests with the relevant academic supervisor.

Throughout the semester the interns meet as a group at parliament to participate in the program's seminar series organised by the coordinators. This series introduces students to parliament, and provides lectures on report writing, ethics, Victorian political history and acts as a venue for the discussion of research issues and problems encountered. During this series students hear from a range of people connected to parliament speaking on their respective roles, including current members, committee staff, Clerks of the parliament, a former Premier, journalists, and parliamentary officers. Interns are also now expected to attend a session of parliament during a sitting week of parliament, and are given a comparatively free rein to use services of the parliament, such as the library. Students are also encouraged to visit their member's electorate and gain an understanding of the local context within which a parliamentarian works.

For MPs in the program their principal role is to provide guidance and assistance to their interns on the initiation and development of the research project, to meet with the intern on a regular basis, as well as providing an introduction to parliamentary life. Many MPs over the years have also included their intern in part of their work

schedule, providing the student with a real insight into both constituency work and the parliamentary role.

### *What do Interns Research?*

Internship reports demonstrate an extraordinary level of diversity in terms of subject matter and methodology, and many are characterised by their interdisciplinary nature. However, by using the Parliamentary Library's key subject listings, which are based on portfolio and major policy areas, we are able to group each report according to its principal subject bias or interest. The following table shows internship reports listed from most to least popular for the period 1990 to 2006 inclusive.

**Table 2: Parliamentary Internship Reports Research Topics  
by Subject Area & Number — 1990 to 2006**

Subject area	#		#
Community Services	48	Economy and Finance	14
Transport	47	Energy	14
Education and Training	45	Multicultural Affairs	13
Parliament	38	Crime	12
Politics and Parties	36	Mental Health	12
Law and Justice	33	Tourism	12
Planning	29	Water	11
Youth and Children	29	Women's Affairs	10
Environment and Natural Resources	25	Aged Care	9
Government & Public Administration	21	Aboriginal Affairs	7
Health	21	Corrections	7
Housing	20	Drugs	7
Legislation	18	Arts	6
Population and Demographics	18	Consumer Affairs	6
Employment & Workplace Relations	16	Major Projects	5
Regional and Rural Affairs	16	Information & Com. Technology	3
Sport and Recreation	16	Agriculture	3
Gaming	15	Police & Emergency Services	3
Local Government	15	Science and Research	2
Business and Industry	14		
<b>Total reports</b>			<b>676</b>

Under Australia's federal system of government the states have primary responsibility for a range of government policy areas including education, transport, policing and the delivery of many community services, and it is not surprising to see that these are among the most popular research topics for interns. But within those categories, the research reports have ranged in their scope from the relatively

narrow and local, to the state-wide and even, on occasion, nation-wide. Here we will briefly provide a snapshot of the breadth of reports within the six most populous categories.

Intern reports within the 'Community Services' field (48 reports) have tended to be specific to particular locales or service areas. Examples include 'Child Care in the Bentleigh Electorate' (Martin 1994), 'Improving Service Delivery to the Somali Community' (Cary 2000), 'Autism in the Eastern Region' (Burke 2003) and one report reviewed the resettlement of refugees in Warrnambool (Hirschelmann 2005). A smaller number of reports in this field examined broader issues, such as 'Family Services in Victoria' (Paltos 1998) and the production of 'Social Capital' (Round 2004). Members have also shown a keen interest in volunteering (Rimmer 1993, O'Keefe 2001, Schueller 2003 and Johnson 2006), early childhood development services, home care services, community respite services, and neighbourhood houses.

Within the 'Transport' area, many reports deal with local public transport issues, for instance, 'The Box Hill – Ringwood railway line' (Tracksdorf 2005), 'Public Transport in Ferntree Gully' (Kwan 2004), and others (see Smith 2005, Rudd 2006, Vial 1998 and Rodrigues 1995), while two reports dealt specifically with Essendon airport (Brennan 1997, Coghlan 2000). Broader projects have investigated privatisation of public transport (McCann 2000) and even 'The Impacts of Freeways on Society' (Houston 1999), while a number of others have examined the City Link project (Blanch 1999, Riordan 1999, Bihary 1996). Members have also had their interns investigate school buses, regional rail services, automated fare systems, ring roads, and traffic congestion solutions.

In 'Education and Training' school education has been a central topic, with one intern writing about 'Government Secondary Schooling in Brunswick' (Chesterfield 2005), another on 'LOTE Education in Victoria' (Kung 2000), while others have reported on 'Schools of the Future' (Nunez 1993) and 'Promoting Government Schools' (Heywood 2004). Reports have also been completed on university education, the role of learning precincts, education vouchers, the role of IT in education, civics education, comparisons with other jurisdictions, and the welfare needs of students, amongst others.

The fourth most common topic has been Parliament (with 38 reports). Within the 'Parliament' topic three reports have looked specifically at the operations of the Legislative Council (Epstein 1997, Casey 2000, Forster 2006), the role and method of election of which was changed dramatically in 2003 when the Bracks government changed the Victorian constitution. Other reports within the 'Parliament' area have examined specific parliamentary topics, such as standing orders (Watts 1998), question time (Iser 1994), and even the training of newly elected members (Grant 2003), while other reports have been broadly focussed on topics such as 'Democracy in Practice' (Young 1998) and 'Political Leadership' (Mulherr 2005).

'Politics and Parties' is a broad topic area, and has encompassed reports on voting behaviour and electoral volatility (Blades 1995, Graham 2002, Ho 2003, and Tittensor 2003), philosophies and practices of political parties (Cheng 2001, Waller 2002, Grant 2004), community politics and campaigns (Carrick 1999, Kogan 2001, Schoenborn 2002, Warren 2002, and Anglesey 2005), the use of computers and the internet in politics (MacDonald 1996, Santhalia 1997, Jatkar 1996, Wagner 1998 and Trinci 1999), and media and politics (see Kee 2003, Meerasha 2003, and Thong 2004), in addition to many other topics.

With the 'Law and Justice' area it is worth commenting that if one added the reports in this category to the reports in the related areas of 'Crime' and 'Drugs', then the total number (52) would outnumber 'Transport' (47). Within the 'Law and Justice' area, internship reports have examined specific pieces of legislation, such as the *Medical Treatment Act* (Anderson 2005) and also, popularly, the *Racial and Religious Tolerance Act* (Feery 2004, Blandford 2005, Tan 2005, see also Coletta 1991), while others have examined particular legal areas, such as abortion (Johnston 2005) and tenancy (Simmons 1992). Victoria became the first state to enact a bill of rights when it enacted the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act* in 2006, and a number of reports have examined rights protection in Victoria (Rivett 1995, Bailey 2003, Young 2004, Burman 2004, see also Norton 1993). The related topic of 'Crime' has seen reports on issues such as graffiti (Scannell 1991) and youth offending (Rozenberg 2003), while seven reports have also specifically concentrated on the topic of drugs.

As the above table shows, the Health area is listed as equal tenth in terms of number of reports. However, it should be noted that were the Mental Health area to be included within Health, the latter would become the equal sixth topic overall (with Law and Justice). As discussed below, Mental Health is an emergent issue in the 2000s, and has thus been separately listed. Reports in the Health area have focused on community health care (Martin 1993, O'Rourke 2004), women's health (Obendorf 1996), hospital services (Ozols 1994, Koce 1997, Bell 2003, Epstein 1994), regional and rural services (Phillips 2006, Woodman 2000) amongst many others.

### ***Trend of Issues — 1990s to 2000s***

While the diversity of individual research projects has continued throughout the program's history, there has been a shift in emphasis and focus in some areas. In the 1990s the most popular topic areas each year included the following: Youth and Children, Multicultural Affairs, Community Services, Parliament, Transport, and Politics and Parties. In the 2000s reports focussing on the areas of Community Services, Transport, and Education and Training have become the leading subject areas overall. Reports focussing on Politics and Parties were also strongly represented.

'Planning' developed into a leading area of research in the 2000s, reflective perhaps of the high profile afforded planning issues, particularly in the wake of the release of the government's *Melbourne 2030* planning policy document. Seven intern reports in this period have focused on this policy and its implications for local communities (see Dennison 2003, Cargill 2003, Beech 2003, Schenkel 2003, Pescott 2003, Ostenrieder 2004, Smith 2005).

The 'Mental Health' area also emerged as a new area of research interest for Members in the 2000s — in the whole of the 1990s only one report focussed on a mental health issue, while so far in the 2000s there have been 11 reports on mental health. This rise in interest in mental health issues amongst MPs was bi-partisan, and reflected growing concerns across social sectors and government that the area was seriously under-addressed. Reports in this area examined the links between mental health and suicide (Paterson 2006, Westendorf 2005, Damante 2002), other reports looked at mental health services and local communities, while one report investigated the provision of mental health services to ethnic communities (Maddocks 2006). After the 2006 election the Bracks government appointed a Minister for Mental Health for the first time.

Regional and Rural Affairs also emerged as a significant area of interest in the 2000s, with 12 reports in the area so far, compared to just four through the whole of the 1990s. Some of these reports focused on the issue of rural decline. Papers focussing on 'Water' also became more prevalent in the 2000s, and many of these reports were conducted for regional MPs. Reports examined water law regimes in Victoria, including water trading, water recycling, wastewater treatment, river allocations, and consumption charges. The emergence of both these topic areas, Regional and Rural Affairs, and Water, reflect a renewed political and policy focus on regional matters following the 1999 election of the Bracks government (which owed its election in significant part to regional voters), while it also reflects the dire water crisis facing rural communities in the 2000s.

The focus on environment issues more broadly has gradually developed across the whole period. In the first half of the 1990s just three papers focused on 'Environment and Natural Resources', while this number increased to five in the second half of the 1990s. So far in the 2000s there have been 17 reports on environment issues, and these comprise a highly diverse array of topics, including solar energy, marine parks, conserving biodiversity, local recycling, bushfire policy, and forests policy and management. All the subjects taken up by students in this area reflect key environment issues that Members are now expected by the electorate to be cognizant of, either in terms of their specific electorate, or more state-wide policy or practice.

There was only one report on Aboriginal Affairs in the 1990s, while there have now been six since 2000. At least one of these reports reflected the legislative program, with Richard Hewett's report (2004) focussing on the introduction in 2004 of the *Constitution (Recognition of Aboriginal People) Act*, which amended the Victorian



constitution with a new preamble to recognise the history and role of Indigenous Victorians. Other reports have examined Aboriginal health, youth policy, housing policy, and prison issues. Since the mid-90s 'Gaming' issues have also attracted attention, with most reports focusing on the social impacts of gaming on local communities. As indicated above, the 'Parliament', and 'Law and Justice' areas have maintained a steady level of interest across the whole period, producing a highly diverse range of intern reports.

### ***Who Hosts Interns?***

In this section we briefly examine the political party affiliation of host members of parliament. Over the period under study all political parties represented in the Victorian parliament have had members participating in the program, and several Independent members of parliament have also hosted interns as well. At the time of writing, members of the Greens and the Democratic Labor Party had also joined the program for the 2007 semester. In 33 instances the internship report does not mention the name of the host member, and this information has been unable to be located. In addition, over the period, seven interns were not placed with members of parliament but with other bodies, such as parliamentary committees and in one case, a government department. In Table 3 the percentages are expressed as percentages of those reports where students were placed with members and where the names of the host members (and thus the host members' parties) are known.

**NB:** It should be noted at the outset that the apparent lopsided nature of party political representation over the period relates strongly to the level of party political representation within the Houses, particularly in the period since 2002, when the ALP won its landslide election victory. And second, the period of ALP dominance in the 2000s also coincides with the expansion of the program, both in terms of overall numbers and participating universities.

**Table 3: Political Affiliation of Members 1990 to 2006**

<b>Political Party of Host Members</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Australian Labor Party	370	58.2
Liberal Party	238	37.4
National Party	22	3.5
Independents	6	0.9
Total	636	100.0

Students are assigned to the pool of members of parliament who have nominated to take interns, with recruitment of members taking place in the month before parliament resumes for the session or year. All members are recruited on the basis of equality of opportunity. Members who nominate to take interns tend only to miss out when there is already a full complement of host Members. The higher number of ALP hosts over the period is not a reflection of student political preferences.

Where a student is actually a member of a political party, that will of necessity involve them being placed with a member of that party (where that party is represented in parliament). But outside that relatively uncommon situation, student political preferences are just one of the factors taken into consideration when working out how to allot students to those members who have nominated to be involved in the program in any given semester. A number of members have hosted many interns. Murray Thompson, the Liberal Party Member of the Legislative Assembly for Sandringham, has supervised 19 parliamentary interns, as has Craig Langdon, the long-standing ALP MLA for Ivanhoe. Martin Dixon, the Liberal MLA for Nepean has supervised 18. Another regular has been the ALP Member for Melton Don Nardella, who has hosted 17 interns over the last ten years. Victor Perton, the former Liberal MLA for Doncaster had 16 supervisions in his time as a member of parliament.

### *Party Preferences for Internship Report Topics*

One interesting question is whether the different political parties have clear preferences when it comes to the policy areas that their interns research. Opinion polls often see the Liberal Party as the preferred party when dealing with economic policy, and the Australian Labor Party is preferred when it comes to social policy. For instance Newspolls taken federally indicate a clear preference in recent years for the conservative parties when it comes to handling the economy, and a preference for the ALP on issues like health and education (Newspoll 2007). One may wonder whether the choice of internship topics may see these parties 'playing to their policy strengths' and choosing to have interns focus on these areas. Certainly there are some clear trends. The following table looks at the 14 most popular research topic areas, and breaks up the student reports according to the political party of the host member.

**Table 4: Popular Topics by Party**

Topic	ALP	Liberal	National	Unknown Other	Total
Community services	34	12	2	0	48
Transport	31	10	1	5	47
Education and Training	25	16	1	3	45
Parliament	19	17	0	2	38
Politics and Parties	19	11	4	2	36
Law and Justice	20	9	1	3	33
Planning	20	8	0	1	29
Youth and Children	17	12	0	0	29
Environment & Natural Resources	10	10	2	3	25
Government & Public Administration	6	9	1	5	21
Health	14	6	0	1	21
Housing	12	5	0	3	20
Legislation	10	8	0	0	18
Population and Demographics	5	13	0	0	18

Patterns are discernible from this breakdown. For instance, in two of the most popular topics 'Transport' and 'Community Services' there is a clear weighting favouring the ALP. While 58 per cent of host members have belonged to the ALP, parliamentary interns placed with ALP members have conducted 34 of the 48 'Community Services' reports (71 per cent) and 31 of the 47 'Transport' topics (66 per cent, or indeed 74 per cent of the 'Transport' reports where the host member's party is known). Interns with ALP members have also produced 20 of 29 'Planning' reports (69 per cent), and 14 of 21 'Health' reports (67 per cent). Likewise, there are some trends evident in the topics researched for Liberal Party members. Liberal party members hosted 37 per cent of interns, and yet 13 of the 18 'Population and Demographics' reports (72 per cent) were conducted by interns placed with Liberal Party members.

### ***Problems and Challenges***

One academic concern that arises when any internship course is undertaken is that the research needs to be sufficiently academic to enable the student to learn in the manner expected by all university courses, and that the student will not simply, for instance, provide free labour to the host institution. In the parliamentary setting this broad concern will be even more particular, with the fear that interns might be taken on in order to conduct political activities on behalf of their parliamentary supervisors. One of the ways in which the internship program has attempted to address this is to require interns, host supervisors and academic supervisors to sign an internship agreement early in the semester setting out the nature of the research to be conducted. This seeks to counter any desire to see interns involved in excessive amounts of administrative assistance or politicking more generally. (A copy of the standard internship agreement that is currently in use appears at Appendix A).

Participating members also receive a 'Parliamentary Supervisor's Guide' at the beginning of each semester, which clearly sets out the roles and expectations for both supervisors and interns, and the parameters within which the research project needs to be undertaken. New members are also given a verbal briefing on the program and its benefits and expectations by the parliamentary coordinator. Both MPs and interns are encouraged to explore and develop the research topic at the outset of the program to ensure that the project is of manageable scale and size within the timeframe and word limit.

That is not to say that interns have not conducted research reports on local political issues. If one refers back to Table 2, the general topic 'Politics and Parties' is the fifth most popular one. Among the 36 reports on this topic a number have focussed on the political outlook of particular electorates or regional areas (Sehu 1998, Graham 2002, Sutherland 2002, Ho 2003, Tittensor 2003). Moreover, the large majority of the 18 reports in the 'Population and Demographics' group has provided specific information on particular electorates. While one reading of these statistics

may be that in these instances the relevant Members of parliament have simply been shoring up their political positions, such a reading would miss two points. Often the skills needed to provide reports on these topics, such as the ability to analyse and draw conclusions from statistical data bases, are invaluable ones for an intern to master (it is worth pointing out that interns are not permitted themselves to undertake large statistical surveys, since the time and cost involved are too great). Second, knowing one's electorate is a reasonable goal for any member of parliament, and the fact that an intern may help in this endeavour is not in itself a problem. One needs here to distinguish between narrow actions that seek to have a member viewed more favourably by the electorate (such as the distribution of campaign material), and the collection of information that may allow the member to more readily respond to the needs and aspirations of the electorate. To be sure, it is one of the key roles of the program's coordinators to ensure that internship reports sit in the latter and not the former category, but this hazard is not an insurmountable one.

Another related concern, which may arise from time to time, is that interns may well be conducting research in areas where the host supervisors already possess strong opinions. Interns are undergraduate students who are often undertaking original research for the first time. They are, as a group, inevitably going to be susceptible to the influence of their hosts. Though this is a concern that is shared by other internship programs, the generally strong and forceful nature of politicians' personalities perhaps renders parliamentary interns particularly vulnerable in this regard. This problem is addressed in the following ways. First, the initial discussions between MP and intern setting out the topic and its terrain helps to clarify the research task in the minds of both parties. One of the tasks of the academic coordinators is to ensure that interns are rigorous in their research, and that the preconceived ideas of their hosts do not unduly influence their research findings. Brian Costar, the Monash University coordinator of the program between 1994 and 2003, used to tell interns that their role was not to tell their members what the members wanted to hear, but to tell them 'what they need' to hear. In addition, while supervisors have long been encouraged to provide feedback on their interns' work, at all times the academic coordinators have retained the key assessment role.

It can be legitimately argued that any research conducted within a parliamentary environment necessarily has a political dimension. What is important here is that the intern report is first and foremost a work of research, and is understood to be such by supervisor and intern. MPs who are familiar with the program understand that it is in their interests for their students to produce quality objective research, and that, in a sense, 'good research' is 'good politics'. Several MPs in the program are now adept at developing research project briefs that would not be out of place in a university setting, and in general, members of parliament have a more sophisticated grasp of the relevance of quality research to the conduct of their role as parliamentarians than once might have been the case.

### ***What has been the Impact of the Program?***

As indicated, members of parliament use their interns' reports in a variety of ways: as a means of better understanding their electorates and issues within electorates; for research supporting the development of submissions to local and state government agencies; and, for assistance in the development of party policy, to name a few. In this section we briefly explore the impact that the internship program has had on policy debates in Victoria, particularly in relation to those debates in parliament. While it is difficult to be anything but anecdotal here, enough information exists to enable some suggestive findings to be made.

In the sixteen years that the program has been operating there have been numerous references in parliament to the research contained in internship reports. The following list, which is selective rather than exhaustive, shows examples where research conducted by interns has contributed to debates in the Victorian Parliament. In the 1990s members of parliament drew on information presented by interns during debates on the following topics: vocational education (Council, 15 November 1995, pp. 555, 559); infrastructure (Council, 2 June 1999, p. 1085); education (Assembly, 8 October 1997, p. 348); the 'community support fund' generated from gambling revenue (Assembly: 11 November 1997, p. 967; 22 April 1998, p. 1123); the televising of parliamentary sittings (Assembly, 1 September 1998, p. 19); liquor licensing (Assembly, 29 October 1998, p. 902); food legislation and local council fees (Assembly, 26 May 1999, pp. 1293-4); and, environmental auditing (Council, 1 June 1994, p. 1209).

Some examples from the 2000s are as follows: fire prevention (Council, 22 May 2003, p. 1749); alpine resorts (Council, 14 May 2004, p. 992); autism intervention services (Council, 5 April 2006, p. 1297); Indigenous disadvantage in Victoria (Council, 7 June 2006, p. 2105); local council elections (Council, 3 May 2001, p. 557); outworkers (Council, 2 May 2003, p. 1238); road safety (Assembly, 17 November 2005, p. 2281); stem cell research (Council, 1 May 2003, p. 1158); gambling (Council, 3 May 2000, p. 853; Assembly, 15 June 2006, p. 2190); insurance in agricultural industries (Assembly, 22 August 2001, p. 156); national parks (Assembly, 15 October 2002, p. 622); tourism (Assembly, 1 December 2004, p. 1861); residential tenancies (Assembly, 18 August 2005, p. 465); drug use (Assembly, 21 March 2001, p. 388); health funding (Assembly, 8 June 2006, p. 1886); and mental health (Assembly, 19 July 2006, p. 2334).

Internship reports have also been mentioned in parliamentary proceedings outside of the course of particular debates. Examples here include mentions of internship reports during adjournment debates (see Council: 26 November 2003, p. 1860; 8 June 2004, p. 1663; Assembly: 4 October 2005, p. 1165; 18 July 2006, p. 2312); grievance debates (Assembly, 14 September 2005, p. 856); and, in recent years, in the making of member statements (Council: 10 June 2004, p. 1765; 19 July 2006, p. 2515; Assembly: 21 November 2000, p. 1737; 12 September 2002, p. 139; 27

November 2003, p. 2105; 16 June 2005, p. 1754; 20 July 2005, p. 1884; 8 August 2006, p. 2571; 10 August 2006, p. 2736). The routine and frequent manner in which members avail themselves of the opportunity to use internship reports within the parliament reflects both the high standard of the work contained in those reports, and the relevance such reports have to the parliamentary role of MPs, particularly in relation to debate on substantive matters, and the highlighting of issues within electorates.

While most members use their reports for knowledge building of one sort or another, some MPs have, in the pursuit of specific policy interests or concerns, used reports more publicly to raise awareness of issues at local and state levels. This may mean using report findings at local meetings or for constituency groups, or in broader party gatherings. This has also occasionally resulted in news media stories appearing which refer to the findings within intern reports. For example, at the local level the report by intern James Corera on the provision of mental health services in Gippsland in 2004 was the subject of local media reporting. Another example, also in the mental health area, is that of Jasmine-Kim Westendorf (2005), who won the prize (known as the President's prize) for the best internship report for her semester. She examined coronial reports and wrote a report on the involvement in the mental health system of people who took their own lives. Her conclusions were reported in the *Australian* newspaper (Legge 2005), under the heading 'Mental Health Failings Linked to 42 Suicides'.

In addition, some internship reports themselves have led directly to policy changes. For instance, Don Nardella, who is one of the most regular parliamentary supervisors, points to three areas where the reports of his parliamentary interns have had, or are likely to have, a significant public policy impact. Nardella, whose electorate of Melton is in Melbourne's disadvantaged outer west, mentions (personal communication with Chesterman, 31 July 2007) that internship reports have played, or are playing, a key role in public policy formation in the following areas: the better provision of public transport for Melton residents; improved mental health funding and services for local residents; and the establishment of a botanical gardens in Melton.

Nor has the learning on the part of members solely come from the research conducted by interns. One suspects that it is far from a rare occurrence when the program has given parliamentarians the opportunity to engage with people whom they otherwise would not have met. In 2003 National Party member Noel Maughan supervised Abdul Meerasha, a Muslim student, and was quoted as saying (Murphy 2005) that 'Through him I met a lot of his Muslim friends and I got a much better understanding and appreciation of the Muslim religion'. Another example of such an interaction has seen a member discuss in parliament the part-time wage rates of his parliamentary intern (Assembly, 1 April 1993, p. 603).

The authors are aware through personal communications with Victorian MPs participating in the program over the years that they value the program very highly.

These anecdotal comments were confirmed in a survey of recently participating Members in the Internship program conducted by the Parliamentary Library in 2007. With 33 MPs responding, the response rate to the survey was nearly 60 per cent and the responses received were highly favourable. Satisfaction ratings of the program were very high, both for the program overall, and for the Members' latest intern supervised. All but two respondents expressed satisfaction with the program: seventy per cent of respondents were either highly or very satisfied with the program overall, while the satisfied and above rate was 94 per cent. Ninety-seven per cent of respondents were either highly or very satisfied with their latest intern. Many Members praised the program in comments, with the most common constraint of Members involvement in the program nominated being 'time'. There were some insightful comments: one MP mentioned that the balance between academic requirements and gaining practical insights into parliamentary processes was an issue for the program, while another MP thought more information on the student's background would help in determining topics. Many MPs further commented that they regarded the program as highly valuable and enjoyable, and indicated that they would continue to be involved in the future.

### *Impacts on the Students*

One of the principal impacts of the program is, of course, on the students themselves. Both through reflective essays and the informal comments made at the conclusion of the program, students often express an enhanced appreciation of the role of the parliamentarian, and often assert their surprise at the sheer workload that MPs undertake in the conduct of their roles. Many students have had, through their MPs, the opportunity to gain real insights into constituency work, and an understanding of how a member's role is performed across a range of interests, venues, communities and organisations. In the course of the research many students are introduced by their MPs to significant people within local communities, who are often crucial to an understanding of the research issue. On not a few occasions, parliamentary interns have found themselves in large-scale community meetings, presenting their research findings as part of progressing information and debate on a local issue. For many students the complexity of modern politics is thus revealed to them for the first time.

The second key impact to mention on the student group is the research project and report writing process itself. Many students take on tasks and methodologies with which they were previously unfamiliar, and in general, the 'real world' nature of internship research provides students with a level of challenge that they are unaccustomed to. These challenges occur on both practical and theoretical levels, as students grapple with the demands of producing a cogent 6,000 word report in a parliamentary context, more often than not on a subject topic they have never studied, which must satisfy university standards and be of use to their member. Students regularly reflect that this part of the internship provided considerable 'pain' in the process, but an enormous amount of satisfaction on completion. Many

interns use their internship reports in later years as 'calling cards' with prospective employers, as a sign that they possess the capacity to produce high quality research in a real world environment.

Naturally in a program of this size not all experiences will be as positive as others. However, students regularly remark in comments and letters to program coordinators that their parliamentary internship has been the highlight of their university degree. Indeed it is fair to say that students regularly immerse themselves in, and apply themselves to, a parliamentary internship experience in a manner that is rarely seen in typical university subjects. For a small group of students who have a keen and developed interest in politics and seek a role within it, the program provides a unique stepping stone. Again, one can be no more than anecdotal here, but we do know that former interns have gone on to become involved directly in Victorian politics. Some, like Melissa Gaddie (2000), have become electorate officers (VPD Assembly, 21 March 2001, p. 388). Others have become government advisers. For instance, James Higgins (1995) went on to become a senior adviser to the Premier (Monash University 2000).

While the program is not in the business of political training, it is interesting to note that two former interns have actually gone on to become members of parliament themselves. Alistair Harkness conducted an internship in 1996 with the future Premier Steve Bracks, and he wrote a report on industrial relations. Harkness was elected to the Legislative Assembly as the member for Frankston in 2002. Daniel Andrews undertook an internship in 1994 and wrote about 'local government reform'. He was elected to the Legislative Assembly as the member for Mulgrave in 2002. In 2007 Andrews became the first former intern to become a Minister, when he became Minister for Gaming, Minister for Consumer Affairs, and Minister Assisting the Premier on Multicultural Affairs (Victorian Government 2007). Most interns however, appear to go on to roles within the public service and private industry, and many are engaged as researchers. The parliament has also employed some former interns. For example, Claire Macdonald, whose internship was with Jenny Mikakos in 2002, is a research officer in the Parliamentary Library, and other interns, such as James Corera, Morgan Armstrong, and Roshena Dutta have also worked as research assistants with the Library, while Felicity Lane is, at the time of writing, a research officer with the Economic Development and Infrastructure Committee.

### *Conclusion*

In this article we have examined the history, dynamics and workings of the Victorian Parliamentary Internship program. The program has involved members of all political parties in the Victorian parliament, and it continues to operate on a non-partisan basis. As we have shown, interns have conducted research on an enormous breadth of policy topics, with recent topics mirroring increasingly prominent policy areas. While the political environment in which the program operates does at times



give rise to challenges that require monitoring, the program has contributed an enormous research bank to policy development in Victoria, while also enriching the educational experiences of interns. ▲

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Appendix A:  
Parliamentary Internship Agreement Form

## Victorian Parliamentary Internship Program Agreement

*Semester One 2007*

**(To be signed and handed in by Friday 30 March 2007)**

Intern's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Parliamentary Supervisor: \_\_\_\_\_

Academic Supervisor: \_\_\_\_\_

**The main aims of the study are to:**

*The Intern agrees to:*

- Fulfil the aims of the research report to the best of his/her ability.
- Devote at least one full day per week to complete the project throughout the duration of the internship.
- Conduct himself/herself at all times with a high degree of professionalism to uphold both the reputation of the program and the integrity of the parliamentary supervisor.
- Maintain a journal and submit a reflective essay based on that journal of no more than two thousand (2,000) words, to the Parliamentary Library (Administrator, Parliamentary Internship Program) by midday on Friday 8 June 2007.
- Present a six thousand (6,000) word research report (two copies, plus a CD) to the Parliamentary Library (Administrator, Parliamentary Internship Program) by midday on Friday 8 June 2007.

*The Parliamentary Supervisor agrees to:*

- Meet with the Intern on a number of occasions (as agreed to by both himself/herself and the Intern).
- Assist the Intern with the research report through the provision of relevant information and contacts.
- Confer with the Academic Supervisor as to the determination of the final assessment grade for the research report, the final decision resting with the Academic Supervisor.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parliamentary Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Academic Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parliamentary Intern

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date