

CONGRESSIONAL FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

An APSA Fellow's Journey from Down Under to the Hill

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When I started out as a journalist, the story most troubling The Sydney Morning Herald newsroom had nothing to do with politics and everything to do with self-preservation. Several days into the job I arrived at work to see half a dozen reporters huddled around a colleague's computer. They were reading an article about the crisis in American journalism. Yet another US newspaper had imploded. Later, I asked a colleague how worried I should be. "We're on a time delay with America," she said. What happens *there* almost inevitably echoes *here*.

About halfway through my second year in journalism I, too, huddled over a colleague's computer screen. This time every journalist in the newsroom was crowded around one cubicle or other. Our CEO, Greg Hywood, had emailed Fairfax Media's 10,000 employees, telling us to join a web conference. He announced in a live video message that about 1,900 staff would be made redundant.

Covering the Australian Parliament over the past election cycle has taught me that the American crystal ball is as useful for our politics as it is for our newspapers. Paying attention to the three branches of US power is less a pastime for Australian political reporters than a professional necessity. Whether it is President Obama's pivot to Asia, perennial bickering over terms of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, Prime Minister Tony Abbott's decision to join the US-led coalition against ISIL, or Australia's hosting of the G20 Summit; the thoughts and actions of the US government inevitably echo in Australia.

During the short period I have covered politics, the intervals between echoes have shrunk.

As is happening in the US Congress, partisanship in the Australian Parliament is hardening into personal animosity and even hatred. The moderates that still exist are routinely humiliated by their colleagues. The most famous of these moderates, former Liberal Party leader Malcolm Turnbull, lost his job partly because he was seen as being too willing to compromise with the other side. Members of Parliament with leadership ambitions are increasingly abandoning traditional party rules and structures, and striking out online as personal "brands." The result of all these factors is a Parliament grinding to gridlock, unable to pass a budget let alone an agenda. Sound familiar?

The same accelerating echoes can be seen in the politico-media realm. As the White House's in-house "Briefing Room" metastasizes

into a multi-platform media outlet, the Australian Prime Minister is expanding his digital press shop to deliver his messages direct to the public, unfiltered by journalists. These Pollyanna political messages are often written by former journalists, now press secretaries, and the cheery dispatches contain none of the contradictions or corruptions illuminated in their former copy.

These accelerating echoes spurred me to apply for an American Political Science Association Congressional Fellowship. I wanted to see for myself what was happening on Capitol Hill and whether what I was reading about US Congress was half or even a quarter of the story. As the American Australian Association's APSA Congressional Fellow for 2014–2015, I have been given an opportunity I will probably never receive again in my journalistic career. We political reporters spend our professional lives pressing our ears against the doors of government. At best, we hear 10 per cent of the happenings inside. Those journalists who accept jobs inside government inevitably return to journalism as partisan "commentators," if they return at all. Here, I've been invited behind Congress's doors, not as a partisan political appointee or as a journalist, but as a non-partisan fellow.

For the next year I will be living in Washington DC learning about Congress with other APSA fellows from a range of professional backgrounds, including academia, government, and health-care. And for much of this time I will be working for a US senator or representative on Capitol Hill. I will be publishing no journalism and have undertaken to protect any confidences extended during the course of the fellowship.

Writing this in late October, I am two months into my fellowship and am yet to begin work on the Hill. The first section of our program involves a course in "Congress and Foreign Policy" at The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), available to international and federal executive APSA Congressional Fellows, as well as to the SAIS student body.

It would be difficult for me to exaggerate the difference between the SAIS program and the university studies I undertook a decade ago in Australia. My experiences at The University of Sydney were of theory taught by theoreticians. My SAIS experience has been of theory taught by practitioners. Our professor, Charlie Stevenson, before writing commendable books on US foreign policy, worked on Capitol Hill for many years as an advisor to Senators including the current vice president, Joe Biden. His lessons are peppered with anecdotes from his time on the Hill, and he is not the only one in our class who can furnish theories with messier stories of how laws are actually passed.

My fellow classmates in the course include CIA executives, members of the US Army and Marine Corps, and officials from the State Department. To my classmates, there is nothing abstract about our debates on defense spending, US statecraft, and the intelligence

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leaked by NSA contractor Edward Snowden. In a heated debate the other day, a classmate spoke emotionally of his friends in America's secretive "special ops" teams in Africa, unsure of whether anyone back home, let alone on Capitol Hill, knew or cared what they were doing. In another debate about the reach of US surveillance, I watched a liberal classmate—who has worked for Democrats his whole life—debate the merits of metadata collection with a CIA executive who relies on such programs to be effective at his job. When our class discusses the US response to the Islamic State, we can solicit the opinion of a CIA executive who has been working on this very threat. When we discuss US statecraft, we can hear from a fellow who has served under the former secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, and another who has manned a foreign desk at the State Department. These conversations pile layers upon Professor Stevenson's own Hill experiences and the hundreds of pages of reading he assigns each week.

Another valuable feature of the APSA Congressional Fellowship Program has been Professor Stevenson's invitations of guest speakers each week for a "brownbag lunch" talk before class. We have heard from a defense expert and long-time senior advisor to senator John McCain, a senior policy staffer on the powerful House Appropriations Committee, a communications advisor on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, an expert in development and foreign aid who engages Congress on behalf of the United Nations Development Programme, a pollster, and a lobbyist. These speakers give us their cards after class, and I have stayed in touch with several.

While the classes have been instructive, I have found other avenues equally profitable. Being an APSA Congressional Fellow gives one

force has grown too large, that too many Americans are incarcerated and for too long, and that there ought to be more transparency in government and fewer taxpayer-funded handouts to corporations.

It seems the bitterest, most irreconcilable divisions are not over social issues or foreign policy but over taxes and the size of government. The Republican and Democratic staffs of the House Budget Committee publish separate budget blueprints that amount to their visions of the world, or more accurately, their increasingly separate universes. Both sides know that neither budget will make it through the House, Senate, and presidential veto.

I attended the "Values Voter Summit" several weeks ago to gain an insight into the issues concerning the evangelical right. On a single day I saw the most influential social conservatives in American politics: Ted Cruz, Rand Paul, Sarah Palin, Michele Bachmann, and Rick Santorum. Senator Paul strode onto the stage accompanied by marching band music and an overhead panel screening video footage of a fetal ultrasound. Stalls outside the auditorium sold merchandise including lapel badges promoting gay conversion, bumper stickers carrying anti-pornography messages, and books on Constitutional Originalism. I have never heard a candidate for Prime Minister in Australia deploy the cadence of a preacher or use biblical allusions in the ways that Senators Cruz and Paul—both possible presidential candidates—did that day. Senator Paul, whom many believe could become the 2016 Republican presidential nominee, told the faith-based voters that America was in "a full-blown crisis, a spiritual crisis" and that "what America really needs is a revival." Lamenting overseas tragedies and the alleged domestic failures of President Obama, Senator Cruz said: "Weeping

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a license to attend events and seek meetings on Capitol Hill with representatives from both sides of politics. It is an excuse, a foot in the door, and I have exploited it relentlessly.

Given that we begin to look for placements in congressional offices shortly after the mid-term elections, I have spent the past few weeks taking informational meetings with advisors and experts in foreign affairs, economics, and defense. I have so far met advisors to leaders of both parties, in both the House and Senate. I have met staff and members of Congress representing East Coast and West Coast states and districts, and many in the center. I have discussed government policies with the staffers on the powerful congressional and appropriations committees who engineer and fund these policies.

On one occasion, at a National Press Club lunch, I met consumer rights activist Ralph Nader and the anti-tax activist Grover Norquist. And, confounding my expectations, these two actually agreed on a number of things.

One thing I have observed since arriving here is that the partisan divide, while devastatingly real, is more complicated than advertised. The Nader-Norquist double act showed, quite dramatically, that the far left and the libertarian right agree on much, and indeed are working together on several issues where they believe both sides can "win." Mr. Nader and Mr. Norquist agree that America's military

may endure for a night but joy cometh in the morning." The crowd went wild. Later in his speech, Senator Cruz discussed an unnamed hypothetical president who would stand up to Islamic radicals and defend America, religious freedom, and the Constitution. The audience began chanting "you, you, you" and an elderly man wearing a plastic battle helmet stood and waved a flag.

In the two months I have been here I have toured the Capitol Building with a congressional leader's chief of staff; visited the Civil War battlefield at Gettysburg; attended a Kalorama house party thrown by a Republican lobbyist; sat in the synagogue on Sixth & I and heard former CIA chief and defense secretary, Leon Panetta, discuss the inner workings of the Obama administration; and attended the Centre for Strategic and International Studies where the secretary of homeland security, Jeh Johnson, presented a PowerPoint on America's attempt to secure its southern border during the recent summer influx of Central American migrants. I have seen the original parchment of the US Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, and spent hours inside the Supreme Court learning about the decisions that have shaped today's America. I have learnt more about US Congress in two months here than in years from afar, and am still yet to start work on the Hill.