During the Australian winter holidays, I spent six weeks on an internship at the Secretariat of the European Parliament (the Direction Générale de la Communication et des Relations Publiques, in Strasbourg, France). I have always been very interested in the European Union, and so I applied for their ‘visites d’études’ program that invites people from all around the world to apply and experience. I went to Strasbourg as an Australian citizen who also holds a Slovak passport. The European Union, often referred to as the twenty-seven legged monster, is a very inspiring and sometimes overwhelming place to work, and provided me with an experience that I will never forget. I was one of four interns at the Parliament, the only Australian that had ever been on an internship in Strasbourg. I shared an office with a Bulgarian girl, a French student and Italian student. We made the most of being able to practice our second languages with each other, speaking Italian, French, Bulgarian, Slovak and English sometimes interchangeably.

I arrived in the middle of the monthly one week plenary sessions in Strasbourg, where all of Brussels descends to spend one intense sleepless week debating new laws and proposals in the Louise Weiss building and then in the Hemicycle, the largest of the amphitheatres at the new Parliament, which was built in 1999. The institution is legally bound to meet there for twelve sessions a year, lasting about four days each. Other work takes place in Brussels and Luxembourg City. The building itself is very impressive, not just in its sheer size. Each day I had to go through two sets of security – even though we were given security badges - which only increased during plenary sessions.

On my second day at the Parliament, after trying to orientate myself in a building with 1133 offices for Members of the European Parliament (‘MEP’s’), three restaurants, four bars, 40 offices and a length of 200 meters, I helped organize and participated in the EU’s Euroscola program. This program aims to bring together secondary school students from the 27 Member States and enable them to gain an insight into the day to day workings of the EP whilst learning about the lives, views and aspirations of young people from other EU countries. The other trainees and myself assisted in coordinating a group of 500 students from all over the European Union, where they spent the day discussing with each other the effects of European integration. We divided the students into multilingual working groups of about 100 students, where each working party chose a spokesperson to present the conclusions of its discussions at the end of the afternoon. Then the participants, all seated in the Hemicycle, were given the opportunity to vote like regular MEPs. I found this day to be really rewarding as I was able to reflect on what a rich environment this young generation of EU citizens are growing up in. It is a place without borders with ever growing opportunities for study and work, the possibilities to learn new languages and to engage in cross cultural communication.

Towards the middle of the first plenary session, I particularly enjoyed sitting in on the debates on Wednesdays afternoons, which are traditionally dedicated to debates on cases of breaches of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. I watched three debates, including one on the continued detention of political prisoners in Burma; one on the routine killing of civilians in Somalia, and one on
the execution of juvenile defenders in Iran. The debates are then followed by votes on motions for resolutions concerning debates on cases of breaches of human rights. What I found quite startling was that during this afternoon session on issues surrounding the protection of human rights, the amphitheatre was only one-eighth full, as the rest of the MEPs went to an early dinner. I found it quite disconcerting to see such an empty auditorium where resolutions were so quickly passed without adequate contribution or debate from other MEPs. I got the impression that these issues just did not figure highly on the MEPs list of priorities.

With the help of my Slovak background, I was fortunate enough to be introduced to a Slovak MEP Anna Záborská of the European People’s Party, during both plenary sessions. I have always thought of Slovakia as a small country with little presence or representation. This view was completely changed during my internship in Strasbourg. I was lucky enough to be put in contact with Slovak Judge Ján Šikuta at the European Court of Human Rights, a two minute walk from the European Parliament, who kindly gave me a tour of the ECHR as well as helped me in my research. I also attended regular hearings in the Grand Chamber of the ECHR and followed the case of **Kazactoglu v Turkey**, a case that relied on Article 1 (protection of property) to the European Convention on Human Rights, with the applicant complaining about an infringement of his right to the peaceful enjoyment of his possessions.

Towards the end of my stay, I also had the opportunity to work for one of the jurists at the European Ombudsman’s office, located across the Marne-Rhine Canal where the old parliament used to be. I assisted and worked alongside the Slovak-Czech legal officer, Branislav Urbanič, in sorting through non-admissible complaints that are sent to the Ombudsman’s office. I then participated in telephone conferences to complainants in the Slovak and Czech republics and helped prepare the preliminary documents for press releases. It was a very exciting time to be working at the Ombudsman’s office as the team of jurists working there were in the final stages of preparing a controversial report on the lack of transparency involved with what MEPs do with their EU allowances, which is an area that I was looking at whilst writing my research essay.

The position as an intern at the European Parliament is constantly interesting. There is always something going on and there are always opportunities to meet new people, participate in conferences and cultural festivals. It is a very busy and often stressful environment, but it is also a varied and rewarding environment to be in. The logistics of preparing and making sure that the plenary session runs smoothly are remarkable. For each of the languages spoken there are two to three interpreters, assistants to the MEPs, countless chauffers, hundreds of chefs and even more security officers. The cross-section of people you get to work with, people from all over Europe who speak anywhere from 3 to 6 languages each, is very enriching. I often found myself speaking French, English and a little Italian with my coordinator, and similarly with my colleagues. Hearing so many languages around you – there are 22 official languages of the EU – can only make for interesting experiences, some which end in confusion. During a conference at the European Parliament, I had the great opportunity of meeting officials from the UN from Africa, Vienna and New York, judges from the ICJ, diplomats from Iceland. As I was the only native English speaker available at the time, I was in charge of translating and welcoming the guests to the conference which culminated in a very lavish cocktail party hosted by the Mayor of Strasbourg at the Strasbourg Townhall, which reminded me of a mini Versailles. Lastly, one of the highlights of my internship was when French President Nicolas Sarkozy came to the EP to launch the French Presidency of the EU with a speech to MEPs and the European Commission– myself and the other interns were able to see him at an arms length, nearly mobbed by security officers.