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TPOL S 497

Capstone Essay

When I applied for the Washington State Legislative Internship program, I did not grasp what the duties and responsibilities of an intern would entail. Laughably, I thought that we would be more like personal assistants to random individuals and that concrete work would be mostly clerical and likely attending meetings and some notetaking. I was only partially correct and hilariously wrong. I knew that it was located in Olympia, Washington and was comprised of Democrats and Republicans. In all honesty, I assumed that I would be supporting the greater institution of the legislature, not individual elected officials. When I received the internship offer, it was briefly mentioned that I would be working in the House of Representatives and that I would be working with 2-3 different representatives. Even then, I did not have a conceptual understanding of what that meant for me as an intern, nor the legislature as a whole. It would still take me weeks to grasp the mission of legislation and how it could support 60+ interns.

When I arrived on the Capitol campus, I was even more unprepared than expected. The words bicameral and joint resolution were thrown around casually. Professional dress was subjective, and the other interns felt as intimidating and competitive as I feared. During orientation, we jumped headfirst into the organization of legislation. Basically, we learned that the legislative session meets each year to create new laws, change existing laws, and enact budgets for the State. While some folks had more grasp on the fundamental principles of state governance, I was one of many who quickly realized how woefully uninformed most of us were. Our first exposure to the nuances of political institutions were resounding questions about the differences between the House and the Senate. In that first week, our cohort was erratically

shuffled from House to Senate rooms. Even students who understood bicameral chambers were perplexed by the chasm of different practices between the House and Senate interns. Why did the House cohort clock-in for their shifts with a Microsoft Form while Senate interns sent emails at the beginning and end of their shifts? Why could House interns bring their work laptops home, but the Senate interns were prohibited? Why was there a complicated application for parking passes for the Senate, whereas the House was simply handed parking passes? This mutual questioning of *why* each side held such notably different procedures would become a theme and answered by time and exposure to the operations of the legislative process. In addition to exposure, and as foolish as it may seem, the reality of how a bill becomes a law did not sink in until our third or fourth week of the session. I felt that the hands-on education component was the most useful (never will I forget how a bill becomes a law) but it was such a different environment than higher education that it rarely felt like I was actually learning the process. Between trying to be the type of “worker” that I know myself to be, mixed with the type of student that I am, it was a strange mixture where I often felt like I was doing neither particularly well.

In my first week at the Capitol, I met the legislative aids (LAs) for my two assigned representatives. After those meetings, I quickly learned that there were not only differences between the House and Senate but between the offices of representatives themselves. For example, my responsibilities as an intern in Representative Gerry Pollet’s (46<sup>th</sup> District) office and Representative Dave Paul’s (10<sup>th</sup> District) office did not share much overlap. Between those two, each member had a different political strategy to best represent their districts and constituents—which then shaped how I participated in their operations. In Rep Pollet’s office, I spent my mornings reading through bills that fell into his political scope (primarily education,

environment, and reproductive care) that he may have been interested in cosponsoring. Then, I would write a summary of the main points of the bill so he could quickly skim and choose whether to sign on or not. It was important to become proficient in correctly judging the main points and detailing the proposed effects of the bill. All combined, Rep Pollet sponsored and cosponsored over 300 bills. In contrast, Rep Paul heavily focused on a close relationship with constituents. From the beginning, I was tasked with writing dozens of drafts to carefully respond to constituent mail. Because the 10<sup>th</sup> District is a swing district, Rep Paul had a responsibility to be much more strategic and cautious and, by proxy, that caution was extended to me. Overall, Rep Paul sponsored and cosponsored a total of 60 bills and all of which were hand-selected by him. My job was to appease the concerned constituents through virtual “door knocking” emails. Each of these two approaches pulled on my skills to read a political temperament, synthesize information, and appropriately communicate that information based on the respective audience.

After the second week, I was assigned to a third office—Representative My-Linh Thai (41<sup>st</sup> District). Her office was another learning curve. She was not interested in an intern’s ability to complete mundane tasks or to excel in being diplomatic but to research and convey a multitude of perspectives using both qualitative and quantitative data. She sought fresh viewpoints on the potential unintended consequences of her proposed bills and asked for a laymen’s angle on the controversial opinions and stances that stemmed from certain bills. I organized my extensive research into memos of talking points to reflect different communities that would be affected by her bills. I attended the committees tasked to hear the bills and listened to the public testimonies to better understand the issues and concerns. I wrote and re-wrote my recommendations for amendments and concessions. I met with Rep Thai to get her personal input and intent behind the bills. I observed her meetings with OPR and had access to the

concessions that must be made and saw how my research and input was incorporated. Afterward, I watched the amendments either make it out of committee or die in committee. Only through the controversial nature of Rep Thai's bills did I start to comprehend legislation in action.

Though the internship did not explicitly state that the varied nature of the different offices would contribute to a holistic education of the legislature, that was by-and-large the outcome. This experience was both balanced and supported by organized intern activities and through connecting with other interns. I found the internship pocked with the stated intention of supporting individual elected officials but, in doing so, also learned more about the state legislative process and some of the less discussed innerworkings of the representatives themselves. Overall, the internship forced me to be a more adaptable "nonpartisan" participant and to reckon with people behind the political procedure. Additionally, I was exposed to both the textbook processes of legislation (how it is described from an academic perspective) as well as the socio-political dynamics that are equally impactful. As a whole, the lifting of the veil between what is formally recognized as state legislation and the interpersonal component of state government has been the most illuminating aspect of this internship.

This exposition is possible because of the scholastic foundation provided by the TPOL S 497 course materials. One major reoccurring theme in nearly all of the readings was representation and how elected officials represent the demographics of their district. If I were solely reading the academic assertion that because one is elected that it equates to the official is doing the work for their constituents, then one might be inclined to believe that is so. Because at first, it can appear that there is an immovable connection between representatives and constituents, if not a threatening relationship of not being elected in the future. On a theoretical level, the priority is the voices of the constituents. In practice, that may be more accurate in the

interim, but party lines and collaboration between officials take priority while in session. For example, the authors of *State and Local Politics Institution and Reform* write about lesser informed voters defaulting to electing members based on party alone but mentions little to none of the struggle of elected officials voting outside of their party lines. The default strategy of both majority and minority parties for bills that make it to the floor is laughably predictable. I witnessed this directly with Representative Paul who received hundreds of anti-gun control messages a day, nearly all signed “XYZ Organization will alert me of your vote in response to anti-gun legislation”. Despite the huge number of these messages from his own constituents, the pull to align with the pro-gun control values of the Democratic party still triumphed. While this herd mentality isn’t necessarily disguised from academic materials, there is a notable lack of scrutiny of representation versus action from elected officials.

Another reoccurring theme from the reading material was the political temperament of Washingtonians. Specifically in *Governing the Evergreen State*, there were strong assertions that the historical and contemporary political attitudes of Washingtonians are highly independent and above-average mistrustful of institutional elites than constituents in other states (Clayton et al., 2018). Whether explicitly or implied, the other readings were also slanted towards this independent view and several provided examples to illuminate examples of how this position was established and has been maintained. Across the span of time, there have been two primary expressions of skepticism towards large institutions and elitist politics: the evolution and current standing of nominating candidates in the two-party system and how campaigns for those candidates are funded. In both of these situations, Washington sought to minimize power and influence of political parties to allow voters to have more independence in their voting choices and curb absolute political ideology. The comparative method was featured to describe the

precedent of political parties with unmovable political affiliations and agendas and explored the intentional inefficiencies of state political ideologies and processes. There was an insistence that both parties are more deliberate and less divided because of these principles and therefore a greater public interest in mind. In theory, these will result in a less polarized state and more dynamic local policy. However, while the course materials portray a united front of the mistrust of in the “institutional elites”, this view is not as monolithic as the articles insist. Although it was useful to gain the theoretical perspective of the political temperament of Washingtonian ideals, it seems that there is surprisingly more complacency towards the institution and, possibly as a result of this, more polarizing politics than the readings claim.

A strong theme found in *The Voice of the People: Public Opinion and Democracy* was the importance of information and civic engagement. In this publication and others, there was a strong emphasis on meaningful channels of participation. There are two opposing views that the greater population is disincentivized to participate. Fishkin (1997) feels there is loss of apt social conditions to engage citizens enough to think seriously and fully. This view is reiterated by a lack of collective engagement and the idea of political representation is glorified even if the public opinion is vague and uninformed. The other course materials generally disagree with this sentiment. This would seem to be an appropriate dissent, especially from Fishkin’s sweeping generalizations. Specifically, because even though there are instances where those assertions may be true, this internship has shown the ways in which Washingtonians tend to be more politically engaged than other areas. Furthermore, it is established that Washington has one of the most well-educated populations in the country—which very well may translate into more sophisticated political knowledge and more civic engagement among voters.

Some of the reading material also discussed redistricting. Since redistricting follows the census, and the census only occurs every 10 years and was last completed in 2020, there were many new Washingtonians that had been shuffled around. Some of the course materials focused on the political disruption and issues of redistricting such as malapportionment, gerrymandering, and some of the three forces of legislative redistricting. Specifically *State and Local Politics Institute and Reform* describes these as “conflicts of interest among those charged with those drawing the maps, the lack of agreed-upon criteria for redistricting, [and] the general public’s lack of concern with, or knowledge of, the redistricting process” (Smith, 2013). I saw this occur firsthand in two of my legislative offices where there were many newly redistricted constituents. Often the constituents were not aware that the elected officials had not changed but the very districts they lived in were altered. Other academic sources dissected the social forces of redistricting. For example, as policy changes occur at the local or state level, the effects of those policies may incentive or disincentive different populations from moving in or out of the state. Because Washington hosts a large number of farmers and agricultural workers, bills that would benefit farm workers or increase rights or protections might draw in personnel from out of state. This would alter the social make-up and the demographics of the constituents in districts that hosted farms with large numbers of employees. This could also be reversed—where overly restrictive policies would dissuade people from staying in the state and instead pursue moving to states with complementary policies. To read these explanations in the textbooks, and then apply it to actual Washington state legislation, was the praxis that this internship opportunity afforded me.

While the general public may not be aware of their consent to the powers of state politics, the public is an essential component. Their acceptance of the administration of state legislation

affirms the greater legitimacy of politics. Both engagement and lack of engagement is the grease for the wheels of the hamster wheel of the Washington State Legislative Assembly and the legislative session. Even my personal participation as an intern endorses the functions of the legislature. This was an intricate dance in my internship experience. For example, I often found myself wondering why I was involved in an entity that so freely wasted time and resources while simultaneously patting itself on the back for being so busy. How could I consciously participate in an environment that baked inefficiency into the pie of the bigger systems while touting this inefficiency as a keystone of democracy? When was the ceremonial ritualistic and flagrant patriotism actually contributing to democracy and when was it just liturgical? Did the pandering prayer just strengthen my own mistrust and disbelief of the separation of church and state and what about public opinion on that matter? During this internship, I regularly worked to cultivate a better understanding of political legitimacy, hope that the systems would coalesce into an intersection of public opinion and develop my own sense of respect for the processes that govern the people.

There is no doubt that public opinion is an important factor in determining political legitimacy. It reflects the people's understanding and acceptance of the government's policies, actions, and leadership and when feel that their government is responsive to their needs and concerns, they are more likely to view the government as legitimate. On the other hand, when people feel that their government is unresponsive or corrupt, they are less likely to view the government as legitimate. However, the theme of political legitimacy also begs the question of the role of public opinion within the scope of the legitimacy of state legislation. Previously, I had believed that if the public rejected the schema of state politics that it could *not* continue to exist or be considered legitimate without the buy-in from the masses. However, this notion was

challenged by both the internship itself and the academic materials. This is partially because I believed that political legitimacy was solely derived from public opinion. However, the academic components and interactions with constituents exposed me to a second component of legitimacy—hierarchical power structures. Hierarchical power structures in politics can be both formal and informal based on the positionality within the hierarchy. In representative democracies, it can include a range of power dynamics including party affiliation, districts, or even committee positions. And in reality, it is these complex influences from both public opinion and power that are the composition of political legitimacy.

The interesting bit is that there is a huge number of voters and non-voters who do not accept the legitimacy of the political institutions. Yet those same people proffer their opinion *to the institution* (see: angry constituent mail). Furthermore, they generally abide by the decisions made by the state. But this is where political legitimacy is supported by hierarchical power structures. In this case, the respected power structures are the constitution, rule of law, and formal authority. These structures provide the framework for how power is exercised and ensure that government officials are held accountable for their actions. When a government is able to enforce its laws (even the unfavorable ones), it is more likely to be viewed as legitimate. I saw this throughout the internship when constituents would write comments on issues and bills and work with lobbyists and interest groups to advocate for their positions. If these efforts worked in their favor, the legitimacy of the legislators would be validated. If they did not, legislation and legislators would be corrupt—but the constitution (especially the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment) would hold true. Essentially, when public opinion failed the minority, they defaulted toward the power of the constitution. Even this contradiction is mostly assimilated by the social construction of government and becomes “real”. This is significant because even though the public can reject

some (or even most) components of political power, the institution and hierarchical structures absorb that rejection and persists regardless. To me, this represents a divide between public opinion and the various arms of the legislature.

I am invested in this issue because I believe that legitimacy is linked to justification of political decision-making and authority and whether that authority exists *for the people* or *because of the people*. This examination is not to undermine the impetus of state legislation but to question the power it holds over real-world people and explore the ripple effect on society as a whole. For example, if the scope of legislative power is focused more on the small pools of routine of electability and contrived representation than broader justice for the people, then how does the public advocate for relevant governance? Furthermore, I am invested in participating in matters that can measurably improve the human condition. If this is authority for the sake of appeasing the founding fathers and to do so means compromising the good of society for the ritual of state (and federal) government, then what are the ways I can dissent from that authority? Because I am not invested in power for the few under the disguise of representation and committed to the hierarchy of law by force. Especially when those mechanisms favor an uninformed public and who are not incentivized to be socially engaged in meaningful ways. But if I don't understand the internal hierarchical power structures or the legislature's view on public opinion, I can't effectively campaign for better mechanisms of change. This internship has helped me reckon with why public opinion alone is not enough to challenge the authority of legitimacy—primarily that it is not the only driving force to administer political validity. In summary, political legitimacy is actually a multifaceted concept that is influenced by public opinion and hierarchical power structures. The degree to which each factor influences political

legitimacy is based on an informed or uninformed public, responsive or unresponsive politicians, and how voters feel their needs are being met by state government.

I did not intend to run for a leadership position for the mock floor debate. The civic education team warned that it would be extra work and would occur in the last week when I would be trying to focus on writing my capstone essay. I did not really understand what leadership entailed in this part of the mock process. But I did have some judgments of the interns who signed up for leadership positions for the mock committees but seemed to care far more for the clout of the role than the work and organization that it required. I watched the different mock committee chairs excel and flounder in their positions. In that experience, I had to consciously work to stay in my role as a member and not fall into patterns of guidance. When committee was over and it came time to sign up for our districts, I was on the fence about what to do. So when a fellow intern offhandedly said, “you should run for a leadership role, you’d be good at it” and I took that encouragement and ran. It didn’t seem right that I could find criticism in other leaders and then not put myself in those shoes. Thus, lo and behold, I ran for a mock caucus co-chair and was voted in by the caucus. This appointment would turn into the highlight of my internship experience. And it was immensely challenging. It’s one thing to talk about inclusive and transparent political leadership but it is another to actually lead with those values. My strategy involved a complex combination of factors to attempt my hand at collaborative governance and successful political decision-making.

The first was a collaborative approach. I got to share this with an amazing intern and co-chair leader, Sebastian. Him and I agreed from the initial meeting that we were not interested in a Machiavellian method. We heard from the minority party that their co-chairs would be splitting the caucus meetings and each would individually lead their own meetings. We were

fundamentally opposed to that methodology and immediately committed to working together to the end. I proposed a change in the physical structure of the caucus. Though it may have seemed unnecessary, we organized the chairs in the meeting room into a large circle instead of the customary rows. From my previous personal experience, this forced members to look and speak to each other instead of who was standing at the front of the room. We wanted this because it displayed a clear and compelling direction toward cooperation for the caucus. This was also an opportunity to address the challenges we had witnessed—namely people opting out of participation by sitting in the back of the room or in the corners. This physical reordering aided in shaking out the old ways of interacting in the legislature and to communicate our vision for collaboration in a persuasive and inclusive manner.

The second endeavor was strong communication skills. We knew that effective leaders had to be adept communicators—able to articulate our vision, strategies, and decisions clearly and convincingly. Instead of telling people *how* they were going to be involved, we encouraged like-minded individuals to organize together and welcomed them to invite us into their conversations. We wanted to deconstruct the power hierarchy and intentionally lower our voices (figuratively) and make space for their thoughts and perspectives. We were wary of foisting our opinions on the caucus during the developmental stage. We hoped that this care and intention would inspire and motivate others to work towards shared goals. We hoped that this type of involvement would facilitate listening actively to feedback and questions from others and offer clear and direct answers while facilitating a mutual sense of purpose and as a result align individual interests with the broader goals of the caucus.

Lastly, we challenged and sharpened our integrity as leaders. Good leadership comes with a high degree of accountability and responsibility. We were expected to have strong ethical

values, be trustworthy, and uphold the integrity of inclusivity and collaboration. When we received some last-minute information from the civic education team, we saw how easily it was to jeopardize trust for efficiency. We had to bargain with the minority party and balance those negotiations with the perspectives of our members. We did not do this perfectly and had to backpedal from portraying our leadership as cooperative and then making a short-cut decision in our efforts towards bipartisanship. This made us vulnerable to both our caucus members and the whims of the minority party. These things matter because they reflect a microcosm of how these issues sprout in the larger systems of committees, caucuses, and even the House and Senate floor.

In a mock setting, we believed that good political leaders would exhibit these traits and characteristics. We tried to embody those traits by effectively and efficiently handling the common problems we predicted would arise during the mock floor exercise. We really wanted to demonstrate the ability to listen actively to the opinions of the other members, find ways to invite them to share their thoughts and insights concisely and clearly, collaborate with other caucus members to achieve shared goals, and work as a team to address the challenges and varied perspectives. Additionally, we agreed that good political leaders should prioritize the interests of the mock constituency they represent, champion accountability, and ensure transparency.

In the end, our party managed to do what we were tasked to do. We utilized our majority numbers to pass amendments, deny amendments, and pass both of the bills on the floor. The process of leadership was supposed to be a small part of the process as a whole; yet, it siphoned all of my focus. I spent days scheming how to do better by the members of the caucus. I belabored the nuances of how I wanted to convey certain messages and encountered pushback from the civic education team in both Sebastian and I's dedication to not falling into the patterns of leadership that we were expected to inherit. It was a test of my own fortitude towards social

and racial justice. At one point, I was told straight-faced by a member of my own caucus that I should step down because I am white and let a woman of color lead instead. While I took it in stride, I also had to swallow some reactions and wonder whether this occurred in real caucuses and committees. But it also reinforced my personal belief that if one is going to pursue being in these positions, we really do have to do better by the people we either want to (or are forced to) collaborate with. When the institution itself does not carve out that appropriate space, how can individuals take it upon themselves—while remaining steadfast in their own values in a way that is genuine and authentic?

I am invested in this issue because I believe that equitable engagement is important for political decision-making because it allows for a unified approach to addressing complex or contentious issues. One technique that is rarely considered in leadership or the state legislature is consensus. Consensus is the process of reaching an agreement or understanding among different members of a group or organization. In a political setting, it can be crucial for decision-making because it leads to the support and implementation of policies that benefit the majority of the population. It promotes cooperation among different stakeholders, reduces the potential for polarization and conflict, and builds trust and confidence in the decision-making process. Additionally, a consensus-based decision-making framework can result in more effective and sustainable policies as it considers a wide range of perspectives and ensures that different needs and concerns are addressed. This is the future of legislation that I want to see and tried to model in the mock floor exercise.

During the internship, I thought a lot about the function of inefficiency. From the first day on the Capitol campus, it was evident that the institution relies on systems that are not designed to expedite processes for the greater good of the constituents. At first, it did not seem possible

that the whole state government could move at such a glacial pace. However, after ten weeks in this internship and through the supplementary materials, it is clear that some of the inefficiencies in the government are intentional. While I was thoroughly aghast from the onset, there are some reasonable arguments to be made for why the inefficiencies might occur.

The first argument is that the slow-moving nature of the political process would require any sweeping changes to be deliberate and not respond to social pressure. While the intent of that may be sound, the reality is that it is only a partially accurate narrative. Because my time at legislature was heavily weighted towards large-scale changes that were very much in response to the demands of the public. The anti-hazing bill is a prime example. I sat in a meeting with Representative Thai while she talked with the mother of a boy who was killed by hazing practices. That mom took to the legislature almost immediately to increase the penalties for hazing from a low-level misdemeanor to a gross misdemeanor or possible of a felony. As of March 1<sup>st</sup>, HB 1002 (The Sam Martinez Stop Hazing Law) passed unanimously, 96-0 off the House floor and is expected to sail through the Senate. This quick turnaround legal response to the abuse of hazing is a socially responsible action but contradicts the slow-acting protections of inefficiency.

However, when one zooms out, it is possible that the inefficiencies are not intentional but could be attributed to the complicated and interconnected nature of the government. When programs and policies collide, there is a constantly changing landscape of social issues and needs, possible strategies to mitigate the effects of the issues, and then politics themselves. This also includes the endless myriad of complications related to the state budget (a whole different can of worms). The responsibility to appease a state population needs (multiple) systems of checks and balances. My question is: has the process of doling out government evolved so far

beyond manageable that the possibility of reforming for more simplification null? Would streamlined legislative processes improve the lives of Washingtonians at a more acceptable pace or would it be destabilizing? In the case of the anti-hazing bill, the process still seems to be mismatched with the tempo of society. During the session, another young man in a fraternity was killed via hazing. Of course, there is always the argument that harsher penalties (see: punitive measures) won't dissuade hazing any more than incarceration rehabilitates but the impetus to punish those who harm remains.

Which also leads to the possibility of political reform. Rather broadly, political reform is systematic changes made to the political systems, institutions, and/or processes to improve state government effectiveness, efficiencies, process transparency, accountability, and accurate representation. In theory, political reform is a positive force for change and takes many shapes like constitutional amendments (HJR 4201/SJR 8202), electoral reforms (SB 5082), anti-corruption measures (AACA), decentralization, civil society participation, and so on. Sometimes, reform is an impossible recipe for band-aid bills slapped onto band-aids. In our mock floor debate, there were so many amendments added to the original bill that the bill no longer resembled itself—it became a nine-headed hydra and no matter how it was shaped it could not be made whole again. One can easily wonder if state government is reformable.

Whether political reform is a viable option depends on an endless vacuum of factors. For example, what is the context, what is the level of political will, is there or could there be a balance of power, is the legitimacy of the government enforceable, what about the existence of social and economic grievances, and is there support or opposition from stakeholders and constituents? Without exposure to the existing barriers to the answers to these questions, I would

likely dwell in the absence of the answers and not feel compelled to cultivate alternatives to the void of positive radical governance.

It is easy for supporters of political reform to argue that it is necessary to address the flaws and weaknesses of the political system, to promote democracy, and human rights but is it realistic? Because as Fishkin (1997) writes in *The Voice of the People*, the rule of law must respond to the demands of the people and the systems for listening to the people, educating the people, and the large-scale conditions of a massive population and a lack of intent to organize the masses makes that model virtually impossible in contemporary times. Political reform has the potential to lead to better governance, increased public trust, and stability. But I believe this can only be true if reform is not just another short-term adaptive strategy.

Contrastingly, opponents of political reform could make the case that deviating from the current evolution of legislative decision-making could be an unnecessarily risky and costly move that *could* destabilize the status quo, provoke resistance from stakeholders, and lead to unintended consequences, such as political rebellion, violence, or simply just mass confusion. Additionally, incremental changes or gradual “reforms” are as the touted saving grace of government—widely argued as a safer and more realistic approach, rather than radical or sweeping reforms. However, I think this may just be a defense for the intentional inefficiencies and subsequent harms that happen while “reform” is fighting out on the beaches trying to take an inch at a time.

I’m invested in the question of whether political reform is a viable option because it shapes my professional development and direction. Do I choose a career so steeped in dogmatic procedure that it is perpetually inefficient? Or do I move in a direction that can actively address the costs and benefits of reform and find a solution that can respond to the needs and aspirations

of the people in a sustainable and peaceful way? I am devoted to reform because abolitionism is still far too intimidating for the state legislature to even begin to consider.

But abolitionism is my actual interest. I believe that it is a strategic investment in the long-term stability and security of societies. By promoting freedom and democracy, reducing inequality and discrimination, and upholding the rule of law, abolitionist efforts may contribute to preventing or mitigating ritualistic filibusters, untenable conflicts, government extremism, and possibly even domestic terrorism (HB 1333 and HB 1240) that may arise from social, political, or economic grievances. This is notable because when our cohort visited the Parliament building, their respective speakers addressed the ramifications of their history of racism, colonization, sexism, and inequities surrounding those issues. In my experience at the Capitol, legislators couldn't even begin to utter those words without jeopardizing their legitimacy. Yet, in Canada, they named the elephant in all the political rooms without being provoked or tricked. The Canadian officials nobly invited discussion about their Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). They educated us on the work of the TRC—most notably communicating that it has helped raise awareness about the history and legacy of residential schools and spurred efforts to address the harm caused by them. They even discussed some of the efforts to address the ongoing impacts of intergenerational trauma and how to support Indigenous-led reconciliation initiatives. As Americans, we regularly attempt to sweep our history of atrocities under the rug. This small example kindles hope that U.S politics will embrace abolition. Because how can we, as nation and our state, heal the generational wounds if we do not seek to end contemporary slavery and slave-like forms of oppression, exploitation, and coercion of people (read: prisons). While we were in Canada, one of the MLAs mentioned that housing is big priority for their government as well. I asked what some of the contributing factors for the Canadian housing

issues were and he responded with the influx of people immigrating into Canada. When I probed further about immigration, he responded straightforwardly by saying “Our population is going to start declining by 2030. We will need the labor from immigrants and the question is how to do that responsibly. We need to be able to provide adequate housing.” That level of transparency is conspicuously missing in the dialogues of American politics—even the left-of-center politicians are not so blatant. So, if democracy is representation, then who is representing the position that all humans are equal and deserve freedom, dignity, and respect? That’s the legislative branch that I want to invest my time and energy and beliefs into and why political reform feels like a steppingstone, but abolitionism is the end zone.

During the internship, I had a virtual job shadow and informational interview with employees at the Washington State Human Rights Commission (WSHRC). This seemed like an appropriate fit because Human Rights is one of my minors at UWT. I was particularly interested in learning how attorneys fit into the schema of human rights through state government. I hoped that the mission and organization of the commission would be more proactive than retrospective. Unfortunately, that was not the case. The WSHRC has a rather narrow scope of jurisdiction and is perpetually bogged down by bureaucracy. While that is no reflection on the diligent and useful intention of attempting to right the wrongs of human rights violations, the majority of the results from the investigations are wan. In short, my honest critique was that the human rights commission was a pacifying effort designed to fill in the minutia of gaps in state policy. Yes, the work is valuable and the people who are researching, investigating, and resolving complex and sensitive issues related to human rights violations should be celebrated for their commitment. But the narrow focus on legal and technical details and less-than-rewarding outcomes could be considered dull. This was somewhat surprising because I had studied international transformative

justice in several classes throughout college. Even though there were similar controversies about the where there was unanimous effectiveness, the real-life functions of these international human rights groups did not appear nearly as wearisome. For example, the person our group interviewed appeared far more interested in chatting with us about any number of topics (unrelated to our job shadow) than discussing their role at the WSHRC. Not to anyone's discredit, but I could not imagine myself toiling in a virtual setting in a department that openly has such a backlog that it cannot accept any new claims. While that could be viewed as this commission being a desperately needed service, in reality just reflects a poorly executed system of bureaucracy and public sector limitations towards justice. Despite my criticisms, the WSHRC is an endeavor to ensure that human rights are protected, promoted, and upheld. Despite my doubt of this particular arm of human rights, these commissions are essential in maintaining a fair and just society. I hope to see them liberated from the proverbial muck of administrative oversight.

Even before beginning the internship, I was fairly sure that I did not want to be a politician. I have neither the patience nor fortitude for incremental change contingent upon minor concessions and deliberately slow. Here in the final week of the interning for the WA State Legislative session, it appears that I still do not want to become a politician. This is not a blanket rejection of the work of legislators but an affirmation of what I had hoped to learn through the internship. Because I did not arrive at the Capitol with the desire to learn how to be a legislator. But I did want to grasp *what* legislators do and how they do it. I wanted to investigate whether I should rule the legislative branch out of my career path. And most importantly, I wanted to gain an insight so that when the time comes to use my future position as an attorney, I will be informed enough both in the process and the professionals behind it—which was fully provided during the internship. I watched several individuals and organizations (especially newly

established groups) fall through the cracks in their advocacy because they were uninformed about how to actually connect with lawmakers, or worse, offended the legislative aids and were banned to the “No Response” folder. I do not want to be susceptible to the fatal flaws of someone who is adjacent to the legislative process but unable to harness their strengths due to a lack of familiarity.

After this, I still intend to go to law school and pursue working in law. I am currently in the UWT Legal Pathways program and am enrolled in two LSAT preparation courses and have plans to take the LSAT in August. I intend to apply for every top 20 law school in the United States and hope on a prayer that one of them will offer a substantial financial aid package. While I didn't find a mentor at the legislature, I did start to rule out some of the legal careers that I am not pulled towards. Even though there are a wide variety of people who work at the Capitol who hold a juris doctorate, I do not feel compelled to work in the confines of OPR or the Human Rights Commission. While the Attorney General's office could be a potential option, I also saw the advocacy work of some scholarly attorneys that was appealing to me. I met elected officials and legislators that I could imagine working with in the future. Although there wasn't much exposure to this issue in state legislation, I intend to specialize in immigration law and aid rurally based immigrants and their families. I hope to be able to provide a hefty portion of pro bono services.

In lieu of wanting to work within the legislative branch, I further confirmed my interest in working in the judicial branch—specifically as a WA State Supreme Court justice. Again, I have deep respect for the incremental approach of the lawmakers, but I believe that my time at community college and then at UWT have instilled a deeper sense of community and justice. Specifically, a desire for change. I aspire to become a state supreme court justice because I want

to effect change in the legal system, particularly in areas where there is gaping room for improvement or rehabilitation. I also feel a commitment to justice. If state supreme court justices are some of those responsible for undertaking the upholding of the law and ensuring a fair administration of justice, I want the role out of an obligation to justice and fairness. Lastly, I feel a personal and professional sense of duty. I am called to serve the public and make a positive impact on the legal system at a state level. Through a prior opportunity, I was able to meet Chief Justice Steven Gonzalez, Justice Mary Yu, and Justice Raquel Montoya-Lewis. Those three inspired me towards pursuing a JD, but also in the greater direction of working in the courts. Our intern cohort had the pleasure of interacting with both Chief Justice Gonzalez and Justice Yu and my interest was confirmed twice over. Whether through the vitality of their individual personalities or through the confidence of their respective positions of power, neither shielded their stance on social justice or the painful inadequacies of the systems. Justice Yu was candid about the juxtapositions of feeling like she could contribute to positive change in the day-to-day lives of her community while simultaneously feeling like no reform could ever be enough to fix the broken legal systems. To hear an official judge name the legal and political elephant in the room is more than I saw legislators willingly offer throughout the internship. The interactions with Justices Gonzalez and Yu made it seem possible that there are real and meaningful opportunities to shape legal precedent, influence the justice system for good, and use my aspirations of this position to make a positive impact on state communities.

Upon reflection, I see how it could seem contradictory to want to eventually join the highest court in the state and also promote abolitionism. To which I would agree that it is. Working in government while believing in abolition **is** contradictory since the government is responsible for creating and enforcing laws, including criminal justice laws. But how can we

effectively understand what the government can and cannot do unless we actually look at the issues within the system to bring about change and eventually abolish the system that perpetuates injustice? And like living in late-stage capitalism or being a WA State legislative intern, progress is not the enemy of perfection. My time as an intern showed me time and time again that that is not only a personal mantra but the justification for many parts of state government. Amendments are a testament to the imperfections of representation. Does this issue then boil down to a question of ethics? Is it ethical for me to want to work against the systems while working in the system? That is a trickier answer and one I'm still not sure I have a solid and reflective answer for. Ultimately, whether or not it is contradictory or ethical will depend on my specific beliefs and more importantly my own actions. Interestingly, I think this line of thought is not so far from the same struggles of thought by elected officials. What is the balance (and counterbalance) for independence and appropriate representation? Where does political affiliation break down and how does that contribute to the betterment of society?

In conclusion, there has been no shortage of new information and thoughts that have stemmed from this internship. It definitely highlighted my gaping knowledge regarding the very procedures of state legislation that governs the state and town that I live in. Some of this experience confirmed my previous thoughts and understandings from other educational institutions but was further explored and explained. Even as I began to assemble experience with the process, there were layers of nuance that I would only scratch the surface. I thought that I would learn some more transferable skills like more legal writing and a better understanding of the construction of bills. While I learned that officials rarely write their own bills, I did not leave the internship of who the legalese of bills language serves. This is especially poignant when the same people who do construct the bills also write the palatable versions of bill reports. I did learn

a new language of diplomatic responses to constituents—or what I call the art of saying something without saying anything at all. I did leave the internship with the wish that lawyers had a more pivotal role—instead of a purely functional. I wish I saw their nonpartisanship as a force of good instead of a mechanism of semi-objective duty. I was tasked with challenging my biases, struggling with imposter syndrome, and trying to find the sweet spot of balance between “work” and “busy work”. On a conscious level I tried to fill in the gaps of purpose by building community between the interns. But there was a sentient atmosphere of shared pointlessness. The windowless basement of aimlessness collectively wore on us. My own reactions to this resulted in less engagement with my offices—which does give me more time to attend committee hearings and grapple with existential questions. In the ennui, I observed various committees, floor debates, speakers, intern drama, and just what it means to be partisan. My favorite part of the internship was connecting with the interns and their arch of rebellion. I delivered a speech on behalf of the intern cohort of University of Washington Tacoma students and broke into a stride of public speaking I had not experienced previously. I found myself in another leadership position and enjoyed it immensely. I experienced anger, angst, sadness, compromise, illness, and more radiating from my representatives. I never felt close to any legislative aids, but I did grow an immense amount of respect for their labor and effort to support the members. I deeply studied some esoteric bills and barely skimmed the majority of contentious bills. I ate a lot of food provided by the lobbyists. Despite all the exposure to lobbyists and the efforts of the textbooks to persuade otherwise, I still have a deep mistrust of lobbying as a practice of democracy. Throughout the entire internship, I felt a bit like an outsider who had snuck in by accident. I also found myself referencing my own history and political background and observed how that shaped my perspectives (including feeling like an “outsider”)

within the legislature. All-in-all, I would toil in this internship again but perhaps with more focus on education, networking, and untangling the feelings of complacency in inefficiencies and political strife.

#### References

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