

Political Jobs in Ottawa: Legislative Assistants (LAs) to Members of Parliament



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Law. Academia. Consulting firms.

These are some of the areas in which political science students traditionally find work. But if you're more interested in Trudeau than in academic tenure, you may want to consider becoming a legislative assistant to a Member of Parliament (MP).

LAs are at the centre of Canadian politics—the Parliament. The pace is fast, the atmosphere charged, the decisions historic.

Sometimes known as Parliamentary or Special Assistants, LAs have a behind-the-scenes look at these historic decisions. As their name suggests, LAs assist MPs with legislative duties and handle communication and media relations. Yet, outside of Parliament Hill, little is known about the role of Legislative Assistants.

This non-partisan guide attempts to change that. It draws on extensive research and interviews with Members of Parliament and Parliament staffers to inform you—the political science student—about a job you may want to pursue after graduation.

The Roles of a Legislative Assistant

Assisting MPs with Legislative functions

Votes

When the House is in session, LAs must inform their boss about each issue that comes to a vote. LAs must consider their MP's personal values, their constituents, and their political party.

Committees

Each MP belongs to several Parliamentary Committees. LAs make sure that their MP knows the agenda of each of these meetings. In addition, the LA conducts extensive research on committee issues and ensures that the MP has questions to ask committee witnesses.

Question Period (QP)

Question Period is the part of the Parliamentary Process that the media covers most extensively. LAs must help determine which questions their MPs should ask and which statements they should make during QP based on their MP's main interests and constituent issues.

Bills

The LA may assist their MPs in drafting Private Member's Bills or in creating amendments to legislation.

Managing MP Communications

Briefs

LAs prepare MPs for interviews, press conferences, and any other



contact they have with the media about issues before the House.

Householders

Householders inform constituents about federal issues that affect their everyday life, such as health care and employment. They are sent to each household in the MP's riding. LAs may help write and design Householders before they are printed and mailed to constituents.

10-percenters

As its name suggests, 10-percenters are printed communications sent to 10-percent of the constituents in a MP's riding. These communications represent the views of MPs and their political party, and they tend to be more partisan and targeted in their

message than Householders. LAs may help select or write articles for the 10-percenters and collaborate with the Constituency Assistant to determine where to send them in the riding.

Other Correspondence

MPs respond to constituency correspondence and write letters to colleagues, Ministers, and the Prime Minister about the issues on which they work. Many MPs collaborate with their LAs to make sure that their message in these communications is effective and appropriate. LAs must understand their MP's position on a variety of issues and be diplomatic and personable in the correspondence they are asked to do.

MP 101: How MPs Staff Their Offices

Members of Parliament surround themselves with a trusted entourage of staff members (or staffers). To function effectively in their job, Legislative Assistants must understand the organization of the office in which they work.

Although each office is different, an MP's office generally has the following structure:

The Ottawa Office

The Member of Parliament

Legislative Assistants work for "backbenchers;" that is, MPs who are not party leaders, caucus officers, or cabinet ministers. MPs are elected to represent their constituents—the people who live in their riding—in the federal legislative process. They also act as the supervisor and employer of their staff.

The Executive Assistant (EA)

The EA runs the MP's Ottawa office. He schedules the MP's meetings in Ottawa and makes the MP's weekly travel arrangements to and from the riding.

The Riding Office

The Constituency Assistant

Each MP has at least one Constituency Assistant. (MPs whose ridings cover a geographically large region may have more than one constituency office and, therefore, more than one constituency assistant.)

"Constituency Assistants are part mediator and part social worker," says Peter MacLeod of *The Constituency Project*. "They act as advocates for constituents on issues such as taxes and immigration and represent their concerns in the federal government."

Constituent issues, or casework, dominate most of the Constituency Assistant's work. Constituency Assistants are also in everyday contact with the Legislative Assistant to coordinate the MP's activities and to make sure that their MP is aware of breaking local and federal issues.

Administrative Assistant (AA)

The AA often shares work with the Constituent Assistant. AAs are responsible for taking phone calls, handling paperwork, and scheduling the MP's meetings in the riding. They tend to keep extensive contact with community and local political organizations in the riding.

"You are as successful as your boss' performance,"
Louis-Alexandre Lanthier, long-time staffer on Parliament Hill



Internships and Volunteer Opportunities

Many MPs and Parliament staffers consider internships and volunteer work as the best preparation for future LAs. So take a step outside of the lecture hall and see how the legislative process really works.

Internships in the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba

The Legislative Assembly of Manitoba offers six internships during which interns research policy and work on constituency issues for a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA). The ten-month program offers a \$1,033.74 bi-weekly stipend for each intern. It also includes seminars that cover a wide range of topics related to government. At the end of the program, interns submit a research report based on a public policy issue in Manitoba.

All applicants must be graduates from a university in Manitoba. (Permanent residents of Manitoba who graduated from universities outside of the province are also eligible to apply.) Applicants should possess excellent oral and written communication skills in English (similar skills in French are considered “a strong asset”), participate in extracurricular activities, and know how to research and write reports independently.

Web site

<http://www.gov.mb.ca/legislature/info/internship.html>

Ontario Legislative Internship Programme (OLIP)

The Canadian Political Science Association (CPSA) offers a ten-month internship program at Queen’s Park for students who want to work as assistants for backbenchers and pursue research on a related topic of their choice. Interns split their time between two placements: one in the office of a Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP) in the governing party and one in the office of a MPP in the opposition party. Each student receives a \$19,000 stipend and another \$1,000 award upon their submission of the program’s required research project. Students have the opportunity to travel to other legislative institutions and to the ridings of the members for whom they work.

Applicants must possess an undergraduate degree from a Canadian university and demonstrate knowledge and interest in the Ontario legislature.

Web site

<http://www.olip.ontla.on.ca>

Internships in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia

The Legislative Assembly of British Columbia offers recent graduates from universities and colleges in the province the opportunity to work for a Minister and for a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA). Each intern receives a \$17,250 stipend for the six-month program. At the end of the program, all of the interns work together to produce a newspaper that reflects their experiences in the Legislature.

Applicants must be residents of British Columbia and either have citizenship or permanent residency status in Canada. Interns who plan on pursuing a M.A. in Political Science at Simon Fraser University, the University of British Columbia, or the University of Victoria may arrange to obtain credit for their respective degree programs from their internship.

Web site

<http://www.legis.gov.bc.ca/info/2-5.htm>



Internships and Volunteer Opportunities

Programme annuel de bourse et de stages parlementaires in the National Assembly of Quebec

The *Fondation Jean-Charles-Bonenfant* offers five \$15,000 scholarships for students who are interested in studying the political and parliamentary institutions of Quebec. The ten-month program includes two placements: one in the office of a deputy who belongs to the governing party and another in the office of a deputy who belongs to the Opposition party. At the end of the program, students must submit and present a thesis related to their work.

The program is open to all students who earned *un baccalauréat* from a Quebec university within the past two years. All applicants must be Canadian citizens or permanent residents of Canada, and they must be fluent in French.

Web site

<http://www.assnat.qc.ca/fral/fondation-jcb/bourses/index.html>

Volunteering Suggestions

Legislative Assistants must know about current policy issues and where their political party stands. By volunteering for your political party, you can learn more about these policy issues, network with like-minded individuals in your region, and participate in politics at a grassroots level.

You may also want to check the student organizations at your university to see if any are affiliated with your political party.

If you live or study in the Ottawa region, you can apply to become a volunteer in a MP's Parliament office. Volunteers work approximately 20 hours a week and are generally university students. Depending on the MP's office, volunteers answer phone calls; handle constituent correspondence; assist in the writing of Householders, 10-percenters, and Questions for QP; and research their MP's issues of interest.

Quick Facts about Members of Parliament

Number of MPs
308

Number of current MPs who are political scientists
1 (*Réal Ménard*)

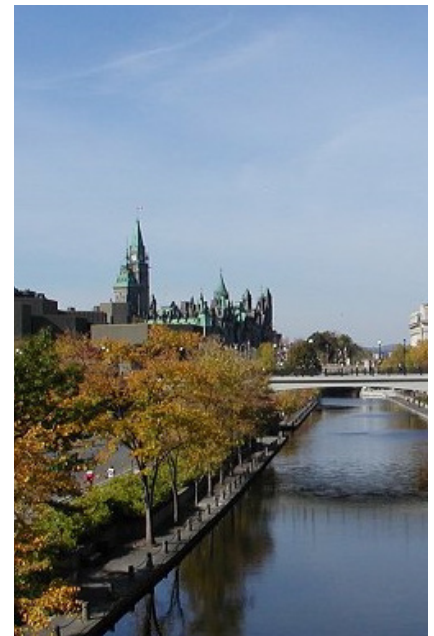
Number of current MPs who were born outside of Canada
39

MP of the smallest riding (in area)
Pierre Pettigrew (Papineau)

MP of the largest riding (in area)
Nancy Karetak-Lindell (Nunavut)

MP who has served the longest in Parliament
Bill Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona)

Source: *The Library of Parliament*



The official Web sites of the four major parties have sections where you can sign up to become a volunteer:

Bloc Québécois <http://www.blocquebecois.org>

Conservative Party of Canada <http://www.conservative.ca>

Liberal Party of Canada <http://www.liberal.ca>

NDP <http://www.ndp.ca>

The LA FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions

How can I prepare myself for a job as a LA?

Besides pursuing volunteer and internship opportunities, you should create habits now that correlate to functions that LAs often perform:

Read the news

Keep track of major current events that influence Ottawa, Canada, and the world at large. Try to read a variety of newspapers and publications to understand different viewpoints on these events. Most newspapers have online versions of their daily editions:

The Globe and Mail

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/>

The National Post

<http://www.canada.com/national/nationalpost/index.html>

The Hill Times

<http://www.hilltimes.com/>

La Presse

<http://www.cyberpresse.ca/reseau/>

Le Devoir

<http://www.ledevoir.com/>

Take courses outside your discipline

LAs must draw on skills and knowledge from a variety of disciplines. By taking university courses in journalism, public relations, French, sociology, economics, or history, you will be able to complement and enhance your understanding of Canadian politics and policy. Academic advisors may

be able to recommend which courses would prepare you best for working on the Hill.

Watch political programs

Study how MPs and spokespeople from the political parties convey their messages on television. The following programs often feature such guests and summarize the major viewpoints on the political issues of the day:

Politics Early Edition

Weekdays, 10:30 AM ET, CBC

Politics

Weekdays, 5:00 PM ET, CBC

Question Period

Sunday, 12:00 PM ET, CTV

Primetime Politics

Weekdays, 8:00 PM ET, CPAC

Revue politique

Weekdays, 7:00 PM ET, CPAC

Tribune parlementaire

Weekdays, 5:30 PM ET, RDI

What is the general salary range for LAs?

LAs typically earn \$30,000-\$70,000 a year. Most LAs start at the lower end of the range, and the amount that LAs generally receive varies according to their previous experience.

Each LA is considered an employee of the Member of Parliament for whom he or she works. This means that, if your boss does not get re-elected, you no longer have a job. Your salary is at the discretion of the Member of Parliament, who has an operating budget of approximately \$250,000.

NDP staff members are the only unionized Parliament staffers. If you become a LA for a NDP MP, you are entitled to receive a starting salary in the \$30,000 range.

Although they are not considered employees of the government, LAs are entitled to the same benefits that public service workers receive. To learn more about these benefits, visit the Treasury Board of Canada's Pensions and Benefits Web site at http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/hr-rh/bp-raspl/index_e.asp.

How many LA positions are there?

The government does not publish statistics on the staff of Members of Parliament, but it is estimated that 200-250 people work as LAs.



The LA FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions

What challenges do LAs face in their work?

A LA may need to research the latest policy issue, work on a 10-percenter, and fulfill their MP's requests for instant information—all in one day. With so many responsibilities, LAs must learn how much time to spend on each task and how they should prioritize their work.

“Sleep and take breaks when you can,” advises one Hill staffer. “Otherwise, you’ll burn out.”

And if you like discussing your workday with friends and family, be careful: a lot of the work that LAs do must remain confidential. If LAs discuss sensitive information, whether it's an upcoming major policy decision or a crucial political strategy of their MP's party, they run not only their reputation, but also the reputation of their MP.

How can I become a LA?

As with any other field, you should network to learn about available positions. Participate in your local political organizations and let people know you are interested in working as a LA. They might offer you advice or give you leads to possible openings. Follow up on leads and research the MPs

for whom you want to work.

Once you've done your background work, you are ready to apply for a position. Each MP has a different hiring process, but the following strategies are generally accepted ways to apply.

Submit your CV and a cover letter to your local MP.

After reviewing your CV, the MP will decide whether to recommend you as an applicant. If the MP does recommend you, then her office will send your CV to Parliament Hill and have it distributed to various offices. (If you do not know the name of your Member of Parliament, go the Parliament Web site, where you can search for MPs by postal code.)

Submit your CV and cover letter to the MP(s) for whom you wish to work.

If the MP has an opening, his office will contact you. If not, the office will pass your CV to the office of its party's Whip. MPs generally request CVs from their Whip's office when they need to hire a new staffer.

The MP goes through the CVs that he has gathered through either of these processes and determines which candidates to interview. If you are selected for an interview, you should expect to speak with the MP for approximately 45 minutes.

What qualifications do I need to have to become a LA?

LAs must have a university degree. Other qualifications vary according to each MP, but successful LAs typically:

- dedicate themselves to the MP and his causes
- have an interest and understanding of Canadian politics
- manage time well
- act maturely and professionally
- are able to research, synthesize and analyze complex policy issues in a short period of time
- are able to multitask
- possess excellent written and oral communication skills
- are able to work well with others and independently
- are bilingual (depending on the MP)

What type of career path do LAs normally follow?

Most LAs stay in their positions for several years. During that time, they develop key communication, analytical, and managerial skills that they can apply to careers as executive assistants to MPs, assistants to Cabinet Ministers, lobbyists, senior bureaucrats, and government affairs officials in the private sector.

“People who are polite, confident, punctual, calm under pressure, and well-organized will do best as a Legislative Assistant,”

Josh Arnold, Executive Assistant to Wajid Khan, MP

Acknowledgements and Additional Sources

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Peter Stock

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Additional Sources

The Canadian Political Science Association

<http://www.cpsa-acsp.ca>

The Parliament of Canada

<http://www.parl.gc.ca>

About the author

Gabrielle Grubka was an intern in the House of Commons and the Senate. She studied Canadian Politics at St. Francis University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia and received her B.A. in French (Honours) with minors in International Studies, Civic Society and Sustainable Communities, and Writing from Daemen College in Amherst, NY. She is currently pursuing a Master of Arts degree in Professional Writing at Carnegie Mellon University.