**Practicum Placement: MLA Angela Simmonds PFfice**

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My practicum placement was in the office of Angela Simmonds, MLA for Preston as one of her two students. Angela is an MLA with the Nova Scotia Liberal Party and is a Deputy Speaker and a member of the House of Assembly Management Commission. Outside of being an MLA, she is a trained lawyer and has been active in anti-racism work in Nova Scotia, but more on that later. Although we frequently saw and chatted with Angela, our main point of contact and direct supervisor was her constituency manager, Fawn Logan Young. I was not sure what to expect of this placement before starting, and while it was definitely not what I had initially pictured, I do feel it was worthwhile for me as a student in political science to get a feel for what pursuing a career in the field would entail and to gain experience working in an office setting and learning the advantages and drawbacks of a position holding or working in a political office. What was especially interesting about the logistics of this placement was that it was a late addition in December- far after course registration had opened and I had not initially signed up for this course. The fact that Angela’s office had never taken on students before, and they did not have a lot of time to plan for us meant that there were many on-the-fly changes and the exact nature of our role evolved during our time there, but I will explore that further later in this report. The structure of this report will be as follows. First, I will give an outline of Angela Simmonds and her work as an MLA along with some of the unique significance of the constituency of Preston. Then I will describe what work I did chronologically as well as how our role and projects evolved and I will finish the report with my overall takeaways pertaining to what I learned, what went well and what did not in the placement, my favourite moments and some suggestions for people taking on a similar position in the future.

Angela is not a career politician. She got into politics as a way to have a bigger platform to enact change and improve her community. Although this will be discussed in more depth later, that is the same reason for her decision to resign from political office. Angela is from Cherry Brook originally and currently resides in North Preston – both areas that are a part of the Preston constituency for which she is the representative, so she knows the area and its challenges/needs well. I believe that this is a strength of Angela’s and the efficacy of her office as she has a great understanding of how to support and uplift the members of her constituency and from what I observed, her allegiance is to the constituents first before the party. In my opinion that is the mark of a true leader and the most effective use of democracy. During her time in legislature, Angela introduced three bills: the *Dismantling Racism and Hate Act* (for which she is quite well-known), the *Fair Drug Pricing Act,* and the *Homes for Special Care Act.* Angela also spends a significant amount of time in the community, attending events and speaking. Much of Angela’s previous work also reflected many of the same initiatives she worked on during her time in office.

The Preston riding is a unique and interesting riding in terms of its political composition/history. Preston was restored in 2021 out of the former riding Preston-Dartmouth and includes the communities of Cherrybrook, Montague Gold Mines, Lake Loon, Lake Echo, Mineville, East Preston, North Preston and Westphal (Nova Scotia Legislature, 2021). The riding represents an example of a stray from the typical representation by population system of deciding ridings in order to ensure that the significant African Nova Scotian community’s voices were protected and well represented as it is a designated “community of interest.” In all the communities in the Preston riding, the Black/African Nova Scotian population is prominent and has great historical legacy, but North Preston in particular is important in Black Canadian history and culture. “North Preston is the oldest and largest indigenous Black community both in the province of Nova Scotia and in Canada, as well as having the highest concentration of African Canadians” (City of Halifax Community Profiles). Much of the work Angela was doing while I was working with her, as well as the tasks that she had assigned to us were surrounded amplifying the voices of African Nova Scotians and making sure the Nova Scotia legislature understood the constituents’ needs.

Our initial meetings with Angela and Fawn in December as well as the first meeting we had in January were online and mainly we established what we would be working on during the semester. Fawn and Angela outlined two possible projects that we could take on. The first project was about getting signage to shine a light on the uniqueness of the Preston area and the deep African Nova Scotian heritage of the area. This particular project would have been interesting because it would require interaction with all three levels of government: municipal, provincial and federal for permitting and such. It would have also required a good amount of on-the-ground work and community consultation to hear from the residents about what signage they would like to see and how they would like to be represented. The other project was more hands on in the community and surrounded highlighting Black-run businesses in the area and holding community coffee-chats. The coffee-chats would be mainly about helping constituents understand and gain access to provincial grants and other resources. For example, holding one where we would help elderly constituents fill out a seniors’ housing grant application form and provide access to internet for those who do not have access to it otherwise.

Our first day going into the office we got set up in the conference room which was our base going forward and Fawn let us know that we would talk long-term projects later, but they needed our help with the Winter Wear Drive. This was a project that Angela’s office as well as Trish Purdy’s municipal office took on in conjunction with Square Roots. We took over much of this project and it lasted through the next three weeks. Our tasks included sorting through the clothing donations and classifying it by size, trying to fulfill families’ orders as best and as fairly as we could given the donations we had, getting in touch to confirm with the people who requested the clothing, keeping track of it all in spreadsheets and order forms, and organizing the volunteers who were going to be helping with the pickups. This project was more time consuming as any of us had initially anticipated as we could not rely on the applicants to confirm they still wanted their order and to pick up their order during the times we had allocated. We did a lot of the spreadsheet work and phone calls as homework, as well. There were also some issues because at first, half of the inventory was at Trish Purdy’s office and was classified differently. Some if this inventory was also given away or promised to people that we were not aware of which caused some confusion. With this project, some of the work was quite tedious but overall, it was rewarding to know that we were making a direct positive impact in the lives of some constituents. It was also nice to get to interact with the constituents directly and eventually we came to know some of them somewhat familiarly through the phone calls then eventually seeing them in the office. That being said, there was an aspect of the work which was upsetting knowing that there were very few orders which we were able to fill completely – and some we were not able to fill at all. It was especially sad for me to take in how many small children did not have warm clothes to wear this weekend and we were not able to help them. It was also frustrating at times dealing with people who would not come when they said they would or gave wrong information.

While we were doing Winter Wear, we were also assigned some homework. The nature of the homework remained pretty consistent throughout the semester. Much of it was drafting letters to ministers. Drafting these letters would usually involve being forwarded an email chain from a constituent voicing a concern and we would use that as well as our own research to draft a letter on Angela’s behalf to the correct minister. Examples of letters I wrote were: a letter to the minister of health demanding better gender confirming health care and better health care for LGBTQ+ individuals in Nova Scotia and to ministers Tory Rushton and John Lohr about firework regulation concerns in Lake Echo. For homework we were also given the task of making promotional posters for the Nova Scotia Heritage Day Free Skate event hosted by Angela and other local MLAs. I really enjoyed this task as it gave us a lot of room for our own creativity.

The second week that we went into the office, Fawn sat us down and told us that Angela had just decided that she was going to resign, and the official announcement would be made later that day or the next. Angela said that “it was her time to leave politics” and was hoping she could affect more change elsewhere, without all the bureaucracy of being an MLA. As a student who has considered a career in politics, this was interesting to hear as it is something for me to bear in mind as I am looking for jobs in the future. Luckily for us, the date of Angela’s official resignation was to be April 1st which would not affect out placement. We were told that Fawn had been in touch with Dr. Denike and this plan was cleared. While we were told that the long-term projects that we were originally going to work on would no longer be going forward, there did not seem to be any clear plan for what our roles would be throughout the rest of the practicum. Unfortunately, this lack of clarity continued throughout the rest of the time – our tasks shifted away from projects into more odd jobs.

During the month of February, we mainly focused on researching black businesses in the Preston area for Black History Month/African Heritage Month and making Instagram posts about them for Angela’s profile. Doing this was fun because it made me feel more of a connection to the area by getting to know the businesses and business owners that make Preston what it is. It was also a fun challenge to figure out what information to use on a post so that it is brief enough that people are engaged but provides enough relevant information to do the business justice.

The week before reading week was exciting because we received our training to take over Fawn’s position while she is on vacation. It was a little intimidating to know that we would soon be left alone in the office and would have a lot of information to remember, but Fawn was very organized and made the training very easy to understand. She showed us how to log on to the computer and the constituency email as well as how to listen to and document voicemails. Fawn gave us each a folder with instructions of the tasks she wanted us to accomplish while she was away and resources such as the *Positive Aging Guide* which has information about different provincial services, supports and more. The two weeks after reading week we came in once a week and were on our own – Angela was in and out doing meetings and appearances. The first day it was exciting and nerve-racking, but everything went smoothly. We mostly went through emails categorizing them and forwarding anything that involved an invitation to Angela and listening to voicemails and returning the calls when we could. It was very interesting to see the extent to which people rely on their local MLA’s office for information but there was also a surprising number of people who were ranting intolerance with no apparent point. I was very inspired to become more engaged with my local politicians as it is great to see how much information and resources they have available. The second time we went in, Angela was not there at all, and we did the same work for the most part. On top of that Angela asked us to draft an Instagram post of some upcoming Lake Echo events and provide briefs of all the departments in the Black Business Initiative. With both of us working on these, they did not take long.

Our final task was to plan a going away/good luck in the future coffee chat for Angela. We were not given a ton of advanced notice to plan it, but the tasks included: making posters/invites to advertise, getting decorations, getting and planning snacks (Angela loves cheese), and organizing a going away card/present for her. I enjoy planning events and those type of logistics, so this was very fun for me. It felt very nice to be trusted with this, especially because we were given full creative control. It was also very nice because Fawn wanted to plan the date of the chat so that we could be there. This meant a lot to us because it made it clear how much they value us, and it is nice to reminisce on our little team. I would say that that is an advantage to working in a small office like this one. Although we did not meet as many people, we were able to really feel like a part of the team and make genuine connections with Fawn and Angela.

While it is hard to say if I can recommend this exact placement for the future as Angela has stepped down so this exact placement will not be available in the future. However, I do think that working in a constituency office is very valuable experience, especially for a student of political science. There is something very special about making connections with a community and doing things directly for them. I also truly believe that participating in democracy strengthens it. One thing that is interesting about working in a political office is that you cannot escape partisanship. This was one thing that worried me a bit going in as I have always voted NDP so I was not sure how it would feel to be working for a party that I would not necessarily vote for. Working for Angela did not feel like I was working for the Liberal Party, however, it felt more like I was working for Preston which I appreciated. This may be a consideration for someone looking to do a political placement, I think it is very beneficial to do some research about who you are working for first to make sure that you believe in the work that you are doing. Further, this placement used us on more of an ad hoc basis and was more hands off. I liked this independence, but it did make it difficult to manage with other course work at time because you could not always plan ahead. Luckily, Fawn was very understanding about our busy schedules. It also made me understand that the nature of working in a political office is largely ever-changing as the constituency needs are always changing. Being adaptable is definitely an asset in a placement like this. I would imagine that an MLA or MP who is actually holding government would be even busier in this regard. All this being said, I would recommend a placement in a constituency office.

In conclusion, I feel very grateful for this opportunity to work in Angela Simmond’s office. I learned a lot, and this was my first time working in an office which was very enlightening. I hope that in the future of this course there will be more opportunities for other students to work in other constituency offices.