

Final Written Report

POLI 4390: Practicum Placement in Public Policy

Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Nova Scotia (CCPA-NS)

The CCPA is a non-partisan research institute producing research and analysis to help policymakers, activists, and Canadians make informed decisions. They write about progressive policy options, providing opportunity and resources for Canadians to ask for more from their governments and political leaders. In researching and writing from outside of the government, the organization pushes to expand what's politically 'possible.' The organization is well-established across the country as a reputable leader in NGO advocacy. This is a great placement for students interested in policymaking, collaborative decision-making, NGO operations, and progressive, non-partisan solutions.

The organization releases reports, analyses, newsletters, and media interviews across a wide range of subjects. In Nova Scotia, they're often called upon to respond to government measures or to provide background research on an important or controversial topic. They conduct in-depth qualitative and quantitative research, use comparative policy studies, and gather information from other NGOs and academics. Some topics include labour and workers' rights, climate change, trade relationships, economic factors, poverty and income inequality, childcare, immigration, housing, and affordability. Their policy typically advocates for more government involvement and funding of social services. Students who enjoy policy research would be well suited for the practicum role, especially those considering an honours thesis.

Certain reports and research areas are more specific to a regional office, while some are released by the national office. The CCPA has offices based out of Ottawa (national), British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, and Nova Scotia. They aim to address policy concerns within and across jurisdictions. While I can't speak to the specifics of any other office, I'm sure that they work towards similar objectives. This placement could be a good foot-in-the-door for students looking to integrate into the national office or across the country.

From my experience, the CCPA-NS does a great job of bringing together a variety of experts: economists, academics, labour unions, NGOs, activists, industry leaders, Indigenous leaders, and other relevant parties. The CCPA sits at the intersection of many different NGOs. The annual Alternative Budget process is both a forum for progressive policy discussions and an exercise in deliberative, cooperative decision-making among non-government leaders. It's a unique opportunity to balance many different goals and perspectives into a cohesive plan. If you're interested in pursuing a career in an NGO, this is the ideal placement for you. You'll have the opportunity to meet representatives from many different organizations, learn about their work, and discuss how their goals fit into the larger picture of progressive policy.

Working with the CCPA-NS

The mission of the CCPA-NS is to propose policy alternatives to achieve an environmentally sustainable, economically and socially just Nova Scotia. It deals with social policy issues that are specific to the province, while maintaining a balance with greater global and national pressures. The organization is small, despite its large presence in policy debates. In

my time working with the CCPA-NS, there was only the Director, Christine, myself, and another student. Most of the research labour comes from volunteer academics and experts.

My supervisor was Christine Saulnier, the Director of CCPA's Nova Scotia office since 2007. She has a doctorate in Political Science and is an expert in Canadian and Nova Scotian progressive policy. She leads the living wage calculations for communities across Atlantic Canada and co-authors the annual child and family poverty report for Nova Scotia. She has written extensively for the CCPA and provides commentary on a range of other public policy issues including fiscal policy, labour markets, and child-care. She serves on the Steering Committee of Child Care Now Nova Scotia, and Campaign 2000 (a national coalition to end child and family poverty). She also served on the Board of the Nova Scotia Health Coalition and Adsum for 10 years. Students interested in fiscal policy, social policy, poverty, and women's rights would have a lot to discuss with Christine! She is always engaged in conversation and happy to talk about current events and issues beyond the scope of the practicum work.

One important thing to note is that the CCPA-NS does not have a physical office space, so all practicum work is done online. We agreed to meet for 30 minutes weekly on Zoom to check-in about progress and goals. The rest of the practicum work was done remotely on my own time. I'll get into the details of my project and tasks below.

My Practicum Project: The NS Alternative Budget Environmental Sub-Group

At the beginning of the term, I connected with Christine by email and then video-call. We discussed the requirements of my practicum, my interests, and the CCPA's needs in the next four months. I was most interested in environmental activism and policy work. Based on this, she

suggested that I help with the policy research and organization of the Environmental Sub-Group of the Nova Scotia Alternative Budget process.

Future students can expect a high degree of variance and flexibility with regards to their project. Every year is bound to be different, based on the political climate, time of year, the organization's current goals, the student's capacity, and interests. Christine was very open and honest with me from the start. She said that I could take on as much or as little responsibility as I wanted, acknowledging that I had other competing priorities and course needs. Christine also made it clear that I should communicate directly with her if I was given too much or not enough work. It was clear to me that she wanted the experience to be helpful and constructive to my learning. That being said, there was not a lot of structure with this role, so it may be best suited for someone with a high level of initiative.

Since 2000, the CCPA-NS has published Alternative Budgets that assess the fiscal situation and choices available to governments in Nova Scotia. Provincial budgets, like all public policy, are about choices and values. Budgets have serious implications for the everyday lives of Nova Scotians now, as well as for Nova Scotia's future. As the Nova Scotia Alternative Budget (NSAB) shows, governments could make different choices to better balance people's needs with viable fiscal policies. The Alternative Budget is guided by a key question: How can we tax and spend differently to move Nova Scotia toward social, economic, and climate justice?

The NSAB is focused on taxation and spending proposals. This includes expenditures on services that respond effectively to the needs of Nova Scotians. Also, the budget pushes for the creation of a greener economy and, thus, a more sustainable and healthier province. Different taxation and revenue collection methods are also explored. This includes raising the level of taxation on industry and other high earners, as well as re-considering stumpage fees and

royalties. Expenditures ensure that all Nova Scotians, including the most vulnerable, are adequately protected by a robust social safety net. The Alternative Budget is framed to ensure that fiscal choices do not just benefit the few but the many.

As a finished document, the Alternative Budget plays many roles. The process of arriving at costed recommendations is intended to build and strengthen links between and within sectors and communities. The budget itself is a tool to raise public awareness and spark debate, support Nova Scotians' ability to understand government priorities, clarify who pays and who benefits from budgetary decisions, support advocacy through the provision of evidence, and hold the government accountable for its budgetary choices.

The Alternative Budget working group is composed of about 40 volunteers, across a variety of sectors. We did the initial working group meeting with everyone altogether, but the following meetings were held in smaller issue-based groups. The Environmental Sub-Group was tasked with issues of revenue and expenditures related to the environment, energy, climate justice, fisheries, forestry, transportation, agriculture, and food. Our group was comprised of twelve experts, including representatives from the Affordable Energy Coalition, Ecology Action Centre, Sierra Club, St Mary's University, East Coast Environmental Law, Council of Canadians, Healthy Forest Coalition, and ClimAtlantic. Everyone was highly experienced, knowledgeable, and passionate about environmental issues. It was an inspirational group, engaging in interesting conversation and policy debates.

I was responsible for three main aspects of the project: recruitment, notes, and research. In terms of recruitment, I relied on my previous environmental volunteering, advocacy, and schoolwork to seek out experts who might be interested in joining the process. I also did cold research into local organizations and initiatives. I researched their credentials and experiences

and sought to find representatives from a variety of organizations across the province. I helped organize our list of participants and their information. During our meetings, I took notes of member contributions and experiences. I contributed to conversations as well. I would then review and summarize the meeting notes, to be added to our working group documents and sent out to meeting participants. I helped organize our shared files and email lists.

The biggest part of my practicum role was compiling research materials and resources related to environmental policy. This included research on electric vehicle infrastructure and subsidies, clean energy production, car-share programs, stumpage fees, royalties, the Lahey Report, and more. It was interesting to examine sources comparatively, across jurisdictions, and learn more about the actual policies that affect Nova Scotians. Research topics were determined by the knowledge gaps in the sub-group. When there was a budgetary decision to be made but not enough relevant information, it was my responsibility to find the relevant research to fill the gap. My research was also intended to provide the background information and justifications required in the environmental sub-group section of the report. That is, to justify why we would choose to spend on electric vehicle infrastructure, but not personal vehicle subsidies, for example. The final budget amounts are determined by Christine and the rest of the fiscal group, which are economic experts. They balance the needs of each sub-group, to cohesively bring together many sub-issues.

Personal Reflection

I enjoyed my practicum experience with the CCPA-NS. Christine was a genuine and hard-working supervisor, who cares a lot about her work and community. I most appreciated the

opportunity to learn about the many functions and facets of NGOs in Nova Scotia. Participating in meetings with representatives across sectors was a unique opportunity to meet and learn from a variety of local experts and leaders. I have a better understanding of the inner workings of NGO operations and objectives. The people that I met were all highly-driven, kind and presented me the opportunity to network with various organizations.

That being said, the schedule for the Alternative Budget was pushed back due to external factors, in such a way that impacted my participation. The current Conservative government decided to release their budget earlier than usual, without opportunity for CCPA comment, which considerably shifted the timeline of the project backwards, to instead address next year's future budget. This meant that I was only around for the initial planning phase of the project, which is now set to be completed in October. That presented a major change to my practicum work timeline, which meant that I had very little to do at the beginning of the term, but then was given considerably more responsibility at the end of the term, once I was entering final season and was less able to adapt to the workload.

Another interesting factor in my experience was the way that current political events have impacted the regular operations and priorities of NGOs in the province. In November, Tim Houston's Conservative government was re-elected with a super majority. At the beginning of his term, he began by targeting so-called 'special interests' (NGO advocacy groups) for 'unduly influencing' politics in the province. The government then moved to pass a series of controversial bills, including limits on the Auditor General's power and re-opening Nova Scotia's extractive industries. This legislation and political shift were acutely felt by NGOs, pushing them to respond in a unified way. NSAB meetings regularly included discussions about the state of democracy, including in our province. This was further compounded by US President Donald

Trump's tariff policies and threats, which further encouraged industry development and self-reliance narratives. In this way, many NGOs including the CCPA-NS was put on their heels and forced to respond to more pressing political issues. Christine was often called by the media to comment on political and policy developments. For these external reasons, in combination with the delayed deadline, the NSAB process was not a top priority when I was doing my practicum. That was alright, but just impacted what I had expected my practicum work to look like.

Conclusion

Overall, the CCPA-NS is a non-partisan research institute producing research and analysis to help policymakers, activists, and Canadians make informed decisions. They write about progressive policy options, providing opportunity and resources for Canadians to ask for more from their governments and political leaders. It's a reputable, well-established NGO that provides practicum students with the flexibility to research policy that interests them, the opportunity to meet a variety of expert leaders, and learn about the variety of work that NGOs do in Nova Scotia. The Alternative Budget is an exercise in deliberative decision-making producing a fiscal budget that serves as a resource to advocacy groups, organizations, and citizens to hold their governments accountable. The Alternative Budget let's Nova Scotians imagine what might be possible from government taxation and expenditures. My project was specific to the organization and research of the Environmental Sub-Group, which included recruiting experts, taking meeting minute notes, researching policy gaps, and meeting with my supervisor, Christine Saulnier. Although my project's timeline was shifted due to the current political situation, I really enjoyed my practicum placement at the CCPA-NS. I've learned a lot about deliberative decision-making, environmental policy, and the role that NGOs play in Nova Scotia.