

“Thinking Canada” 2010

On Saturday 25 September 2010, 27 students and two professors from 18 member countries of the European Union (ranging from Ireland and Portugal in the west to Estonia and Romania in the east as well as from the UK in the north to Italy and Malta in the south) set out on their return journey to Brussels. Since September 1, they had been on a 25-day study tour with the title “Thinking Canada” that was supported generously by the European Commission and the national and regional European Canadian Studies associations. After three days of preparation at Brussels, during which they received a thorough introduction to the European Union and its political institutions, they set out for Canada. A week of visits and discussions to various government and non-government institutions in the Canadian capital was followed by trips to the metropolitan centres of Québec, Montréal, Toronto, Vancouver and Victoria, during which the students met with representatives of the various levels of Canadian government (federal, provincial, municipal, First Nations), various linguistic and ethnic groups, leading banks, think tanks and social as well as cultural institutions. During the three and a half weeks of the tour, the stimulating talks and lively discussion amounted to more than 110 hours.



Don Sparling and participants in the study tour on the ferry to Vancouver Island

The 27 participants in this first European Study Tour of Canada were chosen from more than 200 applicants, thus forming a highly motivated group whose active and enthusiastic participation greatly impressed their Canadian hosts. One of the most interesting events on the programme was a visit to the Canadian House of Commons in Ottawa, during which the group met with Peter Milliken, the Speaker of the House of Commons. While the group had not been able to see the chamber of the House during their official guided tour, Mr. Milliken personally led the students into the chamber and commented on his tasks as Speaker. During a meeting with the Commissioner of Official Languages, Mr. Graham Fraser, who is the guardian of the official bilingual status of the multicultural country, the students also had the chance to meet with the President of the European Parliament, former Polish Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek, one of the official sponsors of the study tour and himself confronted with a mere 23 official languages in his European Parliament.

The study tour was organized by a committee comprising Dr. Alexander Berlin, Honorary Director of the European Commission, Professor Don Sparling (Masaryk University, Brno, the Czech Republic) and Professor Martin Kuester (University of Marburg, Germany). All three accompanied the students throughout the tour; in Vancouver they were joined by the Canadian member of the organizing team, Professor Ed Lavalley (Capilano University), who had masterfully organized the trip from the West Coast and without whose expertise and support the tour could not have taken place. For seven years now, Professor Lavalley and Dr. Berlin have organized the corresponding tour of Europe for Canadian students, so that both could fall back on a great amount of experience in the realm of transatlantic exchanges for this new and exciting enterprise.

The students left Canada full of impressions of Canadian realities, whether it be in the realms of politics (on the federal level in Ottawa, in the legislatures of Quebec and British Columbia, or at the municipal level in the country's financial metropolis, Toronto, and the Olympic host city of Vancouver), of the economy (visits to the Bank of Canada in Ottawa and to the trading floor of the Royal Bank of Canada in Toronto, discussions about the planned free trade agreement between Canada and the EU), of bilingualism and multiculturalism, of the situation of the First Nations and Inuit, and of progressive methods of harm reduction in the field of drug addiction. They all felt encouraged to pursue further studies pertaining to Canada and to return there as soon as possible. Still, an important effect of this first European study tour to Canada was doubtlessly also the growth of a feeling of a common European identity among the participants in this trip to the New World.

Prof. Martin Kuester

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