



## Student Reflections 2019 UBC Women in House Program

Nicole So, Women in House Program Participant



"This year, I was honoured and privileged to be selected as one of the delegates representing the University of British Columbia to the House of Senate in Ottawa through the inaugural UBC Women in House program. Spearheaded by Senator Yonah Martin, this opportunity enabled me to better understand and engage in meaningful discussions on a variety of issues, ranging from the challenges of federal politics in a country as large as Canada to the participation of women in the public sector, in a deeply humanizing way.

Although there has been a greater recognition and a global push towards [addressing gender parity and enhancing gender diversity](#), women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions, particularly in politics. Despite the [established and growing evidence](#) that enhancing women's leadership in political decision-making processes improves them (such as policies on parental leave and childcare, gender-based violence, gender-equality laws and electoral reforms), [only 23 per cent of the world's parliamentarians are women](#), a slow increase from 11.3 per cent in 1995.

This pressing issue stood out to me when I was invited to be in the G7 priorities-setting meeting in 2017 to shape the agenda for the 44th G7 Summit in Charlevoix. Being one of the few women and Asians in the room, I suddenly became very conscious and hyperaware of my identity (one of the few times I have felt that way growing up in a city as multicultural as Vancouver). Yet, amongst the room of men who were much older and more experienced than I was, I found that my unique background and experience provided fresh perspectives to the meeting and enabled me to make meaningful contributions to the conversation. Although I had always known the value of diversity, being at the meeting as one of the only Asian females made me realize firsthand the importance of diversity and the urgent need to address the gender gap in politics.

Hence, the opportunity to participate in a women-focused program and engage with female Canadian political leaders was truly an eye-opening experience for both my personal and professional growth. I had the opportunity to shadow my mentor, Senator Mobina Jaffer, to witness firsthand and better understand

the work she is championing, such as around the Bill C-48 as well as on the Official Languages Act. I had the opportunity to join her in several meetings, including one with indigenous stakeholders meeting to understand the diversity of perspectives, values and considerations that a federal Act or policy would have on different communities. Although the discussion was particular to Bill C-48, the conversation was also directly relevant to my MPPGA capstone project around the development of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG). This reinforced to me the importance of stakeholder engagement, but also prompted me to better consider how the government can better work with the indigenous communities and how the government can remove barriers and enhance the accessibility of engagement process to more meaningfully include the perspectives of affected stakeholders (including Indigenous communities).

Senator Yonah Martin had also organized a special panel for the UBC delegates to engage in a discussion with senior female political staff members and leaders. In our discussion about some of the sacrifices that are unique or more demanding on women (for example, the different expectations for women in both the work and family spaces), I was able to better understand the complex, systemic barriers women can be challenged with. Yet, at the same time, although politics has traditionally been a male-dominated space (an "all-boys" club), I have learned and realized the critical need for more women to be in leadership positions. Women can support, help and elevate each other in their careers; and in my life, I have been blessed and grateful to have strong women - peers, mentors and role models - to look up to. Growing up under the Chinese culture where the norm is for women to choose between their career or raising a family, it was especially important for me to realize that the decision doesn't necessarily need to be binary. And having strong, powerful women to look up to has inspired me, challenged me, and both, directly and indirectly, shaped me to be the person I am today.

In my first meeting with Senator Martin, she told us her experience engaging with the veterans who had served our country as she was pushing forward a bill for the Korean War Veterans Day Act. Senator Martin shared with us that when she would get nervous and feel uncertain, she would think about her mother who has made so many sacrifices for her to be where she is today, but also the courage of the veterans who so bravely served for our country. She said: "I will always remember what they told me: 'if not me, then who?'" This quote stuck with me deeply.

After my graduation from the UBC Master of Public Policy and Global Affairs program, I will be starting a career in the public sector in the Policy Analyst Recruitment and Development Program with Natural Resources Canada, with the (not so) silly hopes to become a strong female leader that others could respect and look up to and "be the change [I] want to see". I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to attend such a meaningful, powerful program and to engage in intellectually-stimulating yet heartfelt discussions with senators, public servants, my colleagues and the UBC Women in House staffs. I strongly urge eligible students to consider participating in the UBC Women in House Program. Thank you so much again for the opportunity."

## Deanne LeBlanc, Women in House Program Participant



“It is one thing to study Canadian politics as an academic, it is another thing entirely to actually witness it up close. The *Women in House* (WiH) Program reminded me of what I found so intriguing about studying politics at the beginning of my post-secondary education, even when it also served as a constant reminder of the gender-based obstacles women must overcome in any workplace. We might have only been on the Hill for two days but those two days were packed with meetings and tours and lots and lots of walking – my fitbit has never buzzed with such joy. While there were the constant reminders of gender-based obstacles, through our meetings with female staffers, Senators and MPs I was also consistently inspired by the strong, frank and motivated women that I met. In their willingness to share their personal stories and experiences about how they ended up working on the Hill and what that work has been like, I found myself woven into that unique comradery that exists when women share and collaborate within a workplace – a comradery that has the potential to connect and unify women even across party-lines. By the end of our two days on the Hill, while I think I was exhausted, I found myself energized by these women and the pace and breadth of politics in Ottawa. As someone coming to the end of her degree I was increasingly drawn to picture myself working there one day.

My day of shadowing an MP might not have gone as planned due to the Opposition’s filibustering in the House (re: the SNC-Lavalin Affair), but it was still an exciting and informative day. While I only had limited one-on-one time with my MP, which was still excellent and educational time, her staff was very welcoming. They took time to show me around, taking me to witness the filibuster in House, to Senate committees, and to lunch. They were also great about answering my questions about their own roles on the Hill as well as about the functioning of the MP’s office more broadly.

In truth, I wasn’t ready for the program to end – I would have been quite content to carry on with my informational interviews, networking and observations. I encourage anyone remotely interested in working in politics (whether as a representative or staffer) to apply to the program. Not only is it run by a dedicated team (both at UBC and the Senate) but the exposure and opportunities it affords are potentially career-altering.”

## Kelley Humber, Women in House Program Participant



“My experience with the UBC Women in House Program taught me a great deal about the community of women who work on Parliament Hill, and gave me a better perspective about the nature of and challenges with Canadian federal politics. Many of the Members of Parliament and Parliamentary aids were evidently very passionate about their careers and about the work they do. What was interesting is that not all, even many, of the people I had the opportunity to talk with did not begin their working life expecting to be so involved in politics and that the trajectory of their career path was not one they would have been able to easily anticipate or chart even five years prior.

Women we spoke with during the lunch meeting discussed some of the female-specific challenges of their role such as receiving some push-back depending on the nature of their constituency, although many reflected a sense of empowerment and support coming from most of the people they worked with on Parliament Hill. My impression was that the work itself can be highly empowering because on a daily basis you are working with your local community and with Members of Parliament from across the country to create tangible change. From this it seems as though a core benefit from increasing the number of women in Parliament and number of women leadership roles in politics has very personal outcomes for the women themselves in these roles.

For me, being able to talk and discuss professional and personal challenges was an incredibly meaningful experience because it exposed many of the personal successes of the women we spoke with, how they personally felt empowered through their positions, and what sorts of doubts and fears they themselves had to grapple with as they grew into their roles, and took on new roles in politics. It sounds silly to say, but it was surprising how common many of our personal fears and doubts about our abilities and choices were, but it was truly moving to also be able to be mutually encouraged and inspired. What I did notice was there was a lack of discussion of how MPs felt supported by their political parties during campaigning, or how they felt their parties helped achieve the kind of societal change that would help foster better female empowerment and representation.

However, I spent most of my shadowing day with two of my MPs' aides, and while we did not discuss any of the specific gender-related challenges of the role, they did discuss some of the challenges of working in public politics that few other industries have. Specifically, I had wondered about how they handle the uncertainty that comes with your job being linked to electoral success of yourself/ or your candidate. The response was essentially that it's a huge challenge and a huge hindrance for many people to want to take that step into politics, but that overall, they work in public politics because they have a genuine desire to serve Canadians and be a part of the political changes they see as meaningful for our country. Which in and of itself showed a level of personal integrity and dedication that is clearly necessary for the job.

Lastly, the Women in House Program gave me a huge appreciation for the challenges Members of Parliament face who represent constituencies that are geographically difficult to reach and far away from Ottawa. I grew up a three-hour drive from Ottawa, and now live in Vancouver. Hearing from the variety of people working on Parliament Hill what their work week looks like when Parliament is in session, and the logical challenges of getting to and from their constituencies and Ottawa, gave me a greater appreciation for the sacrifices that politicians from further edges of our country make to be able to represent their constituents.

Overall, this program was incredibly eye-opening, provided opportunities to meaningful connect with inspiring Canadians who work on Parliament Hill, and to self-reflect on my own personal strengths, weaknesses, ambitions, and pre-conceived assumptions about the life of public politicians.”

### **Camile Oliveira, Women in House Program Participant**



“Participating in the Women in House Program definitely pushed me out of my comfort zone. I have never considered myself as the most politically active person – I am interested in political issues and discussions, but have never volunteered for a political campaign, for instance. Also, coming from Brazil, I had become very disheartened with politics, and had never thought of becoming an elected politician. However, after learning from politicians about the challenges and gratifications of the job, I decided to not completely cross out the possibility of doing work related to politics and be open to it if the opportunity presents itself.

One of the most surprising parts of the experience was learning the professional path that these politicians took to be where they are today. Most of them had not imagined to be a politician early in their career – Senator Martin, for instance, was a teacher for 20 years before deciding to run. MP Caesar-Chavannes did not even know how the Canadian government worked on its most basic level! She told a story about how her 14-year-old daughter had to teach her about the House of Commons, and explain its most basic components, like where the opposition sits for instance. In my head, I always thought that if you were not heavily involved in political campaigns since you were a teenager, then you would never be a politician.

But now I know that is certainly not the case. In fact, MP Caesar-Chavannes said that having another career and a different set of skills other than knowing how to play the “politics game” gave her a unique perspective when she started her job. It helped her think more creatively, as well. As such, I think that became a reoccurring topic – some people fall into politics by chance, and I think it is important to be open to the possibility if it comes your way. A lot of the speakers talked about having a general career plan but at the

same time, being open to opportunities that unexpectedly appear along the way. This message resonated with me especially at this moment when graduating seems like an impending doom after which I have to plan every next step and know exactly where my career is going. It was comforting to hear from successful politicians that it does not work quite like that.

Another reoccurring theme, and I think one that represents a unique challenge of being a woman who is a politician, was about the work-family balance. It was helpful to hear the very frank opinions of MPs in regard to that. Although times are changing, it is still assumed that women will take on most of the responsibility when it comes to child care, and if they do not, they are judged as bad mothers. I do not think male MPs are frequently asked about how they manage to take care of their children, simply because the assumption is that their wives will do the work. Either way, they said their job definitely consumes their time completely, and that it was difficult to have that much family time – something that is still very discouraging, as family is very important to me. MP Elizabeth May, for instance, did not get a day off in almost two months! So, I would definitely not be a politician while having small children but applaud any women who decide to do so. However, both MP May and MP Caesar-Chavannes expressed that their children were older when they decided to run, and that made it easier for them to spend more time away for work. Also, I thought it was very unique how different politicians delineate their work-family boundaries. I was hopeful to see that one still has some choice when it comes to the work-family balance in politics. Although, of course, being an MP still takes up most of MP Caesar-Chavannes time, she still ensures that she has at least a day to spend with her family.

Interestingly enough, I think most of the women we talked to did not think they were treated differently because of their gender, even though some experiences they shared said otherwise. However, I am skeptical of that. Having studied gender inequality and feminist theory, one thing that I learned is that sometimes, actions or situations that have become normalized to us are actually a reflection of an underlying patriarchal system, but we are just used to it. As such, it takes some reflection to realize how your actions and thoughts have been inscribed by such systems of power that work in inconspicuous ways. We could even get all philosophical and bring Foucault's biopolitics and Butler's gender performativity into it. Either way, I was skeptical of what they said because if one has not been taught that certain actions are actually wrong, then they will think it is acceptable or they will link it to something other than gender. I believe that it would probably be difficult to recognize experiences as a systemic problem if certain actions have become normalized. This also makes me think about how gender also does not automatically mean more equality. Of course, it is important to have women's voices on the table, but I do not think we should automatically assume that that solves all the problems, since some women may benefit from the current system and do not make it their focus to work on equitable policy, or to further women's rights. Hence, I think that if I ever were to go into politics and since gender equality is one of my passions, I would have to put that at the forefront of my work, and not just assume that my presence at the table automatically results in a more equitable system.

I feel very lucky about the timing of our trip to Ottawa. Although many MPs had to cancel because of the budget issue, it is still a contentious time in Canadian politics right now, and both MP May and MP Caesar-Chavannes talked about partisanship. Both MPs also spoke about the issues of first-past-the-post system and called for an electoral reform – an issue I will definitely be more aware about from now on. MP Caesar-Chavannes became an independent candidate the day before we shadowed her and was very open to talk about the issues of partisanship in politics. The mentality of party-first prevents useful, constructive conversations between parties, and it is ultimately detrimental to the governance of the country. If no dissent is allowed, how are we to include different voices and perspectives that go beyond simplistic, expected opinions of the party?

Perhaps one of the biggest takeaways for me was learning that despite which party, all the women we met were incredibly passionate about the work that they did, which is why they got into politics in the first place. Many of the women claimed that they learned a lot about politics while on the job, showing that one does not have to know every detail or have expertise in all the skills before becoming an MP, as it does develop the longer one participates in politics. Nevertheless, all the women were passionate about their mission, and that is what keeps them going despite the difficulties of the job. MP Elizabeth May, for instance, comically stated multiple times how much she hates the politics game, yet, she is incredibly hardworking because she believes the cause she puts forward in her work. This was incredibly refreshing and inspiring to see – again, I subconsciously thought of politicians as self-interested, simply because that was what I understood in a Brazilian context.

Lastly, I wanted to express how grateful I am for having the opportunity to participate in the inaugural UBC Women in House Program. Having the chance to talk to so many MPs and Senators was eye-opening, and definitely one of the highlights of my undergrad experience. I learned a lot about Canadian politics and am inspired by the hard work these MPs put into making Canada a better place (regardless of party). Although right now I still plan on continuing with academia, I am open to the possibility of working in politics one day... so thank you, Women in House!"

### **Clara Leroy, Women in House Program Participant**



"We can be better than whatever we have faced," repeats Senator Yonah Martin. "We can learn from what we went through and do better, be better, for those who come after us." Despite the glass ceiling, the double shift, and the many other burdens women have to face, Senator Martin advocates for humility and gratefulness. Those are the two words that best describe UBC's Women in House program and the days we spent in Ottawa.

Previously established in other Canadian universities, this year was the inaugural promotion of the Women in House Program at UBC. What an honor to learn about the Canadian political system from those actually working inside of it and to share this experience with such an incredible group of peers! Not only was it an incredibly enriching experience academically speaking, this program was also a human journey, greatly shaped by the other participants. For me, it appeared crucial to realize that from the start, this program was a shared experience. On March 8th, when we first met Senator Martin, she emphasized how our group was almost as important as the visits and presentations we had in Ottawa. This seems to be a leitmotiv in politics, as all the politicians we had the pleasure to meet emphasized how difficult the political realm can be, which is why having a trusting team and an effective support system are essential. And if all agreed how absorbing and demanding politics can be, the women we met had a particularly relevant discourse.



It is no surprise that sexism is everywhere in our society, and unfortunately the political sphere is no exception. Even after years of fighting for equal rights, the reality is that the patriarchy is still entrenched into the deeply rooted institutions. “I often attend meetings in which I am the only woman” said Kenzie Porter, Andrew Scheer’s chief of staff. Often, MP Shannon Stubbs is “taught” (the term mansplained would be quite appropriate here) about pipelines by her male colleagues, a topic she is actually quite comfortable with as the Conservative Shadow Minister for Natural Resources. Even in the private sphere, women are put aside, as reported by Nathalie Fletcher during our panel. Her experience with the “pink ghetto” that is family law, a disregarded and underpaid yet necessary aspect of law, underlines how challenging and lonely being a woman in a position of power can be. Apart from the constant sexism—which more often than not is so deeply entrenched that its perpetrators and victims are not necessarily noticing it, simply complying with the biased norms—politics is rough.

Indeed all of the inspiring women that we have met, regardless of the political party, all agreed that politics was a tremendous sacrifice. More than a 24/7 job, being a political leader is a complete change of lifestyle. From the pressure it puts on one’s finances to marital life, from not seeing your children to barely sleeping, being an MP, Senator, Staffer, or even local politician is not just a hobby or a career, it is a life-changing decision. We discussed some of the tips our own mentors had to overcome the pressure of the job and maintaining some sort of personal life. For Senator Martin, it’s all about “chipping away” what is not working for you, and learning from your mistakes. Others emphasized the importance of an understanding partner, or a financial security blanket. But for most of them, politics was not really a choice as it felt more like a duty to represent their own community.

But the actual women in the House that we met are not asking for pity, far from it actually. Indeed if compassion is nice, they are mostly looking for passion—also known as the driver of politics. Because if the program certainly underlined the challenges women face in politics, it also offered a positive and hopeful outlook towards it. “It all comes down to passion,” said Senator Martin. The essence of politics is in this belief that what you are doing is worth it and right. At the end of the day, it seemed that for all women, their passion gave them purpose.

While one could expect more competition between women due to this glass ceiling, the politicians we met did not seem to notice an increased rivalry. Rather, women tend to be more understanding and compassionate with one another according to the panelists, as they have faced similar challenges in a field dominated by men and understand the certain duty they gave towards one another. While those might just be beautiful sentiments, maybe some truth resides in them. Whether one believes that women are better political allies than men, whether one believes that competition does not exist between women, no one can say that politics does not depend on its participants. “We have to be better,” emphasized Senator Martin. Gender is a powerful tool, not a burden, explained MP Stubbs and Kenzie Porter. Those words certainly echoed in the two days spent in Ottawa.

We live in an era in which a member of the opposition, a woman, can call her Prime Minister a “fake-feminist” during question period, and not be certain that her job will be gone by the end of the hour. For someone who has always been afraid to raise their voice, especially at male colleagues, hearing Michelle Rempel do it in the midst of the Jody Wilson-Raybould polemic, it felt inspiring and liberating. Women might still not have as many opportunities as men in the political realm, but they definitely have gained a tremendous amount of power compared to the last generation. If change is possible, then our contemporaries have to continue the fight and ensure that the future generations will have similar opportunities.



Overall, the Women in House Program was not just forty-eight intense hours spent in Ottawa balancing visits and meetings. It was about meeting local leaders ahead of the trip, about getting to know the participants before the journey, about walking the “halls of power” as Senator Martin calls them in Ottawa, about meeting alumni, witnessing a Supreme Court Trial, talking with ambassadors, sharing our shadowing experience with one another, but most importantly, learning from each other. Politics and policies depend on its participants, and so did the Women in House Program. As a humane experience above all else, I believe I have learned as much from Senator Martin, Elizabeth May, and MP Stubbs, as from Camile, Michelle, Aman, Nicole, Kelley, Jory, Deanne, Alexandra, and Jade during this experience.”

### **Anam Imtiaz Elahi, Women in House Program Participant**



“As a policy student and an aspiring global changemaker, Ottawa has always been my dream city to work at; the hub of all politics and decision making. Holding a position within the city to me signifies power and stature, a position that has the ability to leave its impact on the working of the country. The UBC Women in House Program, gave me a personalized, up-close tour into the lives of the policy makers, the movers and shakers of the country. It was an opportunity which helped me understand what immense strength women in the parliament and its offices really had, and what all went into becoming a part of that circle. The flagship program of UBC, which I and nine other female students joined in Ottawa as female representatives, helped us all absorb new aspects of our lives. We learned to embody our own capabilities through learning about the struggles of the women who appeared the strongest and most powerful in the media and in the limelight.

As a Canadian-Pakistani, living my life split between the two countries, I grew up with a blurred identity; with a feeling that I was never good enough to fit into any of the two countries, always too foreign for each. I was never too much of a Canadian nor too much of a Pakistani, though loved both countries dearly, but unable to balance the two together. The program aided me to connect with Senator Yonah Martin, a Canadian-Korean, who helped me understand the power that I held within through multiple national identities. She taught me the skill of embracing the diversity and to channel the loyalty positively for my benefit; that the construction of my DNA was not my weakness but my strength which helped me envelope more than one identity at the same time. My conversations with Senator Yonah Martin were not only enlightening but life changing for me. A struggle that I grew up with is slowly becoming my sense of power and holding which distinguishes me through my experiences and diverse reflection from the rest.

The role of the women at the Hill, from positions as senators, MPs, and parliamentary staff is way more challenging and fulfilling than I had expected it to be. These women hold positions of power with grace and dominance and have fought battles to stand at the designations that they maintain today. From opposite gender’s prejudice to their belittling attitudes, they fight small wars every day, where they have to work at least double the amount to prove their ability and knowledge. Balancing personal lives, children, families,

constant travel, elongated periods of voting at the house to election campaigns, these women disseminate knowledge and stories of success for women like myself. As beacons of light, these inspiring female leaders are mentors every female should be able to hear from.

The 'Ottawa Bubble,' as described by those at the Parliament Hill, is a place of constant change, with political drama, changing scenarios and challenges on everyday basis. The UBC WiH Program helped me peek into the bubble and get a brief look at how life in politics would be like. As scary and daunting as it seemed before, I feel the program helped me see the potential in me to fit into that circle. The exalting experience made me realize that a position at the Hill, be it in the form of a policy maker or through the various roles within the parliamentary staff, would be worth the challenge, an attainable target than a distant dream."

### Jory Smallenberg, Women in House Program Participant



"I arrived in Ottawa at 3 am after a long flight from Europe, wondering what I could expect from the UBC Women in House Program.

The previous year, I had met Senator Yonah Martin in Ottawa with the Character Abbotsford delegation, alongside MP Ed Fast, Character Abbotsford founder Vijay Manuel, and other local leaders. Though our interactions with Yonah were brief, I remember her acting differently than the conventional media portrayal of inauthentic politicians: she was chipper and down-to-earth, weaving throughout the corridors of the Hill with a bowl of almonds in her hand. We discussed our origins at W.J. Mouat Secondary School in Abbotsford, and bonded immediately. Though busy, Yonah was never frantic: she was a beacon of hospitality, joy, and sophistication as the Leader of the Official Opposition in the Senate. Is this what it could mean to be a woman in politics?

It is a daunting endeavour, to consider a future in politics. Just now, I am listening to Democrat Senator and Presidential Candidate Elizabeth Warren discuss her experience in American politics. When Elizabeth ran for Senate in Massachusetts, she had a clear message for the girls that she encountered on the campaign trail: "Hi, my name is Elizabeth, and I'm running for Senate because that's what girls do."

Is running for office what girls do? In the post-modern era, it seems like conventional wisdom is still at a crossroads on this question. On the one hand, feminist visions of equity and empowerment are rising like never before, while on the other hand, cultural pulls for women to stay away from big name positions remain ingrained in the social structure. Though female heads of state currently govern Ethiopia, Georgia, and New Zealand, Canada has only had one female Prime Minister from June to November 1993 – a period of less

than five months. What is it, then, that keeps women from the highest positions of authority? How long will it take for popular culture to fully embrace a mindset that truly endorses equality? Is this an issue of structural barriers to entry and systematic sexism, or of beliefs in the hearts of women that they cannot or will not succeed as a result?

As UBC's 2017 Governor General's Medallist and Faculty of Arts Valedictorian, I have experienced this values tug-of-war in my own life for many years: my aspirations oscillate from being a future political leader at the highest level of Canadian politics to being a stay-at-home mom. Some will perceive this predicament as indecision or naïvety, but in fact, it is the opposite; though I am resolute to make steps towards both aspirations, I recognize that neither can be accomplished half-heartedly. Therefore, I must consider how – God willing – I can do both.

Despite the empowered anthems that spur women forward today, it is no easy feat to disentangle twenty-first century role strain in the lives of women. In my view, family-centred women are far too often rebuked, or even condemned as being overly traditional, religious, or disempowered. In fact, one glance at family sociology demonstrates the importance of consistent caregivers for children, while childrearing is a deep-rooted desire for many women. Simultaneously, however, conventional wisdom exhorts women to simply "do both". Without discretion, this view endorses role strain, exhaustion, and burnout. Can a woman really be an active and successful politician with a thriving family life? Will she have to make sacrifices on both ends?

During my 2019 visit to Ottawa with UBC Women in House, Yonah was clear about the challenges in this area for women in politics. Deputy Chief of Staff and Principal Secretary to the Leader of the Official Opposition, Kenzie Porter, shared her experience of being in labour while making phone calls to the party. Yonah, too, shared her reluctance to enter politics while her pre-adolescent daughter was at home. In fact, this dilemma is not unique to women: men also struggle with work-life balance on the Hill, and efforts are being made to make Parliament more family-friendly as a result.

At the end of the day, I learned through my encounter with Yonah that life is more about calling than about commitments: if you are called, you are then empowered to make hard choices that allow you to fulfill both roles full-heartedly. While I was in Ottawa, Yonah's husband was there also, visiting her as she prepared to stay in the Senate until midnight for a voting marathon. Quickly, we snapped a photo together, and Yonah scurried down the corridor, shoes in hand, to prepare for her next engagement. In many ways, I see my lifestyle in her actions: instead, my full-time job is currently called a graduate degree in political science, preparing me for public service in Canada.

As I write this, I wonder what I will think of these reflections in five or ten years. Can I serve my country and my family to the highest degree possible? Is this more than a woman's issue? Briefly, I wish to state that not everyone desires to serve either or both of these groups, but, to me, the prospective reality of family and political commitments makes me feel alive, empowered, and destined. In fact, Yonah said during her time at UBC that she hoped the Women in House would walk through the "halls of power" in Ottawa and to feel our "own sense of destiny". I, too, felt this sense, and look forward to the hope of serving Canada in the future.

In closing, I would like to extend my sincere thanks and appreciation all those who organized UBC Women in House program, especially to Yonah Martin, who is a faithful, sacrificial, and well-equipped leader in Canadian politics today."

## Michelle Owusu-Ansah, Women in House Program Participant



### *Change Starts from Within...*

"As I write this blog, I am on a cross country trip across Canada. And I am not only at awe at the beauty of our great nation but also at the great work of our founding fathers, who brought us together from coast to coast. This country is what it is because of the knowledge, leadership, innovation and stewardship of Indigenous peoples and Canadians as a whole. But our history is not perfect. We have a dark past of colonization and racism which has left a cycle of exclusion, poverty and pain in many communities across the country. However, our desire for unity and a better nation still continues. Unfortunately, not all Canadians feel included in this nation building process. I was one of them but through the UBC In House Women's program, I have learnt that I can also contribute to our nation's growth through public service and sacrifice, regardless of my gender, colour or ancestry.

I am Canadian. But I always felt that I was not Canadian enough, not only because I do not play hockey or eat enough Canadian syrup, but also because of my accent, colour and my African ancestry. And so, when I was selected to be part of the UBC Women in House program, I felt out of place and undeserving of an opportunity to experience the "Ottawa Bubble." However, during my time in Ottawa, I saw women like me - women who ethnically identify with other cultures but are also proudly Canadians and wholeheartedly serve our country. One of those women that stood out for me was Senator Martin. She taught me that it is our cultural diversity that makes us a nation and regardless of who I am and what I identify with, I can also contribute to this nation. This showed me that my sense of inferiority was a hindrance to my decision to be part of the Canadian political landscape.

Interestingly, during the roundtable discussion, other women in the program or within the political spheres confessed that at some point in their lives, they also felt a sense of inferiority for diverse reasons. This indicated to me that becoming part of the 'Ottawa Bubble' is not only about politics, identity or gender, but it is also about mental and emotional health. During the program, I repeatedly asked myself how many times women of potential have avoided or redrawn from politics because of this "sense of not being enough." Unfortunately, the number is probably a lot.

I have learnt that being part of the 'Ottawa Bubble' in the future, requires that I look within my heart and address thoughts about myself and others. What our nation needs to overcome its legacy of colonialization and racism, is not hypocrisy, but truth, love and strong values from within us. If we, as women, are able to overcome our sense of inferiority, we can then serve our nation well. But this is not the only thing we have to overcome.

Women, especially women of color have been excluded from Canadian politics for a very long time. Although this is changing, we still have a long way to go. There are still only a few women and women of colour at Parliament Hill. *Currently, there are only 23 women in Parliament and among them, six are women of colour.* There have been efforts to increase this. However, MP Caesar, whom I shadowed, argued that this effort to increase women representation has also led 'to an act of just meeting quotas.' She explained that, it seems as if women are given position of the power not necessarily because of what they can offer but because of their gender. As a result, their inputs can easily be overlooked. To me, this can further deteriorate the confidence in some women in politics. This is a challenge that we must overcome, but sincerely I do not know how.

As Senator Martin advised, I can be part of the Canadian political landscape regardless of who I am, however there are a lot of obstacles to overcome. Fortunately, the Women in House program has provided me the opportunity to brainstorm with others about how to address these challenges. My biggest take away is that "change starts from within." Thus, to make any impact as women, we must build the confidence within and be kind and forgiving to ourselves. We also should develop partnership with other gender identities in addressing these challenges.

Thanks to the UBC Women in House Program, I can say that I am more knowledgeable about the sacrifices and challenges I will have to face in the future as a woman in the 'Ottawa Bubble.' With such great knowledge, I believe that I can also wholeheartedly serve this beautiful country of ours and make a difference! My name is Michelle Owusu-Ansah. I am proudly Canadian, a leader and a woman with an Ashanti ancestry! *Medaase.* Thank you. *Merci.*"

### **Jade Dumoulin, Women in House Program Participant**

"I'm a fifth year Political Science undergraduate student. In the fall, I will be attending the Allard School of Law. As a student from Xaxli'p First Nation, I decided to participate in the Women in House program because Indigenous peoples continue to be underrepresented in and marginalized from politics. This marginalization is particularly true for Indigenous women. Throughout the first full day in Ottawa, we received tours of the Supreme Court, the East Block of Parliament, and the Senate. I was struck by the absence of Indigenous peoples from these institutions since the tours made no direct references to Indigenous peoples. However, I was happy to find out that I was shadowing Senator LaBoucane-Benson on the second day, an Independent and Métis Senator from Alberta. She has spent much of her career with the Native Counselling Services of Alberta and has a PhD in Human Ecology, with a focus on Indigenous family resilience.

In the morning, I had the opportunity to attend the Energy and Environment Committee meeting. This formal meeting was interesting to observe since various stakeholders presented their views on the bills discussed. Afterwards, the Senators had a chance to ask the stakeholders questions. Through the questions asked, it was fairly obvious for the most part whether the Senators were trying to support the stakeholders or discredit their arguments. As I observed the Senators in the meeting, I also really appreciated the small cultural symbols that Senator LaBoucane-Benson had with her. I had a similar feeling when I visited her office after, which was filled with Indigenous art and culture. In particular, these cultural aspects meant a lot to me since these are predominantly non-Native spaces.

After the committee meeting, Senator LaBoucane-Benson hosted a lunch meeting with leaders from the Indian Resource Council and National Coalition of Chiefs to hear their concerns about Bill C-48. As the

Senator hosted the meeting, I had the opportunity to help ensure everything was in order and observe how she facilitated the meeting. Throughout the course of the meeting, I also noted that the women seemed more respectful of the guests when speaking than the men. My views on the subject of the bill aside, it was a very significant moment for me to see a table full of Natives speaking with Independent, Liberal, and Conservative Senators. Throughout the program, I was very cognizant of Native erasure from these institutions. It was significant to see Indigenous people sharing their views on a bill, as well as their concerns and aspirations for their communities.

Throughout the day, I spent a lot of time with the Senator's staff, Madison Gorsche. Madison was very friendly, made sure I understood what was happening, and answered any questions I had about what it is like to work as staff and on Parliament Hill. Previously, I had never seriously thought about working in politics. I still do not think I would run for an elected position due to the mental, emotional, and even physical demand of the role. For example, we heard throughout the program about the long hours and the extensive travel back and forth from their home communities and Ottawa weekly. Many of the women we spoke to also discussed at length how hard it is to balance work and family in this type of job, especially as a woman. However, the idea of working on the Hill in a non-elected position had never occurred to me before. It actually seemed rather appealing because there is always so much going on and so much energy on the Hill. At some point in my career, I could see myself working in some non-elected capacity at Parliament.

My experience shadowing Senator LaBoucane-Benson provided a stark contrast to the treatment of MP Wilson-Raybould while we were in Ottawa. The treatment of MP Wilson-Raybould does not highlight a debate about the participation of women in government. Instead, the affair highlights how the government treats Indigenous women. At Question Period on the first day in Ottawa, the House only discussed the SNC Lavalin Affair. The entire time, Prime Minister Trudeau was replying to Independent and Conservative MPs who accused him of things like being a fake feminist and muzzling the former Attorney General. MP Wilson-Raybould did not speak during Question Period while we were there. That night, the Conservatives filibustered the House over the scandal and delayed the vote on the budget. The Liberal caucus kicked out MP Wilson-Raybould less than two weeks after the Women in House program. My experiences in Ottawa made me realize just how difficult it is to be Indigenous in government and that it is especially difficult to be an Indigenous woman in government. I am thankful for strong Indigenous women in government like Senator LaBoucane-Benson and MP Wilson-Raybould who give Indigenous youth someone to look up to."

### Alex Lloyd, Women in House Program Participant



"This past spring I had the opportunity to go to Ottawa with UBC's Women in House program. With the program, I shadowed a Senator for a day and talked with female parliamentarians about what it is like to be a woman in politics. Though I am currently completing my Master's in Political Science at UBC, I rarely get to

experience the political workings of my government firsthand so I was immensely grateful the opportunities the program provided me with. The few days I spent in Ottawa really challenged many of my preconceived notions of what political life is like for women in federal Canadian politics and has made me rethink how I approach the study of politics.

One thing that surprised me was that all the women we talked with stated that they felt that their gender was not a major factor in their day to day interactions with their fellow parliamentarians (from their own caucus or otherwise). It was illuminating to see how these women viewed their gender as something empowering, rather than limiting. To be sure, the female parliamentarians we talked with discussed micro aggressions that can take place on the Hill, with woman discussing how a male MP assumed that she was uneducated in a line of work she is an expert in because that field is seen as more 'male-dominated.' However, these instances seemed to happen less frequently than I would have expected. Overall it seems that we have made significant process in terms of dismantling the hegemonic male culture of the legislature.

However, several of the women I talked to mentioned how their media coverage was gendered. For example, one parliamentarian that talked to us disclosed that her mainstream press coverage tended to be harsher than her male colleagues, and that she experienced gender based harassment on social media. One of the senators I talked with stated that she experienced both racialized and gender-based harassment on Twitter because of her identity as a woman of colour. This shows me that while progressive strides have been made in the legislative arena, there are still issues of discrimination present in our society that also have a vast impact on our political landscape.

In addition to media coverage, there still seemed to be a gendered dynamic when it came to the work-life balance of those on the Hill. I deeply appreciated the candor of the women we talked to, especially when it came to discussing the personal sacrifices they have to make in order to serve the public. When asked how she manages to keep a healthy work-life balance, one parliamentarian stated simply: "I don't." There are tremendous demands on all parliamentarians and public servants. From the long work hours to the extensive travelling between one's constituency and Ottawa, there's no doubt that becoming a Parliamentarian demands a unique type of sacrifice. But my experience in Ottawa showed how female parliamentarians often face extra burdens that make the demanding nature of the job even more taxing. Female staffers and parliamentarians discussed how their male counterparts tended to have stay at home wives who could look after their children, whereas the husbands of female parliamentarians tended to be working professionals. Thus, the burden of childcare was still expected to be carried primarily by the woman in the relationship despite having an extremely demanding professional life. The importance of a supporting male partner in order to have a functioning family life was emphasized by women, otherwise childcare became increasingly more difficult.

One staffer discussed how she felt that her pregnancy affected how others saw her at work; she was now seen as more "emotional" and taken less seriously. She even stated that she was on the phone with her boss when she was in labour! Though she didn't think there was anything particularly wrong with the incidents I just described, I still couldn't imagine a male staffer being expected to continue working in such extreme medical circumstances. Just the fact that this staffer saw this as normal was jarring to me, as it illustrated that women being so dedicated to their job is just standard practice. It's not a surprise to me that women working in politics have a tough time balancing their personal and professional lives, especially when women are still expected to give 110% to every aspect of their life in a way that their male co-workers were not.

Lastly, perhaps the most important thing I learned from this experience was that regardless of ideological difference, all parliamentarians, staffers, and public servants want to enact what they genuinely think is the



best public policy for Canadians. As someone studying political science, I think my perspective of politics can sometimes be quite limiting. I've been trained to think of politicians as political actors, as individuals with some measure of political power and the ability to influence decisions, rather than people just trying to do the best they can within our political system. In that sense, I felt that the program really humanized how I see parliamentarians, and for that I am grateful."