

Peter Norman reports on the "AEJ Letter from America with Llewellyn King": the AEJ UK Section's first virtual meeting of the coronavirus lockdown. Special guest Llewellyn King, a veteran member of the White House press corps, answered questions from AEJ UK Chairman William Horsley and other UK Section members at a time of massive social unrest and polarisation in the US following the death of George Floyd, an African American, at the hands of the Minneapolis police.

Llewellyn King presents "White House Chronicle", a weekly public affairs programme that airs on PBS and other US channels, and is a long-time friend of the AEJ. The two dozen UK AEJ members who joined the hour-long Zoom meeting in the afternoon of Thursday 4th June 2020 heard him deliver a bleak and disturbing assessment of the state of US society and presidential politics in his opening Q&A session with William Horsley.

The riots and disturbances, which had broken out in more than US 100 cities, were "much bigger than race", Llewellyn reported. They reflected a "great dissatisfaction" of people rising up in a "bellow of rage" against the Trump administration and saying "no more". The issues were wider and broader than the disturbances of 1968, which followed the assassination of the black civil rights leader Martin Luther King and which Llewellyn had covered as a journalist at the time.

President Trump, according to Llewellyn, is an "ignorant and frightened man" who is endangering the welfare of the US and violating its constitution. The present is "a really disturbing time" in the US. It had "never been on such a precipitous slope since the Civil War".

All civilities in Washington had broken down. The media and Trump were in almost permanent stand-off with the president vilifying all except Rupert Murdoch's TV channels. Conservative commentators had turned against Trump.

In foreign relations, Trump had shown himself to be a very ignorant man, trashing allies, tearing up treaties and abandoning the traditional US support for human rights and democracy around the globe. His approach to China lacked any philosophical basis. "China is large, prosperous and there, and needs to be treated as such". It also provides 90% of the rare earth minerals that the US needs for hi-tech manufactures. However, Llewellyn said the US hasn't lost all of its global leadership capacity: It will "swing back" after Trump, but "not all the way".

Speaking from his Rhode Island home, Llewellyn said he believed Trump would lose November's presidential election and could "lose it handily". Such an outcome could be followed by a crisis, however. Trump would claim the election was rigged, leading to a "massive confrontation" afterwards. "He does dangerous things when trapped", Llewellyn said.

The US was passing through a "seminal time" and there would need to be a big reconsideration of policies and programmes after the election. There would be a "hangover" after the riots and no return to the *status quo ante* following the coronavirus crisis. There was massive unemployment in the US which would become structural as not all jobs would come back. The people demonstrating have "no healthcare, no money, don't know where the next meal is coming from and are in

a parlous state." These problems would be more apparent by November following a partial reopening of the US economy.

Llewellyn King has been calling for public works programmes on the lines of those enacted by President Roosevelt in the 1930s. But he held out little hope that Joe Biden, the Democrat front runner to stand against President Trump in November, will have the answers to America's problems. He has "failed to articulate any vision", Llewellyn said.

A "decent man", Biden is the "establishment candidate" of the Democrats. At 78 he is showing signs of age, often sounding like a "nice old uncle". He "talks too much" and so far has been "unable to lay a glove on Trump rhetorically". Much will depend on his choice of vice-president, where the chances are that Biden will pick an African American woman.

All that said, Llewellyn predicted that Biden would win the presidential election in November despite his weaknesses and the possibility that Trump might "pull some stunt" to boost his chances.

There was a general lack of leadership in the US, Llewellyn lamented. Responding to AEJ members' questions, Llewellyn observed that the hollowing out of the media in the US, and especially local media, meant political coverage from state capitals had decreased dramatically. As a result, talented local politicians were not being covered or identified. Another effect of hollowing out the media was a decline in coverage of the courts so that all manner of skulduggery went unreported.

The failure of Republican politicians in the Senate and elsewhere to stand up to Trump reflected a political change of recent years. Resort to primary elections for the selection of candidates had tended to bring extremes in the party to the fore.

Commenting further on the presidential election and afterwards, Llewellyn said he expected a Democratic victory would bring some modifications to the way the US runs its economy and society, with healthcare, the minimum wage and better labour conditions for gig economy workers on the agenda. On foreign trade, Biden would have a "back to the future" approach more in favour of trade deals and the World Trade Organisation.

For the present, the US economy was based on borrowed money. Trump's tax cuts had created a false prosperity. Credit card debt in the poorest African American city "ghetto" areas left people feeling enslaved. In rejecting multilateral trade deals, Trump was offering his working class "base" of voters the false prospectus of manufacturing jobs returning to the US to create 1950's style prosperity.

Llewellyn King was asked what would happen if something happened to Trump around the time of the election. Mike Pence, the vice president, would take over. He has stayed very close to Trump and not raised his voice against any of the president's excesses. Offering himself as a religious zealot, Mike Pence was a very undistinguished senator for Indiana, Llewellyn said. He suggested that Pence might have a better chance of being elected than Trump because he carried less baggage.

Pence might have more respect for the norms and procedures of Washington, which have been trashed by Trump. "Whether we would be better off with him would be very debateable," Llewellyn said.

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