

AEJ UK CHAIRMAN'S ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2018, December 11 2018

A Year of Living Dangerously...

The turmoil in British national life and international relations caused by the countdown to the anticipated Brexit date in March 2019 has made all aspects of European into hot topics. That heightened atmosphere is reflected in the exceptionally full and lively programme of activities of the AEJ UK Section in the past 12 months. It has brought record Section membership and attendances at lunchtime meetings with leading speakers from the opposing sides of the Brexit debate; we organised a special 100-person debate on 'Future UK-EU Relations beyond Brexit' at Europe House, with funding support from the European Commission, to mark the first 50 years of the AEJ UK Section's life. It also means uncertainty for ourselves because we must wait to know what, if any, access to our familiar meeting-space in Europe House may be available to us to use for meetings after such time as the UK actually quits the EU. That is because after that the new occupants of the building in Smith Square, Westminster, will be European officials representing the EU in the UK as a 'third country', and no longer as a member state.

Our Big Event: AEJ UK's 50th Anniversary

The UK Section's 50th birthday was celebrated with a dynamic and timely half-day Colloquium on future UK-EU relations held on 28 September – six months before the due date of Brexit - with prominent figures in the national Brexit debate including Gina Miller and Gisela Stuart, outspoken ex-mandarin Sir Martin Donnelly as a keynote speaker, and two high-profile panels devoted to a serious quest for some degree of common ground between the rival tribes of 'Leavers' and 'Remainers' about how a mutually beneficial long-term relationship between Great Britain and continental Europe might or should look. The debate delved into the underlying societal malaise of UK voters, and the event attracted diplomats, European and UK officials, opinion leaders from many fields, and about 50 journalists and editors, including some 20 AEJ colleagues from other national sections. Some of those spoke about 'how others see us' by contributing directly to the lively debate and offering their (sometimes highly critical) assessments about how the 'historic' Brexit decision is seen and judged in their countries.

Special thanks are due to UK Section colleagues Firdevs Robinson, Peter Norman, David Lennon, Mike Springate and Margaret Hughes, as well as new member Skye Redman and photographer Doros Partasides, for great work to make the weekend of activities a real success. A fine spirit of solidarity with colleagues across Europe was achieved with more speeches at the Celebration Dinner for UK member and AEJ visitors from a dozen other EU countries, which followed the Colloquium at the Doubletree by Hilton Hotel in Westminster.

The AEJ as a forum of ideas and a chronicle of changing times

Amid the ongoing political crisis, high emotion and often popular exasperation of the past two or more years, the AEJ has been able to provide a reliable forum for well-informed Speakers to illuminate and interpret the extraordinary events and issues of our time: foreign correspondents and UK-based journalists alike have attended our lunchtime events in record numbers. So have international MA students from City University, who are encouraged to keep attending our event and to become AEJ members after they graduate. Clear and readable write-ups of nearly all our

recent professional events, done by UK Section members, provide a unique archive and chronicle of the long and windy 'road to Brexit'. David Barker as website editor has kept the site brimming with topical accounts of the successive parliamentary and governmental crises. He has also published full or summary texts – as well as some audio recordings – of events, including the big “AEJ at 50 Colloquium”.

Firdevs Robinson has regularly kept up the AEJ UK’s social media profile on twitter and Facebook. She also designed and printed the special “AEJ UK at 50” colour brochure featuring quotations from AEJ characters down the decades our pictures of our events and activities to coincide with the September Colloquium. All details are accessible on www.aej-uk.org .

International Activities

A seven-person UK Section delegation participated actively in the 2018 AEJ Congress at Agrinio in western Greece at the end of November. Highlights included a speech on the EU’s own crises of political momentum and unity by the Greek-both major of central Brussels, Christos Doulkerides ,in a panel on the theme of ‘Can Europe remain democratic? ’; and an alarming picture of media repression in Greece and the wider region against investigative journalism presented by frontline anti-corruption journalist Haris Karanikas in a session on ‘the new media landscape’. There was also the mandatory visit to Mesolongi on the Ionian sea, where the great philhellene Lord Byron met his death while resisting the Ottoman Turks; and even a certain amount of Zorba the Greek-style dancing after dark. AEJ Congresses bring together journalists from a score of countries to exchange news, views and insider gossip; they always bring new insights and inspirations – as well as sobering lessons about the realities of political life in today’s Europe.

The AEJ’s wide range of advocacy, media and reporting activities related to the active defence of media freedom are well represented on the international AEJ website as well as the UK site. Just last week, for the AEJ, I joined colleagues from 8 other journalists and press freedom organisations on a press freedom mission to Slovakia to press the authorities there to bring to justice the killers of investigative journalist Jan Kuciak, who was shot dead in February. The AEJ and other media Partners of the Council of Europe have published over 500 urgent ‘alerts’ in response to individual attacks on journalists and on press freedom since the online alert system was started in 2015 – see www.coe.int/fom for details. The ‘Platform’, which the AEJ played a major part in initiating, is seen as one of the Council of Europe’s main success stories of recent years, in the face of what European ministers have called ‘unacceptable’ violence and legal harassment of journalists across Europe.

After 4 years as an international AEJ Vice President I now remain on the Board as the association’s Media Freedom spokesman and Representative for a further two years. Details of other international AEJ changes and appointments decided at the AEJ General Assembly in Greece will be circulated to all members. See also the international site www.aej.org , where recent news items include in-depth and highly revealing annual media freedom reports from Bulgaria and Turkey, and a recent AEJ protest statement after the announcement in Hungary of a new nationwide structure for hundreds of media outlets, including TV and radio, print and online media, which will be part of Foundation aligned with the right-wing policies and the ‘illiberal democracy’ espoused by prime minister Viktor Organ and his ruling Fidesz party.

William Horsley