

AEJ UK Secretary's Annual report for 2020

In 2020 the Section maintained our highly satisfactory membership level of 40. It has been a busy year for professional meetings of the Section, despite the lockdown on March 23 and Covid restrictions which made it impossible to hold our traditional meetings at Regent's University, London. Instead we held a series of online meetings on Zoom during the rest of the year, with speakers from the USA and Brussels as well as the UK; and with the participation of many UK-based foreign journalists, as well as AEJ members from several other AEJ Sections.

Faculty members of Regent's University also joined several meetings by invitation. We remain hopeful that we will be able to resume physical Lunchtime Meetings at the University sometime during 2021.

Detailed reports on all past meetings were written by various UK Section members and posted on www.aej-uk.org. In most cases audio recordings can also be freely accessed there. The UK website is also an informative notice-board on significant developments concerning media freedom, the impacts of Brexit, and news about the international AEJ.

On January 29 we heard an impressive presentation from the maverick politician, Rory Stewart, who had been expelled from the Conservative Parliamentary Party for voting against a no-deal Brexit, and was standing as an independent candidate for mayor of London. The election, due to be held in May, was postponed for a year because of the pandemic. Stewart shared his highly original ideas on how London or other cities could increase revenue and be more effective in tackling social issues, especially housing. On February 20, the chief spokesperson for the National Cyber Security Centre, Nicola Hudson, told us about the agency's vital work to counter cyber-attacks on UK national institutions and individuals. On March 9, Professor Jeff Kingston from Temple University, Tokyo, gave an insightful overview of relations between an increasingly powerful and assertive China and other Asian countries. He predicted more growing tensions, but reckoned that China's economic and political power would continue to grow in spite of the doubts arising from the first outbreak of Covid 19 in Wuhan and Xi Jing Ping's increasingly autocratic style.

On June 4 we held our first Zoom meeting with the Washington-based journalist and polymath, Llewellyn King, the founder and presenter of the White House Chronicle. King, who is a long-time friend of the AEJ, deplored the Trump administration's handling of both the Black Lives Matter protests following the killing of George Floyd, as well as the pandemic. He also correctly predicted that Trump would be soundly beaten by Joe Biden in November's election. On July 3, Polish European Peoples Party MEP, Danuta Huebner, shared her thoughts on Brexit negotiations, the EU response to the pandemic and its economic impact, the then upcoming presidential election in Poland and tensions between the Polish government and EU institutions. She said that the independence of the judiciary in Poland had been "practically destroyed".

On September 3, the leading British climate scientist, Professor Bob Watson, who now lives in the US, gave a critical assessment of efforts to reduce the human impact on the climate. Carbon emissions need to be cut by 50% in the next ten years to halt the trend to average temperatures rising by more than 2 degrees centigrade. He said that the climate challenge would also have far-reaching negative effects on the global economy. And he said that better collaboration was essential between the International Biodiversity Conference and the Climate Conference, both of which are to be held in 2021.

On November 2, Can Yeginsu, a top UK human rights barrister of Turkish origin, gave an illuminating talk on the link between media freedom and the rule of law, showing how they are mutually dependent. Rule of law means that the rights of all are protected and enforced by an independent judiciary. Government processes must all be transparent, which is only possible with a genuinely free press. And media freedom can only be sustained if journalists are protected against intimidation by the enforcement of laws protecting free speech. Yeginsu outlined the ground-breaking work of the High Level Panel of 15 legal experts on media freedom, of which he is one. The Panel was set up jointly by the former UK government

and Canada in 2019, with pledges of support from 38 countries, to strengthen real protections for media freedom against rising global threats.

The last meeting of the year was on December 4, with Catherine McGuinness, chair of the influential Policy and Resources Committee of the City of London Corporation, the “voice” of London’s financial services industry. She gave an upbeat assessment of the prospects for the City, which she said would hold its own as a top global financial centre despite Brexit, and the absence of concrete agreements with the EU to ensure that UK banks and institutions would still be able to sell their products in the rest of Europe.

Charles Jenkins, London: 4 January 2021