

## Minutes of the AGM of the AEJ-UK Section for the year 2022

Held in Tuke Common Room, Regent's University, London, on February 3 2023 with a Zoom link to a few members on request

**Attendees:** William Horsley (Chair), Charles Jenkins (Secretary), Peter Norman, David Barker, Firdevs Robinson, Andy Pye, Michael Hornsby, Bora Kwon, Doros Partasides, Euan Grant, Hugh Sandeman, Martyn Bond, Diana Maxwell. Quentin Peel

**Via Zoom:** David Worsfold (Treasurer), Pat Humphreys, Jack Hanning, Rick Thompson.

**Apologies:** Nick Hopkinson, Nevsal Hughes, David Buchan, Colin McIntyre

The Annual Meeting of the UK Section of the AEJ took place against a background of strikes in key UK public services, including the railways which prevented several members from attending. The meeting started at around 11.30AM after a half-hour delay in which a Zoom link was created to allow outside participants to join the meeting. The Treasurer was among those using Zoom because of transport problems.

Attached to these Minutes are the AGM Agenda and the reports for 2022 of the three elected officers:

1. AEJ-UK Chairman's Annual Report on 2022
2. AEJ UK Secretary's Report for 2022
3. AEJ UK Treasurer's Report 2022 and
4. William Horsley's last Annual Report as the International AEJ's Media Freedom Representative. The report, finalised on 19<sup>th</sup> October 2022, marked the end of more than 10 years activity by William in that particular role.

Chairman's Report. AEJ-UK Chair William Horsley said his aim and that of his fellow officers is to help shape the AEJ-UK to "the needs of the time". He thanked the treasurer and secretary for their hard work and cooperation, which as always was unremunerated. William also thanked David Barker for leading the modernisation of the section's website and Firdevs Robinson for her stewardship of the AEJ-UK's social media presence. The section's relationship with Regent's University is a key asset, William stressed. Regent's not only provides venues for the AEJ-UK's meetings (including the AGM). Its ambition to develop the leaders of tomorrow, and its diverse international student body and its modern and progressive curriculum (including film and media studies) fits well with the AEJ's own aspirations. William thanked Regent's staff members Leslie Viner and Elif Toker for their role in the smooth running of the relationship. They helped set up last October's meeting with the Palestine Ambassador in London and have also agreed to join forces in preparing for a special guest lecture by Lord Patten, to be jointly hosted by the AEJ-UK Section and the university on 4 October this year. This major event should raise the AEJ's profile and, hopefully, attract more working journalists and Foreign Press Association members to its meetings.

The presence of Regent's students and staff at AEJ meetings already creates a better mix of ages among attendees. William is also in contact with a UCL student who is currently a "youth ambassador" for Chatham House, is keen to attend our events, and may be able to boost our efforts to reach a younger demographic.

William reminded members that they are asked to sign up and pre-pay the standard £25 (the actual cost price of a lunch) for lunchtime meetings, as early as possible in advance of meetings. Regent's catering requires us to notify them of our 'final' lunch order by midday on the Friday before a meeting to be held the next week, which means sometimes a whole week ahead. Late registrations raise the risk that our order is inadequate (if several late registrations come in), or else that we over-order in anticipation of too many attendees, so incurring a notable

financial loss. Of course, discretion will be used and the “Friday deadline” order of Deli lunches can sometimes be adjusted upwards a bit later.

William informed members about his efforts to arrange for those interested to show support for a jailed Belarus journalist, Andrei Aliaksandrau, who is known to some of us from his time spent in London. He was sentenced to a very long jail term for his part in the mass anti-government demonstrations in Minsk. The hope is that we can arrange to send messages of support to him in jail, though they will have to be translated into Russian. More information would be shared as soon as possible. He also suggested that members might wish to give practical support to Ukrainian journalists at this time of acute need, by inviting UK AEJ members to make individual donations, however large or small, to a common AEJ UK fund – perhaps targeting a total of at least £300 initially - which could be channelled to an organisation in Ukraine to support the personal safety and operational capacity of journalists at high risk during the war. His early research showed that the NUJ of Ukraine, European Federation of Journalists and IPI may be suitable channels. The proposal prompted a very positive discussion which resumed later in the meeting.

William said that his active engagement with media freedom issues would continue despite his decision late last year to give up the title and role of International AEJ Media Freedom Representative. In particular he would go on being closely engaged with the press freedom work of the Council of Europe, including the Platform for the Safety of Journalists [www.coe.int/fom](http://www.coe.int/fom) which he had been instrumental in establishing in 2015. The Platform now involves 15 leading NGOs and journalists groups which operate Europe’s first early warning and rapid response system to counter attacks of all kinds against journalists and journalism – with the agreement of all the Council of Europe member states, the continent’s premier human rights organisation. William would also be supporting the work of his successor, Kyriakos Pieredes of the AEJ Cyprus section in other areas including the high-impact work of the EU in this area. William also has a professional mandate as international director of the Centre for Freedom of the Media at Sheffield University.

He invited two AEJ members based abroad to speak via a Zoom link, which was set up at very short notice in response to special requests on the day of the disruptive rail strike.

Jack Hanning, Strasbourg-based and a long-time AEJ member, welcomed William’s decision to continue his media freedom activities. Jack said an important Council of Europe summit would take place in May in response to Russia’s aggression in Ukraine and the marked backsliding in democratic standards across Europe. The summit was to develop new ideas for the organisation’s ways of acting effectively amid “seismic change”. He urged William and others to contribute to the debate on how the Council could further strengthen its defence of media freedom which was under widespread attack.

Responding, William mentioned that the next annual report of the Council’s online Platform for the safety of journalists would be published on March 7<sup>th</sup> at a high-profile streamed event in Brussels. The annual report, thanks to close cooperation among the 15 ‘partner organisations’ had become an influential vehicle for mapping the assault on journalism and mobilising strong policy responses. The Council had also announced ambitious plans for the launch sometime in autumn 2023 of a multi-year Europe-wide campaign to strengthen media freedom in practical ways in the 46 member states; it would engage all stakeholders including governments, journalists’ organisations and the Platform partners. Jack remarked that several countries, including Turkey, Azerbaijan, Poland and – sadly - the UK, were increasingly questioning their obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights and judgements of the European Court of Human Rights. It was important for the AEJ and others to press the UK government to be more positive towards the ECHR and the Council of Europe.

Pat Humphreys, a UK member based in Finland, reported on the recent International AEJ Congress in Greece, where he was elected Treasurer at short notice. Like other AEJ-UK members who attended and reported on the end-October Congress, Pat regretted an absence of important decisions by international AEJ members (the sections) at the General Assembly, including establishing a likely venue for the next Congress in late 2023. It normally takes a full year for a national section to get sponsorship and organise a Congress. The cost of living in big cities like London meant that places in southern or eastern Europe looked increasingly attractive for holding affordable Congresses. Greece had received a substantial subsidy from AEJ coffers to host one last year.

The GA also ended without fixing a membership fee for 2023, one of its key responsibilities under the AEJ's rules. But since then Pat had initiated a 'census' of all the national sections. It showed that the association has about 800 members across Europe, some 60 per cent more than previously thought, and that some national sections have not been paying their full annual dues of 15 Euros per member to the international AEJ because it was seen as overly expensive in some sections. He had asked the sections to name a fee at which they would be prepared to declare and pay for their full membership. Sections in Eastern Europe generally preferred lower fees, while only the UK and Irish sections were content to maintain them at 15 Euros per member per year. However, some East European sections had many members or associates: 130 in Bulgaria alone. The census showed majority support for reducing membership dues (payable to the centre) to 12 Euros per head per year, falling further to 8 Euros if paid before June this year. He would invoice sections on this basis in 2023 and take stock after seeing if sections paid as promised.

William Horsley noted that a number of eastern European sections were playing a dynamic and important role in the struggle for professional media standards their own societies, and were now crucial to the ability of the AEJ to show it is genuinely representative of Europe as a whole. It was a great pity that the national section in Bosnia which he had helped to establish some years ago had later been allowed to dissolve. Hopes of setting up new sections in other places such as Serbia and Ukraine had not materialised.

Rick Thompson, a former UK Section chairman, agreed. Rick said fears that the AEJ-UK would decline after Brexit had proved unfounded. It was right to go on developing the AEJ in the UK as a source of informed coverage of European issues and to attract more working journalists to its meetings. William pointed out that the reports of past AEJ-UK meetings going back to pre-Brexit times were easily accessible on the upgraded AEJ-UK website. They provided a valuable resource, chronicling the events surrounding Brexit and UK relations with the EU.

On international matters, David Worsfold noted that the French section had boycotted the recent Greek Congress. As Germany had parted company from the International AEJ many years ago, the need to develop the AEJ's strong Europe-wide presence was pressing. This was one of the fundamental issues not addressed in Greece. Andy Pye, another attendee at the Greek Congress, expressed a similar view, while stressing that the Congress had been very rewarding as a chance to meet and exchange views with interesting and well-informed colleagues from across Europe.

Martyn Bond wondered whether it could be practical for the UK to consider hosting a Congress. William recalled the UK's experience of staging a sizeable event in 2018, when we invited AEJ colleagues from other sections to London to debate post-Brexit relations with the EU. The hotel and other costs had been mountainous and the event was only possible thanks to funding from the EU, which would not be available today. The matter was not taken up by others.

Charles Jenkins, summarising the Secretary's report, said membership had dipped slightly to 38 in 2022 from 40 in 2021. Collaboration with Regent's was very beneficial, with a good number of students regularly

coming to meetings during Regent's term times. He said the AEJ was limited in its opportunity to pre-book meeting spaces at the university because of the university's own needs, but the Regent's Events team were consistently helpful and supportive. We were constrained by the relatively short term times at the university, which meant there were many parts of the year when the students were not on campus to attend our meetings. Charles cited a thoughtful message intended for the AGM from Nick Hopkinson, who was unable to attend. He urged a renewed focus at AEJ-UK meetings on events inside Europe and relations between the UK and the EU. Charles told members that with William and David he was developing contacts with the EU embassy in London to attract a "channel" of speakers from the Commission, External Action Service and EP to future meetings.

The next scheduled speaker, on 21 March, will be Simon French, a leading city economist with experience in the Cabinet Office, who would give a fresh perspective on the downsides and potential positives of the UK's current socio-economic travails and his recipe for smart policies as the UK seeks to re-frame a more stable relationship with Europe. Other suggestions included a former head of Europol on criminal justice cooperation; and an insider speaking about Brexit and the UK's aspirations to be a science "superpower".

William thanked all who put forward ideas. He recalled that we had held a successful Zoom meeting with the then EU Ambassador in London during the Covid lockdown period. Thanks to Covid and the effects of Brexit, it had become more difficult to secure in-person appearances by suitable European public figures. However, aspects of UK-EU relations were very much in focus in each of our recent meetings on 'hot button' issues, including Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its consequences.

Peter Norman suggested thought be given to hybrid meetings with Zoom links added to in-person events. These would enable the section to have meetings with speakers based abroad, as during the pandemic. Andy Pye and Bora Kwon offered their experience and technical knowhow to address any technical difficulties involved. William observed that it would be very important to maintain our successful 'business model' of holding mainly in-person events over a buffet lunch and in a symposium style. The possibility of charging a reduced fee for online participants, using a medium like Eventbrite, was raised but not discussed further.

Turning to the accounts, David Worsfold, treasurer, explained via Zoom that the £757.36 deficit recorded for last year mainly reflected the cost of remodelling the AEJ-UK's website. Catering at meetings incurred some additional costs typical for the sector. The deficit was no matter for concern if the section maintained its annual membership fee at £40. So far subscriptions had been received for 34 members this year, with only a few members still due to make their payments.

Noting that the section's bank balance was £3,599 in the black in 2022, Peter Norman asked whether some of this cushion might be used to boost the proposed UK Section donation to support the safety and capacity of independent journalists in Ukraine. A lively discussion followed in which several members spoke in favour of the AEJ-UK using a circumscribed part of its available funds to match voluntary contributions up to a clearly defined ceiling. A show of hands indicated near unanimous support among those present for such an idea, though Quentin Peel and David Barker cautioned that no commitment should be made without being sure how the money would reach Ukraine and how and by whom it would be used. David Worsfold noted that the section's funds were expected to benefit somewhat from reduced payments to the International AEJ.

While supporting the donation proposal as being for an excellent good cause, he suggested that any contribution from the AEJ-UK's account should be capped at a maximum of £500. Rather than make a firm commitment that would affect the whole AEJ-UK membership, William Horsley undertook to carefully research the most reliable way of delivering a donation securely to its intended target and purposes in

Ukraine, He would report back to members to canvas views again before the scheduled AEJ-UK meeting on March 21<sup>st</sup>. This approach met general approbation.

The meeting concluded with the election of officers. Martyn Bond proposed and Michael Hornsby seconded William Horsley, Charles Jenkins and David Worsfold, who stood unopposed for re-election in their existing roles. They were elected “nem con” to universal acclaim amidst applause following a vote of thanks for the good work of the three officers, and David Barker and Firdevs Robinson.