

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS (ACT BRANCH)

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

18 NOVEMBER 2021

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

The COVID-19 pandemic continued to pose a challenge for the Branch in 2020-2021. The prolonged lockdown and cessation of physical meetings between August-November meant that we had to return to virtual delivery of events during the mid-year period. However, with the gradual relaxation on numbers allowed at our gatherings as the ACT exits the lockdown, we can now return to our standard 'hybrid' mode for meetings with both in-house and on-line participants. Following the refurbishment of the AIIA National Office in January 2021, ACT Branch now has access to upgraded audio-visual facilities in the National Conference Centre at Stephen House. This enhancement means that our events are available to a potentially large audience throughout Australia and overseas via the AIIA YouTube channel.

Despite the operating constraints caused by the pandemic, ACT Branch continued to provide a highly eclectic program for members throughout the year. For our first event of the year in February, Dr John Lee from the US Studies Centre in Sydney spoke on the implications of the Biden Administration for Australia while Emeritus Professor Bill Maley from the ANU covered diplomatic manoeuvrings on Afghanistan. The event with Professor Maley provided an opportunity for the Branch to present him his AIIA Fellowship award which he gratefully accepted. In March, the Ambassador of Ireland stimulated a lively discussion on the Irish Government's perspective on Brexit. The number of hits on the AIIA YouTube channel for the Ambassador's presentation were, up until that time, the highest for any one event held by an AIIA Branch.

In April, the Branch presented Professor Tessa Morris-Suzuki from the ANU her AIIA Fellowship award and heard her talk on academic integrity in the social sciences, in particular history. Dr Merriden Varrall from KPMG spoke on the drivers of rapid change in the Indo-Pacific region.

A highlight of the year for the Branch was the Annual Dinner in May. With the disappointment of our cancelled 2020 Annual Dinner owing to COVID-19 restrictions behind us, it was gratifying that just over one hundred members and invited guests could attend the Dinner at the Boathouse restaurant. Guest speaker, former Prime Minister of Australia Kevin Rudd AO, gave a thoughtful and provocative address on China and Australia-China relations. Former National President and Branch member, John McCarthy, gave the vote of thanks. A generous Branch member subsidised eight seats for recent DFAT graduate recruits – a gesture that was very well received by the 'grads' attending.

Also in May, National President, Allan Gyngell, led a conversation with Judith Betts from the University of Technology, Sydney and Professor Mark Phythian from Leicester University, UK on Australia and the United Kingdom's involvement in the Iraq War. In July, Professor

Anthony Milner from the ANU discussed Australia's future role in shaping the international rules-based order while former Rear Admiral James Goldrick shed light on China's perspective on the South China Sea.

Just before the ACT lockdown in early August we were able to squeeze in a well-attended talk by former ABC Chief Foreign Correspondent, Phil Williams, on the topic of soft power diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific. In September-October we hosted two well-subscribed virtual webinars. Sarah Boxall from UN Women in Australia presented on the topic of women's empowerment in the United Nations mechanisms and the United Arab Emirates Ambassador to Australia spoke on the topic of the UAE's relations with Australia and regional developments in the Middle East.

Most recently in November, Professor John Blaxland from the Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies at the ANU enlightened us with his take on the new AUKUS security pact and Australia's place in a rapidly changing region. Professor Nick Farrelly from the University of Tasmania spoke on Myanmar and policy options to assist the victims of the military takeover in that country.

Notwithstanding the difficulties of operating under the coronavirus, membership numbers have remained solid. We welcome indications of growing interest in student membership which is a necessary spur to regeneration of the Branch.

The Branch is keen to foster closer links with young prospective members. In March, we hosted an informal discussion and networking event at O'Malley's pub in Civic with international relations students from the University of Canberra and the ANU. The event was an opportunity for the Branch to reach out to new and existing international relations students in Canberra and familiarise them with ACT Branch activities and programs. In the year ahead, we will be looking at ways to invigorate a young professionals network. One initiative we are planning is an International Careers Panel with presenters from large consulting firms (KPMG, EY, PwC, Deloitte's) and government departments. The target audience will be university students, young professionals and New Colombo Plan alumni in the ACT. Timing will likely be in March 2022 to coincide with the new academic year.

Branch Treasurer Phil Huntley notes in his report to members that the financial position of the Branch is sound. While that remains a priority for Branch Council, we are exploring options for merchandising of items (e.g., lapel pins and drinking mugs) bearing the AIIA logo to help our bottom line. Sales of merchandise will be an additional source of revenue while helping to elevate the Branch's public profile.

Once again this year, fellow Councillors have lent me tremendous support. Regrettably Natalie Mobini left Council in May to further her national responsibilities in the Australian Baha'i community. We were sad to see Natalie depart and thanked her for her tireless organisation of events over a number of years. In other changes, our Branch Administrator, Caitlin Plesek, left us in

July to pursue a legal career. However, we were pleased that Cassie Goode was available to step in at short notice to take up the role and we are grateful she is managing the transition smoothly. Setting up and monitoring our Zoom webinars is managed by two ANU students, Phoebe Humphreys and Tom Garratt, and I want to record the Branch's appreciation for their efforts to ensure our hybrid events are delivered to on-line registrants smoothly.

2021 has seen the Branch continue to respond flexibly in a challenging operating environment with innovative use of technology to deliver our program. ACT Branch is presently working with other AIIA Branches to overhaul the Institute's on-line presence with a view to streamlining the interface with members and ensure seamless program delivery. I will have more to say on that initiative as it progresses next year. In the meantime, ACT Council will endeavour to implement a diverse and relevant program of events to meet the interests of members in our rapidly changing international environment. We always ready to receive suggestions from Branch members on improvements to our program.

Finally, let me state that the current Council is standing for re-election. We would be very grateful for your support.

Heath McMichael
President, ACT Branch
Australian Institute of International Affairs