

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS (ACT BRANCH)

PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2022-2023

With the Covid-19 pandemic primarily in our rear vision mirror, the events program of the ACT Branch of the AIIA has reverted to in-house meetings combined with on-line delivery. This hybrid (in-person/on-line) format has greatly increased the reach of our events, allowing members and registered participants the opportunity to participate from home or from locations outside the ACT. Together with the uploading of recorded events to the AIIA YouTube channel, we have significantly broadened our impact.

In 2022-2023, we have endeavoured to maintain an eclectic mix of speakers and topics for discussion that meets the interests of our members. Following the 2022 AGM in November, the Branch hosted several events to close out the year. On 10 November, Dr Minako Sakai from the University of NSW (ADFA) spoke on women's economic empowerment in Indonesia and other Muslim countries. On 1 December, a panel of Heads of Mission from Egypt, Kuwait and the Palestine Delegation in Australia conveyed their perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Our final event for the year was a talk on 7 December by HE Mr Manpreet Vohra, the Indian High Commissioner to Australia. The High Commissioner outlined India's views on geo-political and geo-economic changes occurring in the region.

Our 2023 program began with a talk on 21 February by the Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Jan Adams, on DFAT's role in advancing Australian interests abroad. Jan's discussant was the outgoing President of AIIA, Allan Gyngell AO FAIIA, who, as it turned out, made his last appearance at an ACT Branch meeting. The Branch was shocked to learn of Allan's sudden illness and deeply saddened by his passing away in May.

In March, Dr Stephen Nagy from the International Christian University in Tokyo spoke on Japan's National Security Strategy and Professor Clive Williams from the ANU gave us an update on North Korea. Both events generated lively debate on security and defence issues in North Asia. On 6 March, we were fortunate to be asked to host a roundtable discussion with one of the contenders in the 2024 Indonesian presidential race, Dr Anies Baswedan. Dr Baswedan, who was visiting Australia as a guest of DFAT, exchanged views on regional security relations and Indonesian politics, trade and environment issues with senior ACT Branch members, and other invited guests with knowledge of Indonesia.

In early April, the ABC's peripatetic foreign correspondent, Stephen Dziedzic, talked on regional tensions in the Pacific. Later in April, in a significant publicity coup for AIIA (ACT), the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, Baroness Patricia Scotland, addressed the Branch on her vision for a modern Commonwealth of Nations. The event was co-hosted

with the ACT division of the Royal Commonwealth Society and was arranged in conjunction with DFAT. A strong turnout by Commonwealth Heads of Mission in Canberra added weight to the occasion. Baroness Scotland enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to present her views to informed non-government community representatives. On 3 May, the Ambassador of Costa Rica led an interesting discussion on Costa Rica's international outlook in his launch of a book on Costa Rica-Australia relations. The event attracted a good turnout from members and invited guests, including Latin American and other Heads of Mission.

On 15 May, AIIA ACT hosted a panel event at the Australian National University for around 80 students and young professionals on the topic of careers in international affairs. Participants heard from senior and mid-level international affairs practitioners about their experiences and pathways in their careers. The event was organised in conjunction with the Coral Bell School at the ANU and New Colombo Plan alumni in Canberra. We were pleased to forge new bridges with both organisations, and we are planning future initiatives with them to advance our outreach to young professionals. We were fortunate that one of the panellists, the CEO of Asialink in Melbourne, Martine Letts, was willing to stay on in Canberra to speak to the Branch. Martine's insightful presentation at Stephen House on 16 May on the potential for an Australian 'Asia Foundation' drew a positive response from participants.

On 7 June, Professor John Blaxland and Clare Birgin from the School of International Security and Intelligence Studies at ANU addressed a strong turnout of Branch members about their new book on the Australian Signals Directorate and cyber espionage. On 21 June, former AIIA National Executive Director and current lead of the Reimagining Australia's International Relations (AP4D) report, Melissa Conley-Tyler, presented on the findings of an options paper on tools of statecraft. Melissa was joined by AP4D colleagues, Bridi Rice from the Development Intelligence Lab and Will Leben from the National Security College at ANU.

So far in the second half of 2023, ACT Branch has continued to be busy. In a well-attended presentation at Stephen House, Professor James Cotton from UNSW, ADFA spoke on 12 July on the establishment of Australia's first diplomatic mission in pre-World War II China. On 16 August, Bangladesh High Commissioner, HE Mr M Allama Siddiki, addressed the Branch on Bangladesh in the Asia-Pacific region and, on 23 August, a panel featuring Canberra-based Heads of Mission from Ecuador, Chile and Colombia discussed Latin America's perspective on the Asia-Pacific. Forthcoming events will include presentations on city diplomacy, the ACT's international engagement strategy, and how 'lawfare' has been utilised by Ukraine in its war with Russia.

Branch Treasurer, Phil Huntley, will note in his report to members that the financial position of the ACT Branch is sound. I believe we have made good ground in putting Branch finances on a surer footing heading into the future, not least because of the additional revenue we

have received from raising membership fees last March. For the time being at least, this decision has obviated the need for us to impose a charge for members and guests to attend events. I thank all members for their cooperation in ensuring sustainability of the Branch's financial bottom line.

Membership numbers remain solid at around 280. We continue to seek new members, especially from young professionals who will contribute much to the Branch in the years ahead. Amongst distinguished Branch members who sadly passed away during the year were: Allan Gyngell (already mentioned); the Hon John Kerin, former Treasurer and Minister of Agriculture; Jim Ingram, former senior public servant and director of the UN World Food Programme and; Dr Peter McCawley, former ANU academic and Deputy Director of AusAID.

In response to a request at last year's AGM for a Branch Gender and Diversity Strategy, we have put together a Diversity and Inclusion Policy paper (see [Annual General Meeting - Australian Institute of International Affairs - Australian Institute of International Affairs](#)). We believe the paper reflects the diversity evident in the community and will allow AIIA (ACT) to contribute meaningfully to future consideration of gender and diversity issues by the AIIA at national level. We hope it meets the expectations of members.

Again this year, fellow Councillors have lent me tremendous support. Recently, Hannah Pakula joined Council and we look forward to her contribution. We have employed a new Branch Administrator, Emily Braun, who has moved seamlessly into her role in support of membership, looking after day-to-day Branch finances and promoting events.

Please note that the ACT Branch has a new contact number, **0403 932 571**. Please feel free to contact Emily on that mobile number if you have any queries or requests. If she cannot pick up when you call, please leave a message on the message bank and she will respond when she can.

In conclusion, AIIA (ACT Branch) will endeavour to implement a diverse and relevant program of events in 2023-2024 that furthers the Institute's goal of promoting understanding of Australia's international environment. Branch Council values dialogue with members of the Branch and welcomes your input.

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
28 August 2023