

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS (ACT BRANCH)

PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2024-2025

I believe the ACT Branch has again delivered a varied and interesting program of events that tap into the rich vein of international affairs expertise we enjoy in the nation's capital.

Following the AIIA (ACT) Annual General Meeting in September 2024, Australia's inaugural First Nations Ambassador, Justin Mohamed, spoke at Stephen House and generated lively discussion with his presentation on a First Nations approach to Australian foreign policy.

Two events were held in November 2024. The Ambassadors of Bhutan and Afghanistan spoke on 18 November. Both conveyed a sense of the opportunities and challenges of running a small diplomatic mission in Canberra and the complexities of dealing with home administrations and local community diasporas. On 27 November, we hosted a panel session with the ACT Branch of the Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS ACT) on the outcomes of the October 2024 Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Samoa. Panel speakers came from DFAT, the Samoan High Commission, and RCS ACT.

Our final event in 2024, coinciding with our end-of-year function on 10 December, brought together the Vice President of the Australia-Indonesia Business Council, Judy Anderson, the Head of the ANU's Indonesia Project, Dr Budy Resosudarmo and the Assistant Secretary of DFAT's Indonesia Branch, Clare Duffield. This panel of experienced 'Indonesia hands' conveyed valuable insights on the administration of Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto.

Early in 2025, we looked at the vexed relationship between Israel and Palestine with former Australian Ambassador to Israel, Peter Rodgers, as our speaker. In March, Sydney barrister, Dr Michael Smith, and Dr Sarah McCosker from Lexbridge Lawyers in Canberra, led a timely discussion on the international law-based order and Australian statecraft.

In April, we heard a presentation on Australia's defence preparedness by the Professor of Military Studies at Deakin University, Dr Michael Evans. We also heard from US politics expert, Dr John Hart, formerly Reader in Political Science at the ANU, on the first 100 days of the Trump administration.

A presentation on 1 May by ANU academic and former DFAT senior official, James Battley, on the Pacific region shed light on Australian policy in that part of the world. On 29 May, the Australia Chair at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, Charles Edel, gave a topical presentation on US policy in the Asia-Pacific under Trump 2.0.

On 4 June, UNSW Emeritus Professor James Cotton spoke on the Australian legation in pre-war Tokyo, providing an insight on a relatively unknown chapter of Australian diplomatic history. Also in June, the former Secretary of the Australian Himalayan Foundation, Garry Weare, spoke on the background to the Kashmir dispute between Pakistan and India drawing on his deep understanding of Kashmiri culture and history.

In May and in June, AIIA (ACT) supported two student-led events at the ANU. On 22 May, we co-hosted a seminar organised by the ANU College of Asia and Pacific Student Society on the topic of rethinking Australia's relationship with the Asia-Pacific. And on 17 June, we

supported a seminar on international careers organised by the AIIA National Office during Asia-Pacific Week at the ANU. Both events allowed us to engage directly with young professionals about AIIA and the benefits of becoming members of the Institute.

On 17 June, Branch members with expertise in defence and security and the Indian Ocean region participated in a roundtable at Stephen House with Dr Hassan Khannenje, from the Horn International Institute for Strategic Studies in Nairobi. The exchange with Dr Khannenje, whose visit was sponsored by DFAT, provided an opportunity to gain a first-hand assessment of the rise of state and non-state terrorist actors in Africa.

In the third quarter of 2025, we hosted an in-depth discussion between Canadian High Commissioner, Dr Julie Sunday, and former Australian High Commissioner to Canada, Scott Ryan, on Australia-Canada relations. On 24 July, I presented ANU Professor Evelyn Goh with her AIIA Fellows Award. Professor Goh delivered an insightful talk on the rise of the 'revisionist' powers, China, Russia and the United States.

Our next event on 21 August was a book launch on Myanmar's Digital Revolution and the International Response, by two Myanmar experts in Melbourne, former Australian Ambassador, Nicholas Coppel and cyber-security analyst, Lennon Chang. The discussant for this event was Associate Professor Nick Cheesman from ANU's Myanmar Research Centre.

At the time of writing, the Branch was preparing to host former Leader of the Opposition in Federal Parliament and currently Vice Chancellor of the University of Canberra, the Hon Bill Shorten, as guest speaker at the Branch's 2025 Annual Dinner at Royal Canberra Golf Club. We expect Bill's topic, 'The Role of Higher Education in Australia's Foreign Policy with an Australian Accent', will be of interest to foreign and education policy practitioners alike.

Looking ahead, the ACT Branch Program will continue with former Chief of Army, Lt General Peter Leahy, from the National Security Institute at the University of Canberra, speaking on: 'Challenges in Sustaining a Defence Force in a Modern Democracy', on 7 October. On 4 November, Dr. Albert Palazzo, Adjunct Professor at University of New South Wales, will also consider a national security-related topic: 'The Strategic Defensive: Australia's Plan B.'

In his report to members, Branch Treasurer, Phil Huntley, notes that the financial position of the ACT Branch is sound. That said, our main source of income, membership dues, is being squeezed as member numbers have tended to drift down. We are looking at ways of turning this around, for instance through targeted membership marketing in concert with AIIA National Office and other branches of the Institute. In the short term, however, and in the absence to date of donors or benefactors, the Branch needs to consider ways to increase revenue to meet unexpected cost increases. We recommend a policy of charging a modest sum to attend events. Such a measure would be in line with other Branches and National Office and would allow us not only to cover our costs, but hopefully to make a small surplus to build financial sustainability for the Branch into the future.

Set out below is the gender and diversity matrix covering the annual program. As it shows, we have considerable work to do to improve participation by women and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) speakers. I commend that task to the in-coming Branch Council.

Male, Female and CALD Speakers at AIIA (ACT) Events: September 2024 – September 2025

Date	Male	Female	CALD
18 Sept 24	1		1
18 Nov 24	2		2
27 Nov 24	1	2	1
10 Dec 24	1	2	1
20 Feb 25	1		
6 Mar 25	1	1	1
10 Apr 25	1		
24 Apr 25	1		
1 May 25	1		
22 May 25	3	1	2
29 May 24	1		
4 Jun 25	1		
12 Jun 25	1		
26 Jun 25	1	1	
24 Jul 25		1	
21 Aug 25	3		1
18 Sept 25	1		
TOTAL	21	8	9
	72%	28%	31%

Fellow Councillors have again lent me tremendous support this year and I thank them wholeheartedly for their contributions. Some fresh faces are nominated to join Branch Council in 2025-2026. They, and returning Councillors, will be a great resource for AIIA (ACT). Our Branch Administrator, Maryam Mobini-Kesheh, is providing first rate support to members as she looks after Branch accounts and manages events. Please contact Maryam at act.branch@internationalaffairs.org.au or leave her a message on **0403 932 571** if you have any queries or requests.

In conclusion, as I am not renominating for a position on Branch Council, this is my last President's report to members. It has been a memorable journey over the last seven years. Long-standing Branch member, Claude Rakisits, is nominating as in-coming President and I support his nomination. I believe Claude has the necessary experience and breadth of vision to take the Branch forward. I hope you will also support him, and the new Branch Council, so that AIIA (ACT) can continue to play a role as a valued forum for the discussion of international affairs in Canberra and throughout Australia.

Heath McMichael
 President
 AIIA (ACT Branch)
 6 September 2025.