



**AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS (ACT BRANCH)  
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING  
19 NOVEMBER 2020**

**PRESIDENT'S REPORT**

Facing our most challenging year in many, the ACT Branch has striven to continue to deliver members a program that combines variety, topicality and innovation. Although we have been constrained because of physical distancing restrictions wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic, I believe our events in 2020 have maintained a high standard of quality and relevance for members. As you can see from Treasurer Phil Huntley's report for the year ending 30 June 2020, we are in a sound financial position despite the COVID challenge.

Many of you will recall we commenced 2020 in pretty much our normal format. In February-March, presentations by Andrew Green, the ABC's defence correspondent, Clare Walsh from DFAT and Pichamon Yeophantong from ADFA were well-attended in the National Conference Centre at Stephen House.

But then came the pandemic. It was extremely disappointing for me to have to cancel the Branch Annual Dinner at The Boathouse on 19 March following the imposition of government restrictions on public gatherings a few days before the function. The cancellation was all the more unfortunate given that the patron of the AIIA, Governor-General, HE General David Hurley AC DSC (Rtd), had agreed to be our guest of honour and keynote speaker. On the upside, as noted in our Treasurer's report, many members generously volunteered to donate their dinner ticket fees to the Branch or elected instead to put their dinner fees towards paying membership renewal. Through enlightened and magnanimous member initiatives such as these our Branch continues to prosper.

After several weeks assessing the ACT Branch's new operating environment, we launched a program of virtual meetings in May. On-line event delivery was a major departure for us but this technological innovation (for ACT Branch, at least) has proved to be a blessing in disguise. Virtual meetings have enabled us to reach new audiences well beyond our membership base in other parts of Australia and overseas. While there may have been something of a 'free-rider' problem in respect of non-members tuning in, we are appealing to our extended virtual audience to renew or take up Branch membership.

During the year, we have delivered a diverse range of presentations exclusively on-line. Amongst the topics covered have been the ICRC's and World Vision's humanitarian responses to COVID-19, the Sunni/Shi'a divide, the breakdown in Libya, competing claims in Antarctica, Australia's policy on Israel/Palestine, Afghanistan and negotiations with the Taliban. I wish to thank fellow Council members who successfully mastered the art of chairing these virtual presentations in a way that ensured a seamless interface between speaker and on-line participants.

As physical distancing restrictions gradually relaxed, we again pivoted our program to include 'hybrid' events utilising on-line delivery of speakers' presentations before face-to-face audiences of invited members and guests. Under restrictions to date, we have been able to accommodate up to thirty in-house participants at Stephen House. National Office generously loaned us their video and lighting facilities and we stumped up funds to acquire a new sound system. This has given us a heightened capability to live-stream our hybrid events in front of a 'live' audience.

In August, our first hybrid event featured a presentation by Indian High Commissioner, HE Mr Gitesh Sharma, on India-Australia relations. This was followed with further hybrid events by Dave Sharma MP on Australia in a post COVID-19 world in September and by former DFAT and Defence Department Secretary Dennis Richardson in conversation with National President Allan Gyngell in October. In each case we attracted a substantial number of on-line registrants (in excess of 150 people) who submitted questions via the Zoom Q and A function.

Thank you to those members who responded to the member survey we circulated in September. Around 20 members indicated their interest in taking part physically in hybrid and in-person speaker presentations at the National Conference Centre. I hope that as COVID-19 restrictions continue to relax, more members will consider joining us in person for events. By the way, the Branch Christmas Party will be held in the second week of December at Stephen House and it would be great to see as many of you as we can.

In addition to our program of speaker events, the Branch worked towards extending our information outreach to members. Since May, we have been emailing members bi-monthly editions of the Branch's new International Affairs Digest. This e-publication comprises articles, podcasts and interactive media on a diverse range of international affairs issues. My thanks go to Council volunteers Phil Diak and Bradley Innes and to our Branch Administrative Assistant, Caitlin Plesek, for curating this initiative. Please feel free to send them any feedback on the Digest so we can respond to your fields of interest.

We have also sought to engage with young members and prospective members of the Branch. In October we organised an in-house session with international relations students at the ANU to discuss career pathways in international affairs. A panel comprising Council members, assisted by a DFAT graduate recruit who kindly volunteered to take part, answered students' questions about careers in DFAT, Defence and other agencies active in international relations. Such was the success of this interactive session that we plan to hold further 'careers nights' in more socially relaxed venues. I want to thank Amanda Lynch, Desmond Woods and Brian Ely for volunteering their time to meet students.

To bring our Constitution into line with the ACT Associations Incorporation Act 1991, I am seeking member's approval at this AGM on a revised Branch Constitution. With other documents for the AGM there is a written explanation of my reasons for the update, together with an amended version of the Constitution for your consideration.



**Australian Institute  
of International Affairs**  
*ACT Branch*

Fellow Councillors have lent me tremendous support during the year. I have already mentioned the contributions of several Council members but I want to call out in particular Vice President Natalie Mobini for her unflagging work in organising events, and Lawson Lobb and Jill Harris, for arranging event hospitality. We are sorry that Lawson and Jill have decided not to continue on Council and I thank them sincerely for all the effort they made over the years to ensure we were able to enjoy drinks and nibbles at many Branch meetings. I also want to thank our outgoing Vice President Sacha Blumen for his sage advice on Council and wish him every success as he takes up his overseas posting in the New Year as First Secretary in the Australian High Commission in Dhaka.

2020 has seen the Branch pivot in response to unforeseen changes in our operating environment and embrace technology to maintain delivery of our program. We hope you have been satisfied with the result. Soon, the new Council will begin planning a new program of events for next year. In 2021, we aspire to at least match the high calibre of the Branch's program this year, if not better it.

Finally, let me state that the current Council, with the exceptions of Lawson and Sacha, are standing for re-election. We would be deeply grateful for your support.

Heath McMichael  
President, ACT Branch  
Australian Institute of International Affairs

2 November 2020