

AEJ UK 50th Anniversary Dinner: solidarity and a sense of purpose – then and now

A dinner gathering in London of AEJ journalists from across the EU has celebrated the birth of the UK Section of the AEJ in 1968 -- five years before the UK's accession to the EEC -- and the Association's present existence as a pan-European network for independent journalism and press freedom. Today the association is active in all corners of the continent, from Portugal to Armenia and from Finland to Greece.

The AEJ UK Section's 50th Anniversary Dinner brought together over 30 AEJ journalists from 15 countries at the DoubleTree by Hilton hotel in central London on 28 September 2018. The dinner was hosted by the UK Section and it followed that afternoon's topical debate about the future shape of UK-EU relations beyond Brexit. The [#AEJBrexitdebate](#) featured leading British figures involved in the current political showdown over Brexit. Among the almost 100 participants were journalists and editors, diplomats, officials and others representing UK and European professional organisations.

At the dinner AEJ UK chairman William Horsley raised a toast to 'all our absent AEJ friends'. Former AEJ president Eileen Dunne asked those present to drink to solidarity among journalists in all AEJ Sections across the whole of Europe.

Current AEJ president [Otmar Lahodynsky](#) expressed his regret about the UK's expected departure from the EU in 6 months' time. Britain, he recalled, has played a big part in some of the EU's greatest achievements, such as the Single Market and Enlargement. Otmar recalled his own excitement many years ago, when he first came to London and saw its vibrant multi-culturalism and youth culture. Austrians, he said, were shocked at the 2016 referendum vote. He believes the result was not a fair expression of the will of the British people, because of 'outside interference' and distorting algorithms on social media.

[Miguel-Angel Aguilar](#), a founder member of the AEJ Spanish section in 1981, reminded those present of the crucial role the association has played in defending press freedom from its attackers down the years, from the Slovak prime minister Vladimir Meciar in the 1990s to the authoritarian leaders in power in parts of Europe today. Miguel-Angel, who also served the AEJ as its secretary-general in the 1990s, applauded the hard work by William Horsley as the AEJ's leading campaigner for media freedom, working closely with others including the Council of Europe and UNESCO. On Brexit, Miguel-Angel called for an 'unshakeable compromise with our British colleagues' to ensure continuity, and so that the common defence of liberties among the nations of Europe can remain 'tall and proud'.

[Kevin d'Arcy](#), a former AEJ UK secretary, recalled that 25 years ago many British politicians were unequivocally in favour of the EU and saw the UK's membership as positive. Kevin paid tribute to Celia Hampton, a former British section secretary who was a familiar figure at past AEJ Congresses but who died two years ago; and to Roger Broad, one of the original founders of the UK Section, who passed away last year.

At the time of the UK Section's 40th anniversary ten years ago, [Roger Broad wrote a pithy account](#) of those first 40 years. The idea of a British section was first born in 1968, he said, because General de Gaulle's grip on power was fading. When France's legendary wartime leader-in-exile left office, the path was at last open for a British government to be let in, eventually, to the 'European club'. The

first lunch guest of the new UK Section was the then prime minister Ted Heath, who negotiated Britain's entry.

Since then the British Section has kept up its tradition of political and economic independence. With 40 members and a wide network of colleagues among the UK and international media in London, recent [Speakers at its monthly meetings](#) include John Kerr, the British official who wrote Article 50 (under which the UK announced its intention to leave the EU); the outspoken champion of Brexit Lord Peter Lilley; and David McAllister, Angela Merkel's envoy in pre-referendum talks with David Cameron's government. Membership of the AEJ offers UK-based journalists the opportunity to hear in person from a wide range of newsmakers, and key figures in the evolution of the volatile relationship between the UK and its closest neighbours. That relationship now faces the end of an era with Brexit in prospect six months from now.

The British section has marked its 50th birthday by publishing a new [Anniversary colour brochure](#) to illustrate its activities in the UK and its active part in the thriving network of AEJ branches around Europe. In it Rick Thompson, a former chairman of the UK Section, writes: 'The AEJ is at the forefront of efforts to expose threats to journalism across Europe... The AEJ campaigns to protect the freedom of expression that is essential to any genuine democracy. The British section is a leader in this field'. [The AEJ-UK 50 Forum: Colloquium](#) on the future of UK-EU relations and the Celebration dinner which took place over the last weekend in September, 2018, were organised by the AEJ UK 50th Anniversary Planning Team. They are William Horsley, Firdevs Robinson, Peter Norman, Mike Springate, David Lennon, Margaret Hughes and Skye Redman. The AEJ UK's website editor is David Barker.