

The Association grew in stature since its foundation in 1987 until I became Chairman in 2001. Successive Chairmen were able to build on the work of their predecessors and take the AEA to greater prominence.

I became Chairman following the unfortunate illness of the late George Smith. It fell to me to continue to establish the AEA as a major player in elections at a time of considerable change. The Electoral Commission had only recently been established, and there were a number of changes in the government departments responsible for elections. I was fortunate in that I was able to represent the UK with Nicole Smith from the Electoral Commission and Thomas Barry from the ODPM at a conference of election management bodies in Mallorca. It helped to give the Association additional credibility at this early stage.

One of the earliest problems, which we all remember with affection, was how to deal with the multitude of consultation papers emanating from the Electoral Commission. Members had diverse views, and it was difficult to reflect them all whilst preparing a unified response on behalf of everyone.

There have been many meetings during my period in office. These have been with Ministers, civil servants, Electoral Commission staff, the Electoral Reform Society, the Oxford Internet Institute, H S Chapman Society, members of the House of Lords, the Hansard Society and many more. These of course were in addition to the Management Board and AEA Council. My recent trip to Uzbekistan was also a boost, as the Association was at a conference on an equal basis to the Indian Electoral Commission, the European Union and representatives from the US, Russia, Japan etc.

The media also has been in touch for quotes, interviews etc. I particularly remember a live interview for the Sunday morning Politics Show from the steps outside of the Council House in Birmingham. I was extremely cold and had to speak very loudly into the microphone because of the sounds from the adjoining fountain.

I have undertaken a number of branch visits, but nowhere near as many as I would have wished. Everywhere I have been received with great warmth and friendship, and it is this aspect that makes the AEA so special.

I believe that the role of Chairman is becoming more difficult. Time is the major problem. We all have to put in the equivalent of a full day's work in the office, and then fit in another one or two days a week representing the Association. It is hard to see how this can continue in the current climate where performance assessment and appraisal regimes require officers to demonstrate their efficiency and that they are providing "best value".

Future Chairmen will need very generous and supportive employers, or be retired. I am of the view that it may become hard for retired members to keep sufficiently up to date with changing trends to ensure that they can be effective in the Chairman's role.

It is important that we continue to push the Association forward, but remember that we are here to help each other to provide the highest standard of electoral administration possible. I look forward to the day when electoral administration (or management) is considered to be a fully professional service delivered by qualified

members of a professional organisation. The future is in our own hands, and we must do everything possible to take the opportunities that come our way. Please support the Association by taking the qualification and becoming qualified, by attending training sessions, by attending branch meetings and giving freely of your time.

I have enjoyed my time as Chairman, especially as I never aspired to the post) and only took on the role under tragic circumstances. I would like to record my thanks to everyone who has given me help and support over the last two years. Ideally, I would like to name them all, but I am afraid that it would take too many pages of Arena) and I would probably still miss several important friends and colleagues. Finally, I extend my best wishes to my successor as Chairman, and offer my services to the Association in any capacity that he or she may wish.