

Impartial and international

By **DR DEANNE JULIUS CBE**

CHAIRMAN, CHATHAM HOUSE



DEANNE JULIUS has been Chairman of Chatham House since July 2003. She was a member of the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee between 1997-2001. Prior to joining the MPC, she held a number of positions in the private sector including Chief Economist at British Airways and Shell. She has been senior economic advisor at the World Bank and a consultant to the IMF and UNCTAD.

Six months after the Armistice that ended World War I, British and American delegates to the Paris Peace Conference met on 30th May 1919 at the Hotel Majestic. It was here that they conceived the idea of an Anglo-American institute of foreign affairs to study international problems. Lionel Curtis, an influential British diplomat, said that the delegations had benefited greatly from the open exchange of information between diplomats and other experts. He argued that this method of analysis of international problems should be continued after the delegates returned to their own countries.

In the event, two institutes were founded. In London, the British Institute of International Affairs held its inaugural meeting on 5th July 1920. In New York, the Council on Foreign Relations held its first meeting a year later.

The early years and the Royal Charter

By the end of 1923 the British institute was well-established and had moved into Chatham House in St James's Square, the home of three former Prime Ministers. The property was purchased by Canadian Colonel RW Leonard and generously given to the institute. The gift of the freehold was accepted ceremonially by His Royal Highness Edward, Prince of Wales at a public meeting. Others attending included the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and the Secretary of State for the Colonies, as well as the Prime Ministers of Canada, New Zealand, Australia and Newfoundland, who were in London for the opening of the Imperial Conference.

In 1926 King George V granted the institute its Royal Charter and it became the Royal Institute of International Affairs. This remains its formal name although it is now more often known simply as Chatham House after the building that remains its home.

A central innovation in the early days of the institute was the formal establishment of the Chatham House Rule. When a meeting or event is held under the Rule, those participating agree to preserve the anonymity of all speakers in order to encourage the free sharing of information and candid exchange of views. The Chatham House Rule is now used throughout the world to aid open discussion among consenting participants including, on some occasions, journalists.

In 1935 to mark King George V's Silver Jubilee, the Chairman, Lord Astor, informed the King of the recent establishment of institutes of International Affairs affiliated to the Royal Institute in the Dominion of Canada, the Commonwealth of Australia and the Dominion of New Zealand. Astor noted that these institutes were "endeavouring to serve the King's devotion to the cause of world peace."

World War II and its aftermath

The institute played an important role in the war effort. King George VI and his family remained in London – despite Buckingham Palace suffering nine times from bombing raids – and so did the staff at the institute. Some experts were seconded to government and Chatham House was used for a number of confidential meetings. Chatham House also received bomb blast damage on several occasions and was hit by incendiaries which the fire-watchers were fortunately able to extinguish.

Upon the war's conclusion, some staff returned to Chatham House from their government postings and the armed forces. Others left to join the newly created international organisations – the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

By the time of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation in 1953 the post-war world was looking very different. It was a time of great change for Britain and the Commonwealth as countries rapidly gained independence and embarked on self-government. The institute's Council decided that Chatham House should give priority to the study of new issues of direct concern to British foreign policy, including a better understanding of independence movements and their implications for the Commonwealth.

The Cold War Era

On 10th December 1980 Queen Elizabeth II became the first reigning monarch to visit Chatham House when she opened the newly refurbished conference hall named after Sir John Power, a founding member of the institute.

In the early 1980s the institute took a decision to expand its research capability on the Soviet Union and to build relationships with both state and non-state actors in that area. Chatham House was criticised

for cultivating relations with Soviet reformers before what came to be known as perestroika was widely recognised in the West.

From the beginning of the decade, with Soviet forces in Afghanistan, to the middle of the decade when President Ronald Reagan challenged the Soviet Union in Berlin to “tear down this wall”, to the collapse of communism at the end of the decade, international attention was focused on developments in Moscow and the evolving Western responses. Under its then Director, Admiral Sir James Eberle, Chatham House was able to play a central role in furthering Western understanding of the profound changes underway in the Soviet Union.

Recent history and the Chatham House Prize

The institute marked its 75th anniversary in 1995 and on 23rd February staff were delighted to welcome Her Majesty The Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh to Chatham House to inaugurate the celebrations. During the visit institute experts briefed the Queen ahead of her imminent state visit to South Africa, incorporating responses to specific questions posed by Her Majesty in advance.

History was made in the reciprocal State Visits of the Queen and President Nelson Mandela. During her visit to South Africa in 1995 the Queen addressed its parliament and paid tribute to President Mandela’s spirit of reconciliation and freedom. President Mandela visited the UK the following year and spoke at a conference jointly organised by the institute, the Confederation of British Industry and the Department of Trade and Industry.

In 2006 The Queen visited Chatham House again as part of her 80th birthday celebrations and the 80th anniversary of the granting of the institute’s Royal Charter. She met staff, associate fellows and members and attended a private discussion on the ‘World in the Coming Decades’.

The Chatham House Prize was launched in 2005 to recognise the role – sometimes behind the scenes – that key individuals play in world affairs. Unlike some international prizes, the Chatham House award is based on a clear criterion and rigorous selection process incorporating the expertise of its members and researchers.

The award recognises the statesperson deemed to have made the most significant contribution to the improvement of international relations in the previous year. An initial list is proposed by Chatham House’s research teams and presented to its three presidents – Lord Ashdown, Sir John Major and Lord Robertson – who are asked to narrow it down to a shortlist. The shortlist is presented to all 5,000 Chatham House members who then select the winner in a secret ballot.

Our Patron, Her Majesty The Queen, presented the inaugural award to Ukraine’s President Victor Yushchenko in 2005. Since then, the Duke of Edinburgh, The Princess Royal, the Duke of York and the Duke of Kent have all presented the Chatham House Prize.

The combination of the institute’s reputation for substantive research, the historical importance of the UK in international affairs and respect for Royal Family has ensured that the Prize has rapidly gained recognition as a valuable and prestigious award. The direct involvement of Her Majesty and senior members of the Royal Family is highly valued and appreciated by the recipients as well as the institute.


Over recent years a pattern has emerged whereby Cabinet ministers, diplomats and business leaders travel to London with the Prize winner for the award ceremony. This gives key people from both countries the opportunity to meet with their counterparts, thereby fostering positive political and economic relations between the two countries.

This by-product of the Prize is a new reflection of what Chatham House has been doing for the past ninety years. We remain a forum where our members, supporters and speakers come together and represent a cross-section of the most influential internationally orientated individuals in business, academic and public life. Since 1920 the institute has been a unique and vibrant source of independent thinking on international affairs, constantly updating its research focus and events.

This year’s Prize

The linking of Chatham House, the Royal Family and world leaders is, I believe, benefiting the UK and its relations with a number of countries across the world. I am delighted that this year the award of the Prize to President Gül gives us an opportunity to deepen the UK’s relationship with, and understanding of, Turkey as a rising power.

Turkey’s unique position between East and West, its history as a secular state in a Muslim nation and its large and vibrant economy make it ever more important in world affairs. I am very pleased that the institute’s research and events are increasingly reflecting these changes.

As Lionel Curtis noted at that early meeting in Paris, impartial research, dialogue among experts from different disciplines, frank discussion of opposing views and wide dissemination of the facts all have a role to play in the conduct of international relations and, in particular, the promotion of peace and prosperity. Chatham House’s purpose remains as relevant today as it was in 1920. 

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