

## Monthly Talks (October 2016 to September 2017)

Here is a record of our monthly meeting talks in iU3A's fourth year. For more recent walks, go to our web page [here](#). What appears below is almost exactly what appeared on the website immediately after each meeting. It has not been updated except for the odd typo that slipped through first time around. That means that some of the talks should be read in context. For example, Margaret Hodge was succeeded in June 2015 by Meg Hillier as chair of the PAC—though her concerns seem as topical as ever. Indeed, all of the talks remain of interest, either in our local context or more widely, and so well worth a second visit...

### October



#### **Martin Plaut: The ANC - from revolutionary political group to a party of government**

Martin Plaut from the Institute for Commonwealth Studies gave a fascinating talk on the history of the ANC (African National Congress) from a revolutionary group to a party of government.

He took us on a historical journey from 1652 when the first white people landed in South Africa and set up divisions between the indigenous black people and the white settlers to the present day where the ANC President, Jacob Zuma, has proved to be a ruthless leader facing countless

allegations of corruption. Since his election there has been a lack of real progress in relation to employment, education and health care.

In 1833 slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire. However, a long-standing dispute between the Dutch and English settlers in relation to the treatment of black people continued to fester. In 1901 the Boer War ended in defeat for the British who had promised the indigenous South Africans their continuing support if they supported the British cause. But the British were left financially crippled by the war and unable to keep their promises.

The ANC was formed in 1912 in response to the lack of progress in bringing about any real advancement in the working conditions of black people and from then until the 1950s endless attempts were made to try to gain rights for black workers. In 1958 the government introduced apartheid. Nelson Mandela and other leaders of the ANC tried without success to find alternative solutions. Following the Sharpeville massacres in the early 1960s the ANC decided that peaceful negotiation was not working and that an armed struggle was their only option. Mandela was subsequently arrested and spent 27 years in jail. In 1994, on his release, he was made president, a universal franchise was granted and he enjoyed enormous popularity.

However, since Mandela stepped down in 1999, the hopes and dreams of a 'rainbow nation' have been blown off course. There is now concern for the future of the ANC. It has lost control of some major areas in South Africa and is being pushed back into its rural heartland. Zuma is proving extremely difficult to remove and he maintains a lot of support from his own people. There are other political groups emerging but there is a huge question mark over what would happen if the ANC should lose its political hold on the nation.

### November



**Dr Christine Coates - The 1926 General Strike**

Dr Christine Coates has worked at the TUC library for 46 years and was exceptionally well placed to tell us about The General Strike in the 90th anniversary of its inception.

She presented us with a fascinating pictorial display of how the lives of ordinary people were affected by the strike, with many photos of strikers and their families as well as newspaper reports from the time and comments from politicians and factory and mine owners.

In the aftermath of the First World War, the country’s industries faced enormous upheaval. The coal industry, for instance, was very inefficient and there was a longstanding hatred of the wealthy, and usually aristocratic, mine owners. It was extremely dangerous employment. Efforts to nationalise the industry were met with opposition from the Government and there was no agreement to standardise wages.

In the Spring of 1926 the TUC voted for strike action and although they had some support in Parliament, there were others, including Churchill, who were vehemently anti trade unions and considered trade unionism as an attack on the British Constitution. Despite the opposition, the TUC was able to galvanise thousands of workers, effective communication systems were set up across the whole country, strike payments were organised, soup kitchens set up and nearly two million workers went on strike. However, as the strikes increased, the costs bore down heavily on the unions, there was considerable suffering in many families and food shortages. There was huge disruption to services and strikers arrested due to acts of sabotage were treated harshly by the police with many receiving lengthy prison sentences.

The strike was called off on May 12th when the TUC thought that they were losing control. Workers accused the TUC of cowardice and betrayal and there followed deep divisions in the labour movement which were to have long-lasting implications.

**December**

No meeting.

**January 2017**



**Sir Adam Roberts, Senior Research Fellow in International Relations, Oxford University – The tragedy of the Arab Spring**

Adam gave a comprehensive overview of the many different aspects of the Arab Spring, the popular movement for democracy through reform or regime change, as it unfolded first in Tunisia in 2011, and then in Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Gaza, Syria, Bahrain, Morocco and Jordan. He contradicted misleading conclusions that have been drawn, that Arab or Muslim countries were unsuited to democracy and argued that it was important to recognise that conditions in these countries were very different, for example in terms of economic wealth and population size, but all shared the demographic characteristic of having very high levels of unemployment, especially graduate unemployment (40% in Egypt, 35% in Jordan, 32% in Tunisia).

Adam stressed that prior conditions were important in determining outcomes: where there was little experience of multi-party democracy then the possibility of achieving this varied greatly. Civil resistance could sometimes be too powerful, resulting in mass protest being successful in getting rid of a hated regime before a proper understanding of the process for replacing it or developing a single coherent vision was in place. So in Syria, which is a very divided society, civil resistance could not have succeeded in the short term. And if civil resistance displaces a regime, without establishing a successor government, then chaos is likely as the power vacuum will attract power wielders. Constitutional democracy is a form of government that ensures that political conflicts can be settled without resort to violence – but people have to be willing to lose elections. Tunisia is closer to Europe so its political parties had learned ideas from abroad and established a multi-party process for adopting the new Constitution by consensus after the revolution. And monarchies such as Jordan and Morocco had fared better in the Arab Spring than the politicians in other countries, probably because monarchies have less need to legitimize their rule through ideological programmes.

**February**



### **Louise Christian, British human rights solicitor — Will Brexit really mean we can control our borders?**

Louise, a British human rights solicitor, guided us through the complexities our exit from the European Union would give rise to, impacting on all areas of legislation. At the point of leaving, the 1972 European Communities Act will be repealed by means of the "Great Repeal Bill", which will incorporate the provision of the Act except the European Court of Justice into UK law. The Government will then review the provisions taken over by new Act and use secondary legislation, which does not require Parliamentary approval to make any changes it believes appropriate. The 1972 Act contains provisions that affect important areas such as workers' rights around equal pay, anti-discrimination and safety at work. It is of great concern that the Government's intention is to be able to change these provisions without Parliamentary approval; Louise explained that there are over 40,000 regulations associated with the 1972 Act so the process of review will be a huge task, taking teams of civil servants years to accomplish at huge cost to the national budget. In addition, EU agencies set standards for law enforcement, medicines, aviation, intellectual property, patents and many others, and all this work will have to be replaced and carried out by UK agencies, again at great cost.

Louise distinguished between the European Court of Justice, which considers cases relating to the UK's membership of the EU and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). The latter is a Council of Europe body set up to oversee the European Convention on Human Rights and is not part of the EU. Its anti-discrimination provisions only apply to Articles in the Convention and the workplace is not included. So Brexit will reduce the protection that workers currently have for rights such as equal pay and non-discrimination.

Although the UK was one of the original signatories to the European Convention on Human Rights, its provisions only came into UK law in 1998 with the Labour Government's Human Rights Act. The Prime Minister plans to repeal this Act post-Brexit and replace it with a UK law. UK citizens would still be able to take cases to the ECHR but currently there is a 7-year backlog of cases. Louise said that the UK would have to leave the Council of Europe to avoid the jurisdiction of the ECHR which would be dreadful.

On the question of whether Brexit will really mean we can control our borders, Louise pointed out that Brexit will have no impact on migration from those countries outside the EU. In addition, we will no longer be subject to the Dublin Convention which states that those seeking political asylum should be granted asylum at their first point of entry to Europe. At the moment, we can send people back to countries such as Greece and Italy which are often the first point of entry for migrants from areas such as North Africa. As the Dublin Convention will no longer apply, that will no longer be possible.

The format of this talk was ideal for the subject in that Louise gave a fascinating and informative talk which was shorter than normal, allowing plenty of time for insightful questions and discussion with her audience.

### **March**



### **Peter Cranswick, Head of Planning and Advisory at the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT) from Slimbridge Gloucestershire — From Archangel to Angel Islington: sharing your bird life with Russia**

Peter stepped in at the last minute to replace Peter Morris who was unwell. The WWT was established by the well known ornithologist Peter Scott; its mission is conservation, education and recreation - by inspiring local communities to embrace these aims and to enjoy wildlife.

He told us about two very different projects WWT is involved in. WWT had been working since 2007 with poor villages in Madagascar to conserve an endangered species of Pochard duck which is threatened with extinction due to the loss and pollution of the wetlands where it breeds and overfishing in the lakes. The real conservation challenge was the development work over many years with the local villagers encouraging them to use a greater variety of crops, new farming techniques, establishing plant nurseries and small savings groups, so that poor local communities had viable alternatives for food and income.

A very different WWT project was aimed at reversing the steep decline in the numbers of Bewick swans, which breed in Arctic Russia and migrate 3,500 miles to Slimbridge and the Wetlands Centre in London. Again the WWT has worked at the problem by engaging local communities, schools, farmers and hunters all along the swans' flightpath from Russia, through Europe, to the UK. This was publicised by filming a paramotor flight along the swans' flight path called 'Flight of the Swans' which attracted widespread media coverage.

## April



### **Gerison Lansdowne – international children's rights consultant and advocate – Are Children's Rights Relevant in the World of 2017?**

Our speaker for the month was Gerison Lansdowne who gave a fascinating talk on Children's Rights in 2017. These are embodied in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to which every country in the world, with the exception of the U.S.A, has signed up and every country takes on the responsibility for ensuring these rights are protected. These rights were ratified in the UK in 1990.

The Convention recognises that children are active participants in their own lives and that they have a different legal status from adults and additional protections. Rights can be exercised by parents but transfer to the child gradually as the child matures. These rights include freedom from discrimination, freedom from all forms of violence, the right to a family life and access to health care, education, and play and recreation. Enforcing these rights is a complicated issue. International committees are set up to scrutinise how states are meeting their obligations and all governments need to report every five years to this committee. Although governments are held to account, there are no legal enforcements and changes can only be brought about through constructive dialogue between the committee, governments, and NGOs.

There has been considerable progress in many countries since the introduction of the Convention. There are now far more child protection provisions in place, separate juvenile justice systems have been set up, there is more open public debate, e.g. on the issues of female genital mutilation, greater empowerment for children to speak up and be heard and 52 states have ended corporal punishment (of which the UK is not one!).

There is, however, still a great deal of work to be done and there are many governments still contemptuous of children's rights. There is growing inequality within countries particularly in relation to young refugees and children in institutional care.

As usual there were lots of thoughtful questions from the audience.

## May



### **Professor Frances Spalding – John Piper and the Making of his Vision'.**

On a very warm spring morning about 100 members turned up to hear Frances Spalding from Clare College, Cambridge, give a very enlightening talk on Piper who had a vast sprawling career as a landscape painter, printmaker, reviewer, guide, photographer, theatre designer and stained-glass designer. But his abiding love was for architecture. Even as a child he would take his entire family around the countryside to admire architecture, while he busied himself doing pen and ink drawings.

Piper had a passionate interest in the past and whilst looking backwards for inspiration, was always rooted in the present and saw the old and the new in sympathy with each other. For years he questioned whether there was an English vision and was very interested in trying to define the identity and character of 'Englishness'.

He worked alongside, and drew inspiration from, many other well-known artists and writers. His early pen and ink drawings imitate the etcher F.L.Griggs. In the mid-1930s, after a visit to Paris where he met Kandinsky and Mondrian, he began experimenting with abstract painting. He also explored creating simple abstract shapes, influenced by Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson. After the war, he was Benjamin Britten's right-hand man as a stage designer. John Betjeman renewed Piper's interest in topography and Betjeman commissioned him to write the 'Shell Guide to Oxfordshire'. Piper's wife Myfanwy also influenced his thinking and together they produced an avant-garde magazine entitled *Axis*.

John Piper had a real sense of belonging to a locality and the sense of identity that goes alongside this. He was thought by some to be provincial and parochial but the Second World War was to change his vision as he and other artists confronted the old world in new and shattered

circumstances. His iconic photographs of the destroyed Coventry Cathedral were sent around the world and he became increasingly aware of the effects on ordinary people of the destruction of architecture.

## June



### **Sir Brian Fender – Chair London Waterway Partnership of the Canal and River Trust – London Canals: from London’s Greatest Park to “village greens”.**

We were treated to an absorbing and entertaining talk on the history of the canal system from the beginning of the last century and our continued fascination with water.

In 1946 the Inland Waterways Association was formed in the days when the transport of freight by canals was still in operation. But, after the really hard winter of 1962, freighting failed and the canal system became a dumping ground. The regeneration of the canals began in the 1980s, navigable waters became fashionable again and there was recognition of the heritage potential of canals.

In 2012 the Canal and River Trust was formed and is today a huge charitable organisation with considerable assets including 1,500 locks and 2,700 listed buildings. There are 10 regional groups covering England and Wales of which the London region is one.

The canal system has acted as a catalyst for new building, the development of green spaces and towpath activities such as walking, cycling, and fishing. There are also water sports such as canoeing and paddle boating and many people have made their permanent homes on narrow boats. The canals also provide a retreat for wildlife. There are many challenges for the Trust including over-mooring, siltage, huge numbers of cyclists and the continuing protection of wild life. But it is a very populist pastime: there are 4.5 million people who use the canal system every two weeks.

The London region has seen many innovative projects which have grown up along the canals including Granary Square in Kings Cross, the transformation of Paddington Station, many interesting housing schemes and the Olympic Park. However, there are still tranquil spots to be found and many adjoining parks and green spaces. Brian finished by stressing the continuing need to find volunteers and was very impressed by the variety of question asked by the audience.

## July



### **JULY – Dr Philip Kenrick – classical archaeologist – Classical Heritage in Libya: what is at stake and what can be done about it?**

At our July meeting Philip Kenrick, an archaeologist who has worked in Libya since 1971, gave us a fascinating account of the classical heritage of Libya, posing the questions of what is at stake and what can be done. He brought with him an astonishing array of pictures of the sites.

Libya is a country of contrasts; the habitable strip is along the coastline and there is a vast hinterland of desert. Both the Ancient Greeks and the Romans have been responsible for the astonishing riches, dating back to the 6th century BC, that continue to be discovered across the whole of the country.

Along the coastal strip there are Roman villas, forums, and basilicas, many of them partially restored by the Italians during the interwar years. Inland there is evidence of ancient olive farming as well as remarkably preserved cemeteries and funeral monuments. There are extensive remains of city sites around modern Benghazi: military castles and hilltop fortresses. During Gaddafi’s time there were no allowances made for antiquities, and following the Arab Spring in 2011 followers of religious fundamentalism regarded any veneration of ancient sites as corrupt. There has been casual vandalism as well as theft of many antiquities. New building work has taken place in areas of great historical interest and fighting between various groups has led to further damage and destruction. Ancient sites have been bulldozed for speculative building investment when it seems unlikely that any building work will be completed.

There are efforts now being made among local communities to preserve some of these sites and there are some dedicated staff and volunteers. There is an urgent need to ensure that records are kept of all the sites and this has proved challenging in a country where history and cultural heritage have not been taught in schools and have not been valued. However, guide books are now being written and translated and modern technology is available to assist. There is hope

that different factions can come together and, with support from other countries such as France, Italy, the UK and the USA, Libyans can find the way forward.

## August

No talk.

## September



**Sir Paul Nurse — Director of the Francis Crick Institute, recipient of the Nobel prize in Physiology or Medicine, 2001 — 'Science as Revolution'.**

Paul Nurse took us on a 10,000 year journey through the revolutionary advances made in human civilisation due to the application of 'scientific' ways of thinking and working. He began with neolithic societies that first domesticated wild plants to produce harvestable crop plants, and developed metallurgical technologies, producing copper and bronze for tools and weapons. The same attributes of curiosity, careful observation, experiment and reasoning characterised the expansion of early scientific knowledge and discovery in classical Greece, when the application of rational thinking and scientific methods demonstrated that the world was comprehensible without recourse to superstitious beliefs.

In Britain, the Enlightenment era ushered in the age of modern science in the 17th century and led to the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries which transformed society: evolutionary theory, molecular science, modern chemistry, genetics, new energy sources such as electricity and new communications. A scientific culture and institutions were generated characterised by tolerance, internationalism, and equality through scrutiny by peers. Revolutionary advances in our scientific knowledge continue today and change our culture, technology and understanding of the world and our place in it. Although science can be used as a threat — it has been used to create weapons of mass destruction, and in some cultures science is seen as oppositional to orthodox religious beliefs — Paul Nurse was confident that science was a positive endeavour that would continue to bring 'revolutionary' improvements to the human condition.