Jennifer Mackintosh, AIIC President through the end of the Brussels assembly, and Benoit Kremer, our President for the next three years, offer some thoughts on the association’s present and future.

Jennifer Mackintosh

AIIC Assemblies are held every three years. Any member can attend, submit resolutions, speak from the floor. They are truly democratic gatherings and over the years they have gained in maturity and, dare I say it, wisdom. The 2006 Assembly that has just ended in Brussels was exemplary in this respect. It took decisions on a number of difficult and contentious issues in an atmosphere that was both calm and considered. It listened with great interest to its principal guest, Jan Figel, EU Commissioner for Multilingualism, a subject of intimate interest to AIIC members. It saw a film (The Whisperers) illustrating the life and work of a couple of diplomatic interpreters, a pioneer from the Nuremberg days, a freelancer in Berlin, a staff interpreter from the European Parliament as well as the first faltering steps into the profession of a student interpreter. It elected a new president and 24 council members representing the AIIC Regions.

Over the past decade AIIC has come a long way. The development of its website has contributed hugely to sharpening its professional image; its collaboration with interpreter training courses around the world has contributed towards consolidating the worldwide consensus on what interpreter training should cover and what constitutes a competent conference interpreter. The ongoing dialogue with the major institutional employers of interpreters on how to adapt to a changing world, e.g. the jump from 13 to 20, soon 23, languages in the EU, as well as the changes brought about by new modes of communication all require AIIC to focus its attention and be pro- rather than reactive. Over the decade it has reached out well beyond its traditional confines by setting up Teranga-dialogue, a network linking interpreters in countries which are new to the international conference world with colleagues in our established regions who can provide advice and support. The success of these efforts was demonstrated in Brussels with the addition of a Turkish Region within the association. Another network, VEGA, engages with interpreters starting up in the profession. The VEGA pages on the AIIC website provide invaluable guidance on subjects such as
how to proceed when on one’s first assignment for the European Commission or other major employers; how to organise one’s life as a freelance; what to do and what not to do; record-keeping; glossary management; availability monitoring. Currently available in English and Portuguese, further versions are in the works.

During the past triennium, new developments have included AIIC.MAIL, which greatly facilitates communication between members, and the Bizorg project which offers organisations seeking to recruit a team of interpreters the possibility of accessing from the homepage of the AIIC website a list of consultant interpreters in the country of their choice, all of whom have been vetted for their experience in organising teams, their ability to respond rapidly to enquiries and their standing in the profession.

AIIC knows that nothing stands still and is engaged in anticipating change and being ready to handle the challenges ahead. Professionalism is the leitmotif running through all its activities and the Brussels Assembly amply demonstrated that professionalism characterises its members as much as the association itself.

Benoit Kremer

I can hardly imagine anything more difficult and demanding than trying to map out what the coming 3 years might have in store for us, for AIIC and for our profession. Instead of either making a fool of myself by starting on a crystal-ball gazing exercise or giving up altogether, I decided to shift the perspective and concentrate on the present situation as I see it and on trends that seem to be emerging. To do so, let me use the famous SWOT analysis with a slight change in order. This method, as everyone knows, describes the positive and negative elements at play, both within an organisation (strengths and weaknesses) and outside (opportunities and threats). Allow me to start with the external factors.

Do we see any opportunities in the “market” around us? This is, I think, rather a question of attitude and perception. Any new development, whether of a technical nature, like remote interpretation, or of a political nature, such as multilingualism (i.e. the use of ever more languages in international settings), can be apprehended as an opportunity, in other words as a possibility to make ourselves known and show that we, as professionals, are up to the task. Unfortunately, I sometimes sense a general feeling of pessimism, a fear that technical and political developments may be too challenging or even beyond us, or that our profession could disappear in the next 15 to 20 years. This amounts to saying that some colleagues feel surrounded by threats. And threats there certainly are: pressures from major institutions; difficulties in negotiating adequate agreements; ever tougher rivalries on the private market; requirements for adding new languages that are abandoned at a later stage, leaving qualified interpreters without a market; difficulties in our relations to our non-AIIC colleagues, but also in attracting new members and in motivating existing ones.

This feeling of being threatened contributes to us underestimating our considerable successes. And this to my mind is directly linked to weaknesses. Indeed, we sometimes behave as though we were our own worst enemy. Are we still suffering from the legacy of a time when AIIC was seen by many as a stern father laying down an inflexible law? Are some of us still nostalgic for those times? I, for one, am extremely grateful that the very existence and even the vigour of today’s AIIC is rooted in the knowledgeable commitment of each of its members. I welcome that debates are centred on facts and the conclusions to be drawn from them, and carried out with enquiring minds rather than preconceived notions.

And I believe that this approach will be rewarded because we have clear strengths. With every passing year, AIIC becomes more mature as an association whilst its members become younger!! A
new spirit is spreading, as we could all see for ourselves at our recent assembly in Brussels. We seem to have, at long last, stopped tearing ourselves apart over differences in status or objectives; as members of an professional association, we seem to be willing to accept that others who think differently or whose immediate needs are different from our own have a right to be heard; we seem to be eager to listen to what others have to say and willing to consider changing our position after having heard them. Today, instead of frowning when for the umpteenth time we hear the catchword “solidarity”, which sometimes brought images of “sacrifice”, we are more apt to comprehend that the greatest dangers we face are external, and more willing than ever to unite in order to overcome them.

It is such an environment – which recognises problems but promises rewards for hard work - that makes me look forward to the coming 3 years.

This Issue

Our editor was in Brussels for the whole eight days and had a chance to witness the results of what was a marvelous organising effort on the part of our colleagues in Belgium. The variety of events, the quality of our guests, and the interest generated in the press corps were indeed impressive, as was the message transmitted again and again: It’s all about communication. We want to assure that people can express themselves - and understand each other - fully.

Thanks to online registration and electronic voting, queues and waits were short. And thanks to features added to our members only area, colleagues not in Brussels could follow the conference through an assembly blog (some 35 posts during the week).

Silke Gebhard headed the organising committee and still somehow found time to write about the conference. “The Whisperers” Are Here was first published on the internet at the time of the assembly; we offer it here for the insight it offers into the hard work done behind the scenes and into the way interpreters think.

If one hangs around AIIC long enough, one will hear a lot about new members, new colleagues, and newcomers in general. So what about hearing from them? Well over 100 new members are joining AIIC every year; we suspected that some of the newest ones would be in Brussels attending their first assembly. So Communicate! decided to conduct an informal survey to collect their impressions; the result - A Talk with New Members.

Phil Smith was sited in Brussels also – on the far left of the meeting hall at first, gradually moving toward the centre as the days went by. His balanced view of events is reflected in Diary of a technologically novel assembly.

Rounding out our conference coverage is numer-AIIC-ology, a short collage of figures and photographs assembled by Luigi Luccarelli to commemorate our get together.

This issue, however, does not begin and end with AIIC’s recent conference. We have been pleased to note that several recent articles have generated debate and replies. And in that spirit of communication, we present Anne-Marie Widlund-Fantini’s Comment faut-il traduire? (Suite et fin), which continues a discussion began last March.

Lastly, we offer readers our annual presentation of the overview of international organisations prepared by the Staff Interpreters Committee. Here you’ll find information on structure, recruitment, working conditions, salaries and evaluation systems in various international bodies.

We would like to thank Horst Wagner for providing many of the photographs seen in this issue. Captions can be seen by placing your cursor over a photo. We hope you enjoy them as much as we
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