



# Where the world comes to debate

More than 50,000 people a year flock to LSE's public lectures and debates. What makes these events stand out on the global stage? **William Wallace** takes a look behind the scenes.

'I'm so glad I came to LSE,' one of my former MSC students told me in Athens a few months ago. 'It wasn't just the lectures, and the quality of the other students; it was the chance to hear politicians and officials from all over the world, as well as leading intellectuals, almost every evening every week. There must be few other places where I could sit in on global public debate as closely as this.' It was easy for me to agree; I've been to many of LSE's public lectures and panel discussions over the past ten years, and wish I could have found time to go to many more.

LSE's events programme is now one of its most distinctive assets, for students, staff and outside visitors alike. It's a tremendous advantage to be based in the middle of London, with political leaders, lawyers, businessmen and financiers, as well as academics, passing through. LSE's ethos and reputation, of academic research and study directly related to public policy, helps to attract those who make or influence policy elsewhere; so does the international character of its staff and students. But it still takes a major effort of preparation and organisation to manage an events





programme which in the 2008-09 academic year rose to 227 events, with over 50,000 attendees – half of these drawn from within LSE, half from outside.

Regular lecture series, planned well in advance, provide the backbone of the programme: the Malinowski lecture, Lionel Robbins, Stamp, Lakatos, the Miliband series, and several more. These focus reflectively on long-term trends and controversies – but can nevertheless move markets. Paul Krugman's three Robbins Memorial lectures, in June 2009, on 'the return of depression economics', were streamed across dealers' screens in London and New York as he spoke.

Alongside these, a steady stream of visitors to London passes through LSE's lecture theatres – some invited well in advance, others asking to speak at the last minute. The recent G20 summit in the UK gave LSE the opportunity to hear President Yudhoyono of Indonesia, alongside commentaries on the issues from George Soros and Jeffrey Sachs. But then President Medvedev of Russia accepted an invitation to speak to staff and students at the end of the summit, his presence attracting an eager audience.

Some of the most hastily arranged meetings have been among the most dramatic. When on 11 September 2001 the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre took place, Tony Giddens as director asked me to organise a panel on its implications for the students arriving little more than a fortnight later. What I'd envisaged as a few hundred people in the Old Theatre turned, under the guidance of LSE events programme managers, into an all-ticket

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affair in the 1,000 seat Peacock Theatre: a highly-charged 90 minutes, sparked off by a panel of academic staff, with students from different countries and divergent perspectives raising questions from the floor.

The LSE style is for open debate, with questions to speakers from around the lecture hall. Presidents and Nobel prize winners therefore find themselves challenged by students, sometimes from their own country, sometimes more expert on the topic than they might have anticipated and less deferential than they are used to. Since these are public lectures, advertised outside LSE and open to the wider public, speakers and chairs can never be sure exactly who is in the audience – which can on some occasions raise difficult security issues. When Zoran Djindjic, then prime minister of Serbia, came to speak in 2002, some London-based Serbs in the audience were vocally hostile, creating a tense and nervous atmosphere; he was indeed killed by opponents in Belgrade a few months later.

I've slowly understood from chairing difficult meetings how closely, though discreetly, LSE security staff liaise with the police about potential threats and prominent visitors. What the audience sees is only the surface of security: LSE students acting as

stewards, carrying microphones from one participant to another as they intervene from the floor, showing latecomers to their seats and tactfully discouraging hecklers from making uninvited interventions.

One echo of past disruption came with a lecture from Kemal Dervis, then Turkish finance minister, in 2002. It was, he said, almost the first time he had visited LSE since he had joined in the occupation of the Director's office in 1968. He touched on his progression from rebellious student through World Bank economist to government minister: an illustration to the many current students from Turkey in the audience of how unexpected one's future career might be.

The LSE programme has grown rapidly over the past ten years, from the 50 or so meetings in 1999-2000 to well over 200 today. The opening of the New Academic Building, with the 400-seat Sheikh Zayed theatre and space for receptions after meetings, has increased our capacity to handle simultaneous meetings and different sizes and styles of events, from large scale lectures to specialised discussions. We sometimes now hear students protest that there is an embarrassment of choices, with competing

attractions in the early evening on successive nights, in different lecture theatres.

As the reputation of LSE events has grown, so the number of outside attendees has grown with it: lawyers from the courts nearby, officials from Whitehall at the other end of the Strand, MPs and peers from Westminster, ambassadors and diplomats from the West End, journalists, academics from other universities. The development of podcasts now means that these lectures are also available to a distant audience. The figures suggest that this distant audience is growing rapidly. Between 50,000 and 75,000 people download podcasts from the LSE website every month. LSE podcasts are also carried on UChannel ([uc.princeton.edu](http://uc.princeton.edu)); in the last quarter of 2008, downloads from there were running at over 200,000 a month.

The 2008-09 programme ended with a lecture by Amartya Sen, on 'The Idea of Justice'. It had started with Danish minister Connie Hedegaard and Hilary Benn MP discussing a new international response to climate change. The months between have included a series on the relationship between law and government, with judges from the UK, other states and international courts contributing, and another on the future of European integration focused around the 2009 elections to the European Parliament. The Centre for Human Rights, LSE IDEAS, the Centre for Global Governance, the Asia Research Centre and the Gender Institute sponsored lectures, alongside the Departments of Philosophy, International History, and Management, and a cross-disciplinary series entitled 'Space for Thought'.

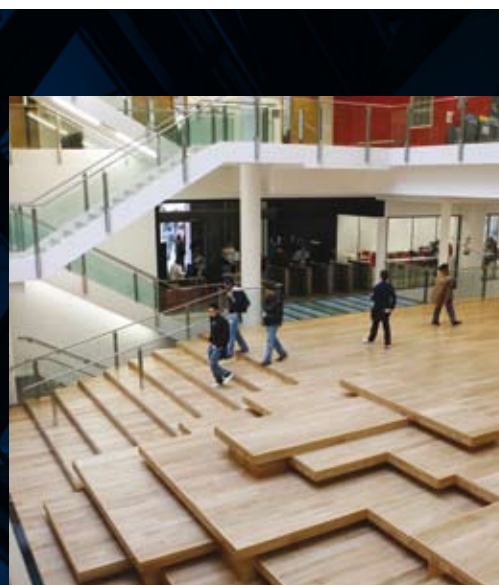
The 2009-10 programme will be as busy – while allowing space to add in extra speakers and topics as opportunity arises. At the time of writing, I'm anticipating some sharp questioning from the audience myself when I open the LSE European Institute Perspectives on Europe series with the question of 'What is Europe, where is Europe?'. I expect to be challenged by students from several countries – including Britain – as to what I consider the core of Europe to be, and what its periphery. Some years ago I received an outraged email from a Turkish student, after a similar lecture, accusing me of insulting her country. The following year she showed me round Ankara. In the intervening months she had talked to me about Turkish politics and society, and she had learned from discussions with teachers, visiting lecturers and other students that many large questions can be answered from different perspectives. That's part of what the LSE events programme offers, to staff as well as students, and to outsiders. Do come and join in the debate next time you are close to the Aldwych. ■

## NEW ACADEMIC BUILDING

Located on Lincoln's Inn Fields, LSE's New Academic Building offers an extensive range of new world class facilities including flat floored and tiered lecture theatres seating up to 400, Harvard style theatres and a range of seminar and executive meeting rooms.

For further information about hiring conference space in the New Academic Building, or to arrange a viewing of the new facilities, please contact [event.services@lse.ac.uk](mailto:event.services@lse.ac.uk) or call 020 7955 7461.

[lse.ac.uk/lseeventservices](http://lse.ac.uk/lseeventservices)



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