

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

By LORD ROBBINS

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AT the last annual meeting this time last year, my predecessor, Sir Maurice Bowra, was able to announce that the Government had decided to make the British Academy its agent for the distribution of grants for research in the humanities. This decision was the result of endless labours on the part of Sir Maurice and his predecessor, Sir George Clark, and their colleagues on the subcommittee which surveyed research in the humanities and the social sciences; and it has given rise to activities which have been the main preoccupation of the Academy during the last twelve months.

Before reporting on these activities, I should like to comment on certain wider aspects of this decision.

First, it must be welcomed as a recognition, however belated, of the need for public subvention to research of this kind. It has long been recognized that, in natural science and other branches of knowledge, there is a clear case for the expenditure of public money to finance the researches of individuals and groups of individuals. But for reasons which do not reflect well upon the public appreciation of such matters, it was too long assumed that, in the humanities, research and publication can be left to private finance. The report of your committee showed conclusively how poorly the position in this country compared with the position in other leading centres; and the decision of the Government is a tribute to the cogency with which that case was argued.

Secondly, the decision is to be welcomed, not only because of its recognition of the importance of the research in the humanities, but also because it represents an extension of an administrative tradition which is of great importance for the future of free learning and free societies. Many years ago some unknown person in the public service—his identity and the background of his thought would be very suitable subjects for a little research—conceived the happy idea that public subventions of this sort were best administered indirectly through expert bodies. The need for public subvention was recognized.

But at the same time it was also recognized that it carried with it great danger of the intrusion into its distribution of considerations very alien to the spirit of free learning; and it was felt that this danger could be avoided if, when the decision concerning the amount to be distributed had been made by the Government, its allocation were entrusted to properly accredited councils, boards of trustees, or similar bodies. In this way there have been developed in this country institutions such as the Research Councils, and the Arts Council, which are the admiration of the civilized world. At a time when so many of our institutions and habits are under critical review, it must be a cause of deep gratification to those of us who believe in the importance of this constitutional practice, that the Government has chosen to follow it on this occasion.

Thirdly, it must be a special cause of pleasure to us here that the Government has selected the British Academy to be its agent in this respect. It would be a mistake to regard this decision as being an entirely new departure. For many years the Academy has acted as distributing agent for the Government in respect of certain famous British institutions abroad; and, of course, there has been a small annual grant for general purposes—this last year £11,000—some of which has enabled us in a very modest way to help or promote various learned undertakings. The present decision, however, has this significance, that we are definitely selected to be the distributing agent in respect of the main system of grants for research in the humanities. Whether or not there is to be a separate council in connexion with social studies—a matter which is now the subject of special consideration—the British Academy is the chosen instrument in all other branches of the humanities. We regard this both as a great honour and as a great responsibility.

Having reflected thus on the general principles involved, perhaps it may be useful if I explain in some detail the methods which have been adopted to carry out our task. There has been established a Research Committee, and, on the advice of this Committee, the Council has authorized the following procedure. At the beginning of the administrative period there is issued and made available to the press and in the chief centres of learning, a notice that applications are invited from individuals and groups of individuals for assistance from the fund. When the applications come in they are first sorted in the office with a view to classification and the elimination of the inevitable irrelevancies. Next they are scrutinized, one by

one, by the Research Committee, who proceed to assign each application to whichever section of the Academy seems most appropriate. The Sections then meet and bring their expert knowledge to bear, first on the question of the intrinsic merits of each application, and then on the order in which they should be placed in this particular context. After that the reports of the Sections come back to the Research Committee, which now has the task of adjusting the recommendations to the limits of the funds available and reviewing in general the reports of the Sections. Finally, the report of the Research Committee comes up to the full Council for final scrutiny and decisions.

I think it may be claimed that this is a procedure which ensures that individual applications will receive ample expert examination and full justice in the difficult business of the allocation of limited resources. Experience has already shown this year that the appraisal of such applications is a task for which the different sections of the Academy are especially well fitted. Indeed, I think it can be claimed that it would be difficult to arrange in any other way for the vast range of projects submitted for our consideration each to be examined by the highest authorities in the relevant field. That is the great advantage of administering such subventions through the Academy, with its wide membership, rather than through some *ad hoc* council, whose numbers must of necessity be much smaller.

Turning now to the actual history of the first year's administration of this money, I have to report that at this, the first time of our indicating the availability of such funds, we received eighty-two applications for sums which would have involved in the aggregate an expenditure of £89,660 in one year. For the most part these applications were of high quality. We had only £25,000 to distribute for all purposes, and I think it is clear that we could have distributed more than twice that amount without any of the projects thus subsidized falling below a high level of minimum eligibility. The actual awards have been published and are printed in the annual report. It will be seen that, with the exception of social studies, they range over the whole field of our activities, from the preparation of a Kurdish dictionary to the publication of Early English Church Music; there is even included a project for experiments on the use of electronic computers in the textual and stylistic analysis of Greek prose. All the projects subsidized have the characteristic that, while they involve work of high academic quality, nevertheless, it is extremely improbable that in any

other way, commercially or otherwise, funds could be found to sustain their execution. I think that if they will examine the list, the Ministers who made the momentous decision thus to inaugurate the subsidizing of this kind of research, may feel reassured that the money is being spent upon worthy objects. I hope too that they will feel, what I feel very profoundly, that a list of this sort drives home, as no amount of mere generalization could ever do, the need for this kind of public subvention. As I have said, the projects subsidized could not be launched without the money which has been made available; and I think it may be claimed that few types of public expenditure are likely to yield results of more long-lasting value per pound sterling expended.

It will be readily understood that the discharge of this new function has involved a great deal of additional labour for our distinguished secretary and his assistants. Naturally much of the detailed work of appraisal is carried out by the different Sections; and in this way, what otherwise would be an intolerable burden, is shared. But the mere business of correspondence, tabulation, and the preparation of agenda for the various meetings has been a heavy load for the secretariat; and our thanks are due to all concerned for the efficiency and punctuality with which it has been discharged. It has been necessary to engage some supplementary assistance and this has involved a considerable strain on our accommodation. I should like to take this opportunity of thanking the Ministry of Works for making available additional offices for this purpose.

That is all I have to say about the specific activities involved by this new function. I think, however, that I should add that although, owing to the Treasury grant, we are now in a position to sustain research in the humanities on a scale which is considerably more substantial than ever before, this does not mean that we have reached a state of stationary equilibrium. Quite the contrary indeed, we are, I hope, at the beginning of a period of sustained growth. As I have already indicated, it is quite clear that in years to come we should be able to distribute much more than we have at present at our disposal without any falling off of standards. Moreover, apart from the fostering of research, there are quite a number of other ways in which we could make very good use of substantial additions to our income. Exploration, the work of the institutes, publication are all activities on which, if our income were many times the size it is, we could still spend with very high hopes of useful return.

In particular, we could at once make very good use of increased resources for the support of learned periodicals. It may be tedious to insist upon this. But so much of what we can do depends upon the availability of funds that I should be very sorry indeed if it should be thought that the fact that we now receive an enlarged subvention from the Government means that we are not able to make good use of anything further.

In this connexion, I should like to stress the great scope which activities of the kind we support still offers to private benefactions. I often think that potential donors fail to realize how much can be done with comparatively little in this particular sphere. If a tiny fraction of what is annually subscribed by individuals and companies to hospitals and athletic activities were available to the learned societies in this country, and in particular, to this Academy, the whole position of humane culture in our society would be on a different basis. In recent years the great foundations have shown growing awareness of this; and we are deeply indebted to the help we have received from bodies such as the Pilgrim Trust and the Nuffield and Wolfson Foundations. But private benefaction has been less forthcoming. I think it deserves to be recognized that, in an age in which state support for eleemosynary and scientific activities has increased many hundredfold, as compared with what it was at the time of the foundation of this Academy, there would be great advantage if private donors were to turn more in the direction of those branches of the arts and learning which, despite some progress in recent years, still receive so little from the public purse. There must be at least a dozen persons in this country who with one gift could place our finances in a position of lasting security. Is it too much to hope that some day one of them will become aware of our existence?

There are two matters of domestic concern which I think I should mention at this juncture.

The first concerns accommodation. Although, as I have said earlier, we have reason to be grateful to the Ministry of Works for relieving the extreme pressure on space caused by the expansion of our operations, I do feel very strongly that we have no reason to feel at all contented with our present quarters. The Council Room is a room of some amenity; but for the rest I must say that our accommodation falls far short of what might be expected of the British Academy. I often ask myself what must be the impression made upon our corresponding members when they come to this country and pay a visit to this building.

What must they think as they thread their way to our humble portals through the stacks of examination chairs and such-like properties of the Civil Service Commission which usually litter the ground floor of this building? What estimate must they form of the place of humane learning in the system of values of those who rule over us? I will not conceal my feeling that this is really something of a public scandal; and I hope very much indeed that members of the Academy who have any influence in high places, will do all that they can to see that the matter is brought to the attention of the relevant persons and that it is not allowed to be forgotten until we are provided with accommodation more suitable to our standing and the important functions which we discharge. I look to a day in which it is taken for granted that we are entitled to quarters which, in dignity and architectural beauty, are comparable to those which have been enjoyed so long by academies abroad and by the Royal Society in this country.

The second matter concerns the organization of the Academy. For some years, as regards those sections of the Academy with which I am more intimately acquainted, I have had the impression that existing classifications might well be improved; and since I have been in a position which compels me to take a wider view, that impression has been strengthened. The area covered by some sections now seems to include disciplines and interests which have no very close organic connexion; and while for some purposes this does not matter very much, where elections and allocations are concerned this may introduce disturbing and undesirable considerations. I suggest that it would probably be appropriate for the Council to turn its attention to this problem and to consider very seriously whether some reclassification may not now be appropriate. I do not wish to prejudge the result of such an examination. I submit only that it is desirable that such an examination should take place.

What I have had to say this afternoon has related chiefly to finance and organization. These are matters which we cannot neglect. We cannot do what we want to do without them. But they are means, not ends. The Academy must find its ultimate justification in the works of its members and other individuals to whom, directly or indirectly, it gives support. And on this plane I submit the evidence of the Report affords ample evidence of vitality and achievement.