

Rising to the Challenge

In these extracts from his address to the Annual General Meeting on 16 July 2009, the incoming President of the British Academy, Professor Sir Adam Roberts, reveals the Academy's plans to play a stronger role in future public debates and policy-making.

IT IS AN HONOUR and a challenge to take up the position to which you have elected me. Thanks to Onora O'Neill, my presidency begins with the British Academy in robust health internally, and responding intelligently and thoughtfully to the many changes in the external environment. Our great strength, to be prized above all others, is that we are an autonomous self-governing association of leading scholars and social scientists. It is because of this independence that we are widely seen – including by the relevant research councils – as able to play a significant part in public debate, not least with government. Further strength to our public role comes from the fact that our 900 Fellows represent a remarkable range of disciplines and subject-areas. We also have leadership within the Fellowship. We have had Alan Wilson's report *Punching Our Weight*, and major contributions from Albert Weale, chair of the Research Committee, and the Treasurer, Roger Kain, as well as many Fellows in prominent public positions.



Figure 1. Professor Sir Adam Roberts, who became President of the British Academy in July 2009.

In developing an enhanced public role, we need to take into account one positive factor – the UK's standing in the humanities and social sciences; and also a more cautionary one – the hazards of the pursuit of policy relevance.

UK standing in humanities and social sciences

The standing of UK research in the humanities and social sciences is by any measure world-class (I promise you that this will be my one and only use of this over-worked term). Whether we think of improved results in the Research Assessment Exercise, or British or international

league tables, UK research in the humanities and social sciences can stand comparison with any other subject or country. The prizes and honours won by the Fellows of this Academy are a further indication.

To put the whole matter in a broader perspective and a cruder form, Britain has had a particularly high reputation internationally in two fields in recent years – financial services on the one hand, and knowledge and culture on the other. The former has taken a knock, but Britain has maintained a consistently high profile in the latter. Our serious media, our major cultural bodies, our creative flair – all are highly regarded internationally. The world still wants to come to the UK for its vibrant culture – and for its higher education. The social sciences and humanities, in all their wonderful variety, have contributed to the UK's high profile in the fields of knowledge and culture. They have a major role within our society, and in the standing of the UK internationally.

Three hazards

There is a need for caution in the pursuit of policy relevance. It is a complex, interactive and sometimes risky process. There are three obvious hazards.

First, the over-eager pursuit of policy relevance can easily lead to superficiality or worse. As Timothy Garton Ash has put it in his latest book, 'Prediction and prescription are both recipes for the dustbin. Description and analysis may last a little longer.' I well recall the acid words of my predecessor at Oxford and Fellow of this Academy, Hedley Bull, in commenting on a student's highly prescriptive essay on 'The Future of NATO': 'This essay tells me a great deal about your mind and nothing at all about the world.'

If we are to be engaged, it cannot be by expecting every written output to conclude with executive summaries and policy recommendations. It must rather be by conveying a deep understanding of human society in all its complexity, and strengthening public life socially, economically and culturally.

Second, preoccupation with policy advice can mean that other crucial aspects of the work that we do risk being ignored. The social sciences and humanities exist in part to create civic awareness, to assist the growth of an informed and critical community, and to provide many key elements of a cultured society in which, among other things, clever and intelligent people will want to live – be they students, doctors, poets, businessmen or scientists – and be they from the UK or overseas. In short, the many and various subjects on which the Fellows of the Academy and its awardholders work are part of the warp and the weft of this country, and of the wider world with which the UK engages in so many ways.

Third, although the Academy is a broad and capacious tent, there is a risk that a campaign to advance the causes of the humanities and social sciences will be seen as yet another case of academics defending their own cabbage patches and missing the larger picture. That is why it is crucial that we maintain the closest links with our counterparts in Universities UK, the Royal Society, the Royal Academy of Engineering, and other bodies. Speaking as a proud possessor of physics and chemistry 'O' levels, I intend to continue on that course. Indeed, there are substantive issues on which we can co-operate with the other learned societies – including, for example, the urgent and multi-faceted problem of climate change.

These three hazards that could arise in the narrow pursuit of policy relevance are simply hazards – of which we need to have a lively awareness: they are not insuperable objections to public engagement on a range of policy issues.

Public engagement – with partners

A significant part of the case for humanities and social sciences will consist in showing the value of these disciplines and subject-areas in shedding light on issues of the day. The British Academy is currently in discussion with a range of bodies that share an interest in the health of the humanities and social sciences, examining ways in which, severally and together, we can make the case for our disciplines and subject-areas as valuable in their own right and for the varied contributions they make to many aspects of public life. We will insist that the humanities and social sciences are not luxuries, but crucial contributors to the richness of society, to prosperity and wellbeing. The major problems that face us today, nationally and internationally, will not be solved by science and technology alone. Indeed the most intractable challenges are likely to rely for their solution on an understanding of human behaviour, of social and political change, and of intercultural understanding – all of which depend on the humanities and social sciences.

By strengthening the policy engagement capacity located at the Academy, we can give leadership and develop a powerful voice on behalf of our disciplines. I know that there is a great appetite for this from our stakeholders. Recent meetings with Government chief scientific advisers, representatives of universities, research councils, foundations and learned societies have helped to shape our thinking.

Therefore as part of a step change in the British Academy's policy engagement, I can announce today that, with support from ESRC (the Economic and Social Research Council), we plan to set up a Policy Centre at the Academy. Its concerns will include –

- **Substantive policy reports** including contributions not only to technical matters such as research assessment and funding, but also to more general topics of public interest, on which expertise in humanities and social sciences can shed light. Topics under consideration include Family/Household Patterns and Public Policy; Understanding and Influencing Behavioural Change; Constitutional Renewal; and Threats to Cultural Heritage.
- **Facilitating policy discussions:** as well as strengthening its own programme of policy relevant meetings and publications, the Academy will henceforth be convening and hosting the UK Strategic

Forum for the Social Sciences, which brings together major funders and users of research; and will develop networking opportunities for learned societies in the humanities and social sciences

A policy centre does not mean that the Academy will be seeking to take sides on controversies – although we will speak out where necessary, as we have done recently on the parlous state of foreign language learning in this country. It will not be politically partisan, not a think tank or a lobbying organisation. Nor is policy work a substitute for the other valuable activities of the Academy. Indeed, it is precisely because we are seen as an independent, and independent-minded, organisation that we are an appropriate place for a policy centre.

Changes within the Academy

What such developments do reflect is an aim for the Academy to be recognised as a source of independent, expert and authoritative advice. This has implications for how we organise our relations with the outside world. Sometimes the Academy will issue a report (as our recent paper on languages) or wish to take a view (and we have the Policy Advisory Committee, informed by input from relevant Fellows, Group and Section chairs, to oversee that); sometimes it will provide a forum where views can be exchanged; sometimes it will invite a group of Fellows to form a working group to prepare a contribution.

My approach

It may or may not be an advantage in this regard that you have elected as your President someone whose areas of academic specialism, international organisations and the laws of war, are both hideously topical. I started writing on these subjects in the 1980s when they were unfashionable, being seen by many so-called 'realists' as largely irrelevant to the conduct of international relations. Nowadays these subjects are seen as less peripheral. I find I have been in demand not just to write about them and lecture on them, but also to give evidence to parliamentary committees and to advise decision-makers of one kind or another. I've also done two stints supervising and observing elections in Kosovo and Bosnia. I often find myself in Geneva, the home of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the second home of the United Nations, and have given *pro bono* advice to both bodies.

Are such activities mainly for social sciences? I do not think so. My undergraduate training was in Modern History. The need for historical awareness in decision-making is of crucial importance, and has been sadly diminished in recent years, including in relation to Iraq and Afghanistan. Likewise, ethical issues need to remain central to decision-making.

I know that I am not alone in this Academy in having experience in advising policy-makers. A survey of Fellows earlier this year found that many had such experience. Through its funding role, the Academy also supports many more scholars whose work has similar relevance. In its conferences, workshops and forums, the Academy regularly brings together policy-makers and academics.

A British Academy Forum held on 10 July is a case in point. These Forums bring together a group, say 20–30, of invited guests from universities, Westminster, Whitehall, the media and other interested bodies, to discuss under Chatham House rules an issue of public



Figure 2. The British Academy Policy Centre was formally launched on the occasion of the British Academy Forum on ‘‘The New British Constitution’’: Democracy and Participation’ on 26 October 2009. Left: Dr Robin Jackson (Chief Executive and Secretary of the British Academy) announces the establishment of the Policy Centre. Right: Participants at the Forum included Dr Tony Wright MP, Professor Vernon Bogdanor FBA, Professor Conor Gearty (Chairman), Rt Hon Nick Clegg MP. (An edited transcript of the Forum discussion is available via www.britac.ac.uk/medialibrary/). Photos: M. Crossick/British Academy.

interest. On this occasion we discussed ‘Two Decades of Military Interventions’. The meeting exposed some different views, but there was one clear conclusion: the need for understanding of the culture, languages and history of countries in which we intervene – and yet it is precisely this that has been in short supply in much decision-making, policy execution and public debate.

Conclusion

Last year, at the AGM, Onora O’Neill master-minded the adoption by the Academy of the *Strategic Framework 2008–13*. Although I am not an unqualified enthusiast for mission statements, and nor indeed is she, this document put real substance into its central vision of the Academy’s role:

to inspire, recognise and support excellence and high achievement in the humanities and social sciences, throughout the UK and internationally, and to champion their role and value.

That remains the Academy’s role. It is the purpose for which we work together.

Although the waters are distinctly choppy, and although we face multiple challenges, I find myself now skipping a ship that is in remarkably good shape, has weathered recent storms, and is set on a course that I commend to you.

In September 2009, the British Academy established a Policy Centre, with generous matching funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The Centre will oversee a programme of work, drawing on the expertise of Fellows of the British Academy and the wider academic community in the humanities and social sciences, to shed light on policy issues.

Outputs from the Centre will include authoritative policy studies (alone and in partnership with our sister academies), topical research overviews, and policy briefings. Forthcoming work includes projects on families and electoral reform. The Centre will also carry out a range of activities, including the organisation of events, liaison with learned societies and Higher Education Institutions, and work on the impact and profile of the humanities and social sciences.

For more information, please see the Policy pages on the British Academy website (www.britac.ac.uk).

Dr Simon Griffiths (Senior Policy Adviser) and Vivienne Hurley (Head of Policy Development) may be contacted at policy@britac.ac.uk
