

Presidential Address

The Presidential address delivered by Sir Keith Thomas at the Annual General Meeting of Fellows of the Academy, held on 4 July 1997.

'The time has now arrived when I must quit the presidential chair, which indeed I would not, but for your friendly pressure, have continued to occupy so long. It has proved impossible to carry through some of the things which four years ago I had hoped to accomplish, but you are aware of the difficulties with which the Academy has to contend. One is the want of funds; another the want of a local habitation in which we can place our books and meet at times most convenient to ourselves.' Those were the opening words of Lord Bryce's Presidential Address to the Academy in July 1917.

Eighty years later, another departing president is forced to reflect wryly on how little things have changed. Of course, we have long had a local habitation and we shall shortly have a more splendid one, which, together with many other amenities, will contain a handsome library in which we can place both our own books and those which we have enabled other scholars to write. But want of private funds remains an acute problem; and in recent years it has imposed serious limits on what we have been able to do to advance the disciplines which we exist to promote.

I do not need to remind you of the inadequacy of current public provision for those disciplines, particularly for the humanities. Compare it with the national expenditure on science. This year, the research councils and associated bodies will receive £1.33 billion (of which £64.5 million goes to the ESRC). In addition, Government departments, other than the Ministry of Defence, will spend over £1 billion on research and development on science and technology, and the Ministry of Defence another £2.2 billion. Total Government expenditure on science and technology will thus be over £5.5 billion. By contrast, the British Academy's grant is £28.5 million, of which only £8 million is available for learning and research. The discrepancy is even greater when we recall that most scientific researchers, unlike their counterparts in the humanities, can look for further support outside the research councils and government departments, to industry and to the great medical charities. Meanwhile, the Higher Education Funding Council for

England (HEFCE) has recently revised the financial allocations to the universities for research, in such a way as to switch money from the social sciences and humanities to the biological sciences. The Academy has protested to the Funding Council, whose officers have listened sympathetically, and we are hopeful that that particular downward trend will be arrested.

Further deliverance may be in sight. In a few weeks' time we shall know the recommendations of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education chaired by Sir Ron Dearing, and, in particular, that section of them which relates to provision for research in the humanities and social sciences. The Academy's Council has made a detailed submission to the Dearing Committee and an Academy deputation has given oral evidence. In addition, I have corresponded with Sir Ron and been courteously received by him on several occasions.

The Academy had a number of concerns to express to the Dearing Committee. We had a minor grumble concerning the Committee's adoption of the practice, current among scientists, of using the word 'scholarship' in a debased sense: to mean not what A.E. Housman or F.W. Maitland would have meant by the word, namely the application of learning and judgment to the editing of a text or the writing of history or the resolution of an intellectual problem, but merely the practice of browsing through the journals and keeping up with one's subject. The issue may sound a trivial one, but the implication that there is an activity called 'scholarship' which is inferior to something altogether more productive, called 'research', is not trivial at all. However, our main concern was to persuade the Dearing Committee of the need for more funding for the humanities and for a mechanism which will ensure that their needs are adequately considered when the allocation of the nation's research budget is determined. The logical way of achieving this result would be the establishment of a properly-funded Research Council.

But what would such a Council look like? It would surely have to be rather different in character from the science research councils we know. They are placed firmly under the Office of Science and Technology in the Department of Trade and Industry; they are required by their mission statements to distribute their

funds in such a way as to facilitate the creation of wealth and to meet the needs of so-called 'user communities'; they have businessmen as chairmen and a substantial lay membership.

This model does not easily fit the needs of the humanities. Research in humane subjects can indeed enhance economic performance. But that is not its primary objective nor the reason why it is publicly funded. As we argued in our written submission to Dearing, 'the increasing emphasis on universities as wealth-creating and employment-training agencies tends to obscure their primary role as places where truth, knowledge and understanding are pursued, regardless of whether they directly and immediately convert into economic benefit, narrowly conceived'. We were alarmed to see that the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals has recently called for 'a national policy' for the humanities, urging that a Research Council for the Humanities and the Arts should identify 'national aspirations, needs [and] objectives'. In the same way, HEFCE is currently considering 'national need' as a criterion which might lead it to support some academic subjects rather than others. We are sceptical about so *dirigiste* an approach. Obviously, it is highly desirable that some body should monitor the proper distribution and maintenance of the library provision and information technology upon which our research depends. It is also important to ensure continuing support for research in endangered subjects, like, say, palaeography or Portuguese, and to encourage innovation in fields where lack of resources currently hampers new intellectual developments. But, ultimately, it must be for the community of scholars themselves to determine the direction of their research; and the needs of their subjects are in any case international, not national.

In short, the Academy values diversity and pluralism. We would not want a Humanities Research Council to imitate the ESRC by devising 'thematic priorities' for the humanities; and we think that either the Department for Education and Employment or the Cabinet Office would be a more suitable paymaster than the Department of Trade and Industry.

As for the composition of a Humanities Research Council, there is no need for all its members to be academics. On the contrary, it would be helpful to include a librarian, say, or a museum director or an academic publisher. But appointments from the world of business, industry and government, of the kind normal on other research councils, would surely be inappropriate. Two final points should be made about a prospective Humanities Research Council. First, it will only earn its keep if the additional money at its disposal is genuinely *new* money. To fund an HRC by

transferring to it some of the resources presently allocated either to the other research councils or to the higher education funding councils would merely be robbing Peter to pay Paul; even more so if, as is likely, the new Council is expected to provide for research in art and design as well as the humanities. Secondly, the position of the Academy has to be safeguarded. If we cease to be the main channel for the distribution of public money for research in the humanities, then we must be recognised as a national academy fully analogous to the Royal Society and funded accordingly.

Should it prove impossible to achieve all these conditions, we should prefer to do without a Humanities Research Council and to continue with the Humanities Research Board. With the HRB already in place, the extra administrative expenditure involved in setting up a new research council will need some justification. We are very content with the HRB's procedures, so carefully devised by Professor John Laver and his colleagues, and so meticulously and imaginatively followed over the past three years; and we should be happy to see the HRB's responsibilities enlarged to include advanced research in the arts.

The subject of research funding is crucially important, but intrinsically tedious. Let me turn to the more rewarding topic of the Academy as a learned society. Some sceptics might ask why these days the country needs an academy at all. After all, such bodies came into existence at a time when research and scholarly discussion were not yet concentrated within universities. Academies, as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* correctly tells us, derive from 'an age of aristocracy, when letters were the distinction of the few and when science had not been differentiated into distinct branches, each with its own speciality'. Through their royal patronage and official standing, the academies of the early modern period gave dignity and status to scholars and artists. But in the nineteenth century their influence declined, 'because of their tendency to resist new and unorthodox developments'. As a result, concludes the *Britannica*, 'it cannot be maintained that at the present day they have much direct influence on the advancement of learning either by way of research or publication'.¹

Those words were written in 1910. Since that date, universities, research councils and research institutes have proliferated and so have outlets for the publication of scholarly work. Does that mean that

¹ F[rancis] S[torr], 'Academies' in 11th edn. (1910) and (anon.) 'Academy' in 15th edn. (1985).

academies have no role to play in the modern world, other than as self-perpetuating societies of obituarists?

That question is easy to answer. In the late twentieth century, learned academies have come to perform a whole range of indispensable tasks which can be discharged by no other body. At a time when academic disciplines have disintegrated into an infinity of sub-specialisms, it is all the more important that there should be a single voice to speak, both nationally and internationally, on behalf of humane learning as a whole. When universities are almost wholly dependent on state funding and subject to ever-increasing bureaucratic scrutiny and regulation, it is essential that the voice of learning should be an independent one, free of obligation to government other than the duty to render impartial advice. When research is increasingly confined to inquiries capable of rapid completion so as to qualify in the Research Assessment Exercise, it is vital that there should be a body capable of sponsoring projects which, like the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin* or the *New Dictionary of National Biography*, are indispensable resources for us all, but involve years of gestation and unrewarded financial outlay. When subjects go their separate ways, it is only an academy which can easily promote the study of genuinely interdisciplinary topics. When a poorly-financed system of mass higher education threatens to lower standards, it is all the more necessary that academies should uphold the cause of scholarly excellence. When political circumstances make access to the academic resources of other countries very difficult, it is only a national academy which can negotiate exchange agreements to facilitate the free movement of scholars. Finally, at a time when the material rewards of the scholarly life are meagre, it is more desirable than ever that national academies should enjoy high public esteem, and, by their prizes and their elections to their fellowship, confer honour upon outstanding individuals; and in their published memoirs commemorate them when they die.

Modern circumstances have thus generated a new need for learned academies; and as a result they are currently multiplying all over the world. They constitute an indispensable reservoir of distinguished scholars and scientists, motivated by a disinterested love of their subject, free from the political pressure which makes research councils less than wholly independent institutions and the financial pressure which forces modern universities to be opportunistic and entrepreneurial. The expertise contained within an academy provides a cheap and efficient means of peer review for grant applications and appointments; it can play a crucial advisory role in national and international policy-making and debate.

I shall suggest in a moment that this Academy has still to realise its full potential. Nevertheless, our activities during the past year have been impressive enough. Out of very strong fields, we have appointed our usual complement of Research Readers, Leverhulme Senior Research Fellows and Post-Doctoral Fellows. A full and interesting programme of lectures and symposia has been arranged by the Meetings Committee, chaired by Professor Gillian Beer since its inception three years ago. We had an enjoyable symposium for our Post-Doctoral Fellows last December, while in April it was the turn of our past and present Research Readers and Senior Research Fellows to stage a highly successful meeting on *Biography and the Creative Artist*. In May there was a notable interdisciplinary Discussion Meeting at the Royal Society on *Ageing: Science, Medicine and Society*, an encouraging prototype of the sort of joint activity with our scientific colleagues which we expect to be much more frequent in the future. In October we shall have the twentieth in the excellent series of *conversazioni* organised by Professor Margaret Boden; and, later in the year, the first in a new annual series of high-profile British Academy Lectures will be given by Professor Christopher Ricks on 'Plagiarism', not a subject which the Academy exists to promote, but one in which we all have an interest.

The Publications Committee, chaired by Professor Luscombe, has been very active. Thirteen new titles have been published during the year, many of them embodying the fruits of our Academy Research Projects. A new series of monographs by Post-Doctoral Fellows has been launched and plans for publications to mark our forthcoming Centenary are well under way. Dr Marjorie Chibnall, who has selflessly edited the *Lectures and Memoirs* for the last few years, has decided that she must now relinquish the task; she deserves our warm thanks. It is a particularly satisfactory feature of our publication programme that, despite its highly scholarly character, it remains self-financing, at least in terms of the direct costs of production.

Overseas exchanges have continued under the supervision of the Overseas Policy Committee and the Foreign Secretary, Professor Supple, who will be a member of the Academy's delegation to China and Taiwan, to be led by our new President in September.

The newly established Board for Academy-Sponsored Institutes and Societies (BASIS) has been busy overseeing the implementation of last year's review of the overseas schools and institutes chaired by Sir David Wilson. There has been some mild resistance to some of the changes proposed, but BASIS has not been disposed to make any significant compromise. So long

as the Academy's expenditure on these overseas bodies (currently £2.64 million) remains rather greater than the sum available to the Humanities Research Board to support research in the whole of the humanities (£2.36 million), there will continue to be heavy pressure upon them to use their resources as cost-effectively as possible for the support of research.

It has thus been a busy and productive year, particularly since all our work has been carried out against a background of intense preparation for our new building and much political lobbying and uncertainty. Nevertheless, as I lay down my office, I hope that you will allow me to mention three respects in which we are perhaps not yet discharging our role as the national academy for the humanities and social sciences quite as effectively as we could.

The first is our relative lack of public visibility. During the past four years I have on innumerable occasions had to explain to otherwise well-informed people just what the British Academy is. I could easily understand it when I was asked that question by students or businessmen. I could also understand it, just, when I was asked the same question by a notably busy and active member of the House of Lords who seemed omniscient on every other topic. But I had greater difficulty in understanding it when, last autumn, paying my first and, as it turned out, my last visit to the then Minister for Higher Education, sitting in his office in the DfEE and flanked by a battery of civil servants, I was greeted by the Minister's opening question: 'Can you tell me: what is the British Academy?' In that particular case, I believe that it was my questioner's job to have known the answer, but in the other cases it is surely the Academy's responsibility to make the general public more aware of our existence and purpose.

Our funding position will never radically improve until informed public opinion knows what the British Academy is and, more important, respects the subjects we exist to promote and appreciates their intellectual value, their social utility, their international importance and their life-enhancing potential. In this respect, I particularly regret our inability during the last few years to launch a newsletter and to secure funding for a member of the Academy's staff whose primary responsibility would be public relations. Such a person could never make the Academy a household name, for those who are not scholars themselves will understandably find our studies difficult and remote. But I hope that we can envisage a future when the words 'British Academy' in a newspaper headline do not invariably relate either to film and television awards or, as more recently, to sport.

A painful example of the consequences of our failure to create adequate public commitment to our values is the present unhappy state of the two great national institutions which hold so many of the scholarly resources on which we depend. Confronted by severe financial problems, the British Museum apparently faces a choice between introducing entrance charges and drastically reducing its staff. The British Library's acquisitions budget has been alarmingly cut: the purchase of Western European monographs and early printed books has been severely reduced; and in 1998-9 no manuscripts at all will be purchased. The Library's conservation budget has suffered similar cuts. It will be a dark age indeed if this erosion of two of our greatest national assets is allowed to continue.

Closely related to our lack of public visibility is the difficulty we have in establishing ourselves as the acknowledged national representative of the social sciences as well as of the humanities. In our elections to the Fellowship, parity for social scientists has been achieved, as can be seen from the names of those proposed for election today. The Academy is proud that one of our Fellows, Professor Sir James Mirrlees, should have been this year's joint winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics. But whereas Britain's economists, geographers and social anthropologists are reasonably well acquainted with the Academy and its doings, the same cannot be said of sociologists, political scientists, psychologists, and students of management and education. We recently held a meeting of representatives of learned societies in the social sciences at which we explained the Academy's electoral procedures and its desire to give full public representation to the needs of the social sciences. At that meeting I said that I believed that there was no branch of the social sciences in which distinguished original work would not qualify a person for election to our Fellowship. But my remarks on this subject, as on that of the Academy's ability to represent the interests of the social sciences more generally, were received with some scepticism. Clearly there is more to be done before our leadership in this area gains general acceptance.

Finally, there is the question of our electoral procedures. They have, I think, been very considerably improved by the structural reforms introduced a few years ago. But there is still scope for further improvement. The Groups, which were originally intended to be impartial tribunals, casting a dispassionate eye upon the claims of the candidates put before them, have, I am told, tended instead to become combative arenas in which section representatives battle in defence of their own nominees. The so-called 'hybrid' Sections have not all proved satisfactory and there has been a tendency for

their candidates to be unduly advantaged in the electoral process. It is also disappointing that so few women scholars achieve election. More generally, networks of personal friendship, acquaintance and, sometimes, antipathy still have some influence upon the outcome. This is a failing to which academies throughout history have been subject and it must be strenuously resisted. Council has set up a new Structures Committee to review the present electoral procedures. It will meet in the autumn and I hope that it will succeed in doing everything that can be done to make our elections as transparent and as fair as is humanly possible.

The coming year will be an exciting one for the Academy, as we move into our new premises in Carlton House Terrace. I wish to express our warmest thanks to the many benefactors who have helped to make the move possible. Their names will be listed in our Annual Report, but I must particularly mention here Mr Lee Seng-Tee of Singapore, who, with great generosity, has endowed our Library; the Wolfson Foundation, which has assisted us with the cost of our Lecture Room; the Rhodes Trust, which has been equally munificent; the Nuffield Foundation; the Aurelius Trust; Trinity College, Cambridge, who got us started with a most generous donation; All Souls College, Oxford; St John's College, Cambridge; Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, and the other Oxford and Cambridge colleges who have followed their lead. My heartfelt thanks go out to the 334 Ordinary Fellows of the Academy who have so far responded to my Appeal, in many cases with a generosity quite out of proportion to their modest means. To date, the Fellowship has contributed a prospective total (tax relief included) of £182,685, an average of £547 per head: a splendid response. I am also grateful to those, mostly elderly, Fellows who have written me very touching letters explaining why their personal circumstances now make it impossible for them to support the Appeal in the way they would have wished. We still need more assistance, but the knowledge that so many of our number have dipped so deep into their own pockets will greatly assist the Academy in its future approaches to potential donors.

Thanks are also due to the outgoing Honorary Officers, particularly Professor Peter Haggett, who has been a wonderfully judicious and emollient Vice-President; and Professor David Luscombe, who has served for seven meticulous years as Publications Secretary; if you seek his memorial, look at the list of our publications. Professor Joe Mordaunt Crook has completed a highly constructive term as chairman of the Committee on Academy Research Projects (CARP). To all those who have served long hours on Council and on Academy committees during my time as

President I express warm thanks for their support and forbearance.

One of the greatest delights of the Presidency is that it brings one into close contact with the Academy's staff. Ferociously hard-working, but consistently good-humoured, these dedicated men and women provide the Honorary Officers with a level of service and support far greater than anyone could possibly expect. I am grateful to them all, though I must particularly thank Miss Susan Churchill, who has helped me with my correspondence, as well as sharing with me her rich appreciation of the Fellows and their idiosyncrasies. Dr Michael Jubb, the Deputy Secretary, has expertly guided me through the acronymic jungle of the higher education funding system and has genially tolerated my part-occupation of his office. As for the Secretary, Mr Peter Brown, there has scarcely been a day during the last four years when I have not sought his advice or enjoyed his conversation. He is selfless in his devotion to the Academy and he exemplifies its values. We are more fortunate than I can say to have him.

We are about to enter a key stage in the Academy's history. Soon after the Dearing Committee's announcement of its proposals for the funding of research, we shall move house. The juxtaposition of the British Academy and the Royal Society on either side of the Duke of York's Steps will offer rich opportunities for future cooperation between the two national academies, as well as providing a focus for the country's other learned societies. Recently, plans have been taking shape for a third national academy, the Academy of Medical Sciences. If all goes well, it too will join us in Carlton House Terrace. I believe that this co-location will enormously enhance the collective voice of science and learning and prove fruitful in more ways than we can possibly predict. The Academy can face the future with confidence; and it is fortunate to have as its new President, Sir Tony Wrigley, who will lead it into the twenty-first century, when a whole new range of opportunities will present themselves.

Keith Thomas