

## Presidential Address

The Presidential address delivered by Sir Keith Thomas at the Annual General Meeting of Fellows of the Academy, held on 4 July 1996.

In his *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville declares that the growth of democracy inexorably propels intellectual endeavour in the direction of those studies which are most likely to produce immediate and practical results. The love of truth for its own sake, regardless of whether it conduces to the enhancement of wealth, is, he asserts, the characteristic of an aristocratic society. In democracies, by contrast, the rewards will go to those whose discoveries are immediately applicable to productive industry.'

It has to be said that the experience of recent years offers little by way of challenge to this depressing generalisation. In contemporary Britain, the creation of wealth has become an explicit objective of all the research councils; and it is increasingly hard to secure support for research which promises nothing immediate in the way of tangible material benefit. It is true that the enhancement of what it has become usual to call 'the quality of life' is also mentioned as a proper objective of public funding, but this, inevitably rather nebulous, entity is seldom defined and in practice is usually given a highly material interpretation.

These contemporary prejudices have worked to the disadvantage of basic research in many of the natural sciences. But it is the humanities and social sciences which have suffered most. From the events of the past year, I pick out three significant indications of the low esteem in which the public, or its elected representatives, currently hold the studies which the Academy represents.

First, there was the report on 'The Research Capability of the University System', commissioned by the National Academies Policy Advisory Group (NAPAG), of which the Academy is a member. After an intensive enquiry, the authors of that Report concluded that the present university system will be unable to deliver what is being required of it. 'In particular: funding for research is not competitive by international standards; student/staff ratios allow inadequate time for research; and all aspects of university infrastructure are being dangerously eroded.' More specifically, they declared flatly that

'research in the humanities is at present not properly valued or adequately funded'.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, there was the setting up of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, to be chaired by Sir Ron Dearing. When the Academy was consulted beforehand, we pointed out that the Committee's draft terms of reference seemed to suggest that the only purpose of higher education was to achieve economic competitiveness. We were pleased to see that the final version stressed the role of higher education in developing the powers of the mind; in advancing understanding and learning through scholarship and research; in transmitting citizenship and culture in all its variety; and in enabling personal development for the benefit of individuals and society. But the Secretary of State appears to have disregarded our further recommendation that it was 'absolutely essential that at the very least one person of scholarly distinction, drawn from some discipline in the humanities or the social sciences, should be appointed to membership'. Although the Dearing Committee contains two distinguished Fellows of the Royal Society, it has no one of comparable standing in the humanities or social sciences. There have been subsequent protests, both public and private, and it is perhaps as a result of them that Professor John Laver has been added to one of Sir Ron Dearing's sub-committees. But in the House of Lords, the Minister of State, Lord Henley, agreed with one of his fellow peers about 'the dangers of the Committee[s] being seen to be a mere cosy collection of academics'; and, in a recent letter to me, the Secretary of State, Mrs Gillian Shephard, explained that there was no room for additional members, as the Committee had to be kept to a manageable size, and that anyway several of its members 'have experience of humanities and social science teaching in higher education'. This reassurance notwithstanding, the Academy's view continues to be that the Dearing Committee starts its work with a serious intellectual imbalance.

Thirdly, there is the question of the Academy's grant-in-aid. A year ago, I reported that the Humanities Research Board had made a carefully reasoned bid for an increase in the research funds at its disposal. That bid had been endorsed by Council and sent on to the Department for Education and Employment.

<sup>1</sup> *Research Capability of the University System* (NAPAG, April 1996), pp. 1, 27.

As Fellows now know, the outcome was bitterly disappointing. In November last, the DfEE announced that the Academy's grant-in-aid would be increased by only 1.4%, which, when allowance is made for inflation, is in real terms equivalent to a cut of 2.35%. The Government recognised that we should face extra costs in moving to new premises and agreed that we could meet them from the grant-in-aid. But the additional sum made available for the support of advanced research and studentships was a derisory £100,000. Worse still, we are led to expect that even the present levels of increase will diminish in future years. In a subsequent letter, the Minister of State for Higher Education, Mr Eric Forth, with whom we had earlier had a helpful discussion, wrote that he and his colleagues had concluded that 'some strongly argued cases, such as that for increasing significantly the support for humanities research, could not be accepted', because 'we regard the maintenance of tight control over public spending in the interests of the economy as a whole as of vital importance'. At a time when the political parties appear to believe that electoral advantage lies in keeping down taxation, it seems that de Tocqueville was right and that it is inevitable in a democracy that the interests of scholarship and learning will come second.

I need hardly say that I am not urging a return to an undemocratic form of government, but I am suggesting that democracies have to be educated and that until both the social utility and the life-enhancing quality of our studies are more generally appreciated, the humanities and social sciences cannot hope for much better treatment. The irony, of course, is that the Academy can do little to change public opinion on these matters without a member of staff whose primary task it is to make both government and people aware of the importance of the subjects which we profess. But unless there is an increase in our grant-in-aid, we cannot afford to employ such a person.

Yet I do not wish to strike too gloomy a note. On the contrary. Our external circumstances may be far from propitious, but internally the Academy is pulsating with life. It has had an exceedingly busy and constructive year; and there are, I believe, very good reasons for optimism about the future.

Our normal activities have continued apace. We have published scholarly volumes, staged some notable lectures and symposia, appointed Research Readers, Leverhulme Senior Research Fellows, Postdoctoral Fellows and a new Wolfson Research Professor, Professor Richard Sorabji, in succession to Professor Rees Davies. Professor Sorabji's massive project on Ancient Commentators on Aristotle is designed to

forge a missing link in the history of philosophy and his productivity as author and editor is one of the reasons why the Academy needs more library space. We have also arranged incoming and outgoing foreign exchanges, made grants to the social sciences, offered advice to many public bodies and made distinguished elections to our Fellowship.

Our main funding body, the Humanities Research Board, has had a year of consolidation. Its procedures continue to be as transparent as possible and the academic world is, I think, genuinely appreciative of the fair-minded and open way in which it makes its grants for research. Its Research Leave scheme has proved extremely popular and there are four times as many highly qualified applicants as there are awards available. Much interest has also been expressed in the new scheme for Institutional Fellowships which has been launched in conjunction with HEFCE as a means of stimulating collaborative and interdisciplinary research in the humanities. In the first round, nineteen fellowships were awarded. The funding bodies for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have subsequently agreed to join the scheme, which is therefore now open to all institutions of higher education within the UK.

Much the largest ingredient in the HRB's budget is the expenditure on Postgraduate Studentships. Competition for these has become increasingly intense. Last year there were 4,360 applications, 79% more than there were five years ago. The Board made 1,036 awards, the highest number in the history of the scheme. Yet, for the second successive year, fewer than half of applicants with first-class degrees were successful in the competition for one- or two-year awards. The severity of the competition nowadays is brought home when one recalls that, until seven years ago, the majority of awards went to applicants who did not have a first. Considering how limited are the openings in many of the subjects which the Academy represents and how poor the material rewards which nowadays await those who pursue an academic career, it is truly remarkable that so many gifted young people still wish to pursue advanced study and research. No one can envy the Humanities Research Board its task of discriminating between applicants who come from a bewildering range of universities, each with its own academic methods and programmes of study. It is not easy to identify those candidates who are most likely to make successful researchers. After all, many of today's most distinguished scholars, Fellows of this Academy included, did not get first class degrees themselves. In modern circumstances, they would probably never have been able to get started.

Last year, I was able to reassure those Fellows who had feared that Academy Research Projects would suffer as a result of having their funding transferred to the HRB. This year, I can report that the Board has continued its protective policy; in the coming year, the overall level of funding for Academy Research projects is to be increased by as much as 17%. This decision follows a series of visits of inspection to individual Academy projects made jointly with members of the Academy's own Committee on Research Projects (CARP). These visits were in themselves a happy sign of close liaison and continuing co-operation between the two branches of the Academy, while their outcome is a cheering indication of the Board's confidence in the quality of our Research Projects.

One project which has not been transferred to the Humanities Research Board is the New Dictionary of National Biography, a joint venture between the Academy and the Oxford University Press which was launched four years ago. This is a truly major enterprise. The completed work will be fifty million words long and it is estimated that by 2004, the planned date of publication, its direct costs will have amounted to £15 million (in 1996 values), of which the Academy's contribution will be £3.3 million. (Fellows will recall that, at the start of the project, the Government made an additional grant to the Academy of £250,000 per annum for this purpose.) Of the two partners it is now the Oxford University Press which bears the major financial responsibility. I would like to thank the Delegates of the Press for the equanimity with which they have shouldered this responsibility and for their willingness to absorb the greatly increased editorial and computer costs which have arisen since the budget for the project was first drawn up. The Delegates have made this huge commitment to scholarship all the more readily because of the remarkable efficiency and *élan* with which the General Editor, Professor Colin Matthew, and his team have set about their task. The work is still on schedule and publication in 2004 remains a realistic target. The outcome will be a monument of historical learning in which we can all take pride.

A major event of the year has been the completion of the Report by the Committee set up two years ago, under the chairmanship of Sir David Wilson, to review the present pattern of the Academy's provision for the overseas Schools, Institutes and Sponsored Societies. The Report is a meticulously written document of over three hundred pages and it repays careful study. Council has now accepted the Committee's main recommendations; and the new Board for Academy-Sponsored Institutes and Societies (BASIS), which will replace the old Standing

Committee for the Schools and Institutes, has been charged with putting them into effect. The Report's main message is that the Schools and Institutes deserve our continuing support and that the Academy should become more closely involved in their affairs. One important recommendation is that the Academy should seek to bring about the creation of one well-founded institute in the Middle East, with small local administrative offices as appropriate. This has its controversial aspect because it involves reuniting the British School at Jerusalem and the British Institute at Amman. Another controversial recommendation is the proposal to cease funding physical bases in Iran and Iraq, though continuing, of course, to fund research in and on both those countries. Council regards each of these recommendations as a realistic response to changing circumstances. The larger issue of the proportion of the Academy's overall research funds which should be devoted to the Schools and Institutes is one which we shall have to keep under review, particularly if our resources continue to be strained. Meanwhile the Academy owes an enormous debt of gratitude to Sir David and his team, particularly the Secretary, for whom the Report has been the year's main preoccupation.

Another of the Academy's activities to have been reviewed this year is the Postdoctoral Fellowships scheme, which has been scrutinised by a sub-committee of Council chaired by Professor Brian Barry. It is cheering to be able to report that the sub-committee concluded that the scheme has been a great success and ought to be continued. Since its beginnings in 1986, 288 Postdoctoral Fellowships have been awarded. A high proportion of their holders have gone on to academic posts and a most impressive volume of scholarly publication has resulted. Council has agreed that the scheme should continue, essentially on its present lines, but that more should be done to improve the relationship between the Fellows and their employing institutions and, in particular, to ensure that the Fellows are properly integrated into the work of their universities and are helped and supported by them. The last year has seen a considerable improvement in the way in which Fellows have been received at Oxford and Cambridge, but more still needs to be done, both at Oxbridge and elsewhere, to enable both the Fellows themselves and their institutions to derive the maximum benefit from the scheme. It is also desirable to bring Postdoctoral Fellows, present and past, closer to the Academy and its activities. In this connection, we should welcome the initiative of the Publications Committee, which has launched a scheme for the publication by the Academy of selected monographs by Postdoctoral Fellows.

A similar desire to establish closer links between the Academy and the scholars whom it directly funds underlies the intention of the Meetings Committee to organise a Symposium next year for present and past holders of Research Readerships and Leverhulme Senior Research Fellowships. The subject of the first meeting will be 'Biography'.

The Academy continues to do everything it can to safeguard the interests of the subjects it represents. Last year I mentioned the widespread anxieties which were felt about the Economic and Social Research Council's new funding policies and particularly about its decision to concentrate upon projects which related to its selected 'themes'. Many Fellows feared that this policy would lead to the neglect of both graduate training and fundamental research in other, less-favoured areas. I am glad to report that we subsequently had a helpful and constructive meeting with senior representatives of the ESRC at which these anxieties were candidly discussed. The Chief Executive of the ESRC, Professor Ron Amann, assured us that the nine selected 'themes' would, in practice, prove capacious enough to accommodate most forms of research in the social sciences; and that, though they might appear present-minded and UK-centred in character, the themes were intended to encompass both historical research and research relating to other parts of the world. In any case, a third of the ESRC's research budget would be wholly unaffected by thematic priorities. We were also told that the stress on themes would not inhibit support for Masters' courses which offer advanced training in such central disciplines as economics and sociology. Professor Amann promised that the Academy would be involved in the Council's next round of consultations and we have now been formally asked for our views upon the ESRC's current thematic priorities. This request will be referred to the standing committees of the social science sections and their opinions will form the basis of a reply which Group III will draw up for Council's approval. Meanwhile, we are content with these reassurances and look forward to collaborating with the ESRC in the advancement of those social science disciplines for which we are both responsible.

We owe a large debt of gratitude to all those who have served the Academy during the past year. The Staff, led by the Secretary and Deputy Secretary, work ferociously hard, while managing to remain friendly and accessible. No Fellow who has had anything to do with the office side of the Academy can fail to admire the efficiency and good humour of the men and women who work for us; or the clarity and elegance of the papers which they produce for our meetings. (I wish I could say the same about all

the documents which come from outside the Academy and make the agenda for Council meetings so voluminous.) Fellows also owe a large debt to the Honorary Officers, the members of Council, the Section Chairmen and all those who serve on the innumerable Academy committees for their public-spirited and unremunerated work. I particularly thank Professor Gillian Beer, who retires after two years as Vice-President, having successfully launched both Group I and the Meetings Committee; and I welcome Professor Margaret McGowan, who will take her place as Vice-President.

Above all, I am pleased that Council has so distinguished a name to put forward for election to the Presidency in a year's time. During the extensive consultations which preceded this nomination, it became clear that Sir Tony Wrigley commanded a very wide range of support, among both the social science and the humanities wings of the Academy. Sir Tony has already done sterling service as the Academy's Treasurer and we are fortunate indeed that our leadership is to be entrusted to someone who is so universally admired and respected. For my own part, I am delighted by Council's choice, as well as cheered by the thought that next year it will be time for me to give way to an older man, and one whose authority will be correspondingly the greater.

Meanwhile, I devoutly hope that this is the last Presidential Address I shall deliver in this building. Through circumstances beyond the Academy's control, there is still some uncertainty about the exact date of our move. But there is every prospect that by July 1997 we shall be installed in new headquarters at 10-11 Carlton House Terrace. The move presents us with a magnificent opportunity and a very considerable challenge, for it has the potential to transform the Academy and its activities beyond recognition. We shall, however, need substantial financial help if we are to realise that potential and we are actively seeking outside support. We have been greatly cheered by an opening donation of £100,000 from Trinity College, Cambridge; and we hope that other benefactors, both institutional and personal, will soon be found.

There is much planning to do and the complexities of the move, legal, financial and logistical, will make heavy demands on Academy officers and staff. The furnishing and decoration of a Grade I building provide an obvious challenge. One Section has already expressed a fear lest the new premises may come to resemble 'the headquarters of an aluminium company'. My own acquaintance with the aesthetic preferences of aluminium companies is too limited to enable me to appreciate the full implications of this remark, but I can assure the Section concerned that

Council's intention is to decorate the building in a style which will reflect the dignity of the Academy as well as its vitality. We shall be inviting all Fellows to help with the task by giving both money and, if they have them, appropriate furniture, pictures and books to adorn the Academy's new home.

Cornwall Terrace has numerous happy associations, but I do not think that many of us will miss the discomfort of its small and crowded meeting-rooms or the enforced intimacy generated by the narrowness of the stairs. Instead, we shall at last have premises worthy of the national academy for the humanities and social sciences. We shall have the space in which to develop our own academic and educational activities, both for the scholarly world and for a more general public. We can become the focus for the other learned societies in our area; and, with only the Duke of York's steps between us, we shall be able to collaborate much more closely and more frequently with the Royal Society. The symbolism of this juxtaposition of the two national academies in the centre of the capital is very potent. My hope is that it will serve as a reminder of the centrality to human life of the studies which we exist to foster.

*Keith Thomas*