

Presidential Addresses

The Presidential address delivered by Sir Keith Thomas at the Annual General Meeting of Fellows of the Academy, held on 7 July 1994.

Asked to assess the influence of the French Revolution upon world history, the Chinese leader Chou-en-Lai is said to have remarked that it was too soon to tell. The same may be said of some of the changes which have occurred within the Academy during the past year. But when the time is ripe to assess their significance, there is only one question which should be asked: have they helped or hindered the subjects whose interests we exist to promote?

This time last year the Academy was still adjusting itself to the disappointing news that the Government had declined to establish a Humanities Research Council. After long debate the arguments in favour of such a body had come to seem conclusive. The Academy's position as a quasi-research council had become increasingly unacceptable. It was unacceptable to the research community in the country at large, who wanted a funding body which would be more representative, both institutionally and by subject, than the Academy, which is composed of Fellows elected solely for their academic distinction, could ever hope to be. It was unacceptable to the Academy, which was founded to be a learned society, not a research council, and was far from ideally constituted to handle these additional responsibilities. It had done so, conscientiously, fairly and economically, but only at the cost of much administrative strain and the diversion of energies which could have been devoted to other purposes. Moreover, by being excluded from the research council structure, the humanities were marginalised and shut out from the process of decision-making about the national research budget. There was, therefore, general agreement that the time had come to establish a Humanities Research Council which would distribute funds in a transparent and representative manner, take part in national policy-making and set the Academy free to play a role in the humanities and social sciences analogous to that of the Royal Society in the natural sciences.

In reaction to the Government's rejection of this proposal, the Annual General Meeting of 1993 called upon the Council of the Academy and its Officers to devise some alternative means of funding research in the humanities through the Academy's grant-in-aid. In his outgoing Presidential Address, Sir Anthony Kenny, to whose keen intelligence and creative

energy the Academy owes so much, indicated that Council believed that the best way forward in the circumstances was for the Academy to set up a Humanities Research Board of its own, to operate at arms-length from Council with as high a degree of autonomy as possible. During the last year much of the energy of the Academy's Officers, Council and staff has been taken up by the creation of that Humanities Research Board. The post of part-time salaried Chairman was publicly advertised and, after stiff public competition, we chose one of our own number, Professor John Laver. To assist him, Council nominated a Board of fourteen members, who took up their appointments with effect from 1 April this year. The members have been selected to be widely representative of subjects and institutions. Eight of them were not Fellows at the time of their appointment, though one is about to become one. Five are women. It is, of course, impossible for all academic interests to be represented on the Board at any particular moment, but a regular system of rotation will mean a steady turnover in membership. Moreover, many other scholars will be members of the awarding panels which will do much of the Board's business.

To the Humanities Research Board have been assigned the allocation of grants for research, for conferences and for publication and, after this year, the administration of the postgraduate studentship scheme. The Academy will retain responsibility for grants to the Overseas Schools and Institutes, for overseas grants and exchanges and for the administration of the Research Readerships, the Leverhulme Senior Research Fellowships and the Postdoctoral Fellowships. Small grants for research in the social sciences will also remain with the Academy; they will be administered by panels chosen by the appropriate sections, augmented where necessary by outside members. We are currently holding discussions with the Economic and Social Research Council about the possibility of its transferring to the Academy the administration of its funds for small research grants. So our social sciences budget may increase.

The Humanities Research Board will be answerable to Council, which appoints its members, provides it with its funds and can set general guidelines about the ways in which those funds should be spent. The Board will make an annual report to Council, but Council will not be involved in the Board's activities during the course of the year. Obviously this

relationship between Council and the Board is potentially a delicate one, but so far all has been harmonious.

The Humanities Research Board should not be regarded as a *pis-aller*, a second-best replacement for the Humanities Research Council which we failed to achieve. On the contrary, now that we have seen the form taken by the new Science Research Councils set up under the Office of Science and Technology, with their industrialist chairman and their commitment to the creation of wealth and the needs of 'user communities', we can agree that a Research Council cast in such a mould, whatever its value for the sciences, would certainly have been highly inappropriate for the humanities. Work in the humanities seldom has direct applications for government or industry. Its contribution to the creation of wealth is at best indirect; and it does not have specific user communities, unless by 'user community' we mean the whole civilised world. So our failure to achieve a Humanities Research Council may prove a blessing in disguise. Of course, there is still the risk that, by not coming under the Office of Science and Technology, the humanities will be sidelined, since their representatives are still excluded from participation in discussions about the size and character of the national support for research. But the Department for Education has been very supportive and we shall look to it for regular assistance in the future.

Meanwhile, the Humanities Research Board starts off with a budget of £15,778,000, of which £13,721,000 is taken up by the Postgraduate Studentship scheme. Until more funds are forthcoming, its room for manoeuvre is thus extremely limited; and it is likely that the Board's creation will release more demands than it will be able to satisfy. A start, however, has already been made on a research leave scheme, which will provide replacement teaching costs for a period of from three to six months to enable university-based scholars to bring a specific piece of research to fruition. The funds available for this scheme are much less than we had hoped and the Academy has bid for a substantial increase next year. Time in which to read, think and write is what we all most need; and it is to the provision of that time that research funding should be primarily directed. Meanwhile, it will be one of the main tasks of the new Research Board to assess the financial needs of the humanities and to draw public attention to the pitifully inadequate provision currently made for them.

My impression is that the creation of the Humanities Research Board has been generally welcomed by the learned world. Within the Academy the welcome has

been more cautious. In particular, some anxiety has been expressed about the future of the Academy's own research projects under the new arrangements. The formal position is quite clear. The bestowal of the title 'Academy Research Project' will remain the business of Council, acting on the advice of the Committee on Academy Research Projects [CARP] or its successor. The funding of the project, insofar as public funds are required, will be one for the Humanities Research Board to determine; and to that extent Academy Research Projects will be in competition with research proposals coming from outside the Academy. Since the money is public money, it is only right and proper that it should be open to public competition. But there is no reason why a well-run and productive Academy project should have any reason to fear withdrawal of its funding. The Humanities Research Board will review projects' bids for funds in exactly the same way as CARP has done; and the Board has been informed by Council that it is expected to strive to provide appropriate and continuing support for the completion of the Academy's Research Projects, subject, as now, to periodic and rigorous review.

The setting up of the Humanities Research Board has been a large task, but, thanks to the extraordinary commitment of the Academy's staff, it has been achieved without any interruption of normal business. We have continued to appoint to research posts — Readerships, Leverhulme Senior Research Fellowships and Postdoctoral Fellowships; we have made research grants and conducted research projects; we have awarded over a thousand new postgraduate studentships and reformed the terms on which they are held; we have staged lectures, symposia and *conversazioni*; and we have continued to foster exchanges of British and foreign scholars and to maintain relations with foreign academies. In addition we have convened a successful meeting with representatives of learned societies to discuss ways in which it might be possible for the Academy to help these voluntary bodies and to represent their interests nationally. The Secretary and I have visited universities and addressed meetings. In his Report he will give a fuller account of these essential, but, as it were, routine activities of the Academy.

Much less routine has been the debate over the Academy's composition and methods of election. Indeed the eventual implementation of some of the chief recommendations of the Committee on Academy Structures has been, along with the setting up of the Humanities Research Board, one of the two great events of the year. After extensive and sometimes passionate discussion, both within the Sections and at its own meetings, Council finally

decided to put into effect those structural reforms which commanded the widest support within the Fellowship. These involve the establishment of Groups as an intermediary electoral body between Sections and Council; the amalgamation of some Sections and the division of another; and a limitation on the extent of cross-membership between Sections.

The object of these changes is to remedy the serious imbalances in the composition of the Fellowship which have been exposed by successive reports of the Committee on Academy Structures. It is, of course, possible to dispute the figures which that Committee has produced and indeed to question the value of any statistics on the matter. But there is no denying that the learned world has changed since the Academy's present sectional structure was established and that, as a result, an individual scholar's chances of becoming a Fellow of the Academy have in recent times come to vary considerably according to the subject which he or she happens to study. Of course, there is no reason to expect distinction to be distributed equally. We all have our prejudices and we can all think of subjects which we regard as less valuable than others or less demanding or which we think have expanded faster than the supply of really able people to practise them. In 1920, after all, the Annual General Meeting of the Academy rejected the economists' nomination of John Maynard Keynes to the Ordinary Fellowship, at the behest, according to his sponsor, of the 'archaeologists and literary people' who did not like his book and thought his election would offend the French. (Robert Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes. The Economist as Saviour, 1920-1937* [1992], 19; *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes* [Royal Economic Society, 1971-89], xvii. 164-7.) Whatever our prejudices, we all stand firmly by the principle that the sole criterion of election should be academic excellence and I doubt whether any of us really believes that the distribution of academic excellence is quite as unequal as the composition of our Fellowship would suggest. We do not really need statistics to tell us that the Academy at present is unbalanced. We all know from our own experience that there are some subjects in which the Academy is a visible presence and its Fellowship highly esteemed and others in which it is remote and barely heard of.

It would do the Academy great harm if the wider academic world were ever to lose confidence in our elections. Our international credibility and our receipt of public funding depend upon the continuing validity of our claim to represent intellectual excellence in the humanities and the social sciences wherever it is to be found. An imbalance in our membership can also skew our activities, as can be

seen from the list of our current Academy Research Projects, which, though excellent in themselves, are heavily weighted in the direction of classical, medieval and archaeological subjects, with large tracts of the Academy's territory totally unrepresented. History is full of examples of learned academies which have ossified or dwindled in importance because of their inability to move with the times.

Fortunately, the weight of opinion within the Academy has come down firmly in favour of rectifying the imbalance. I hope that Council will not be accused of having acted with undue haste, for it was as long ago as 1972 that it first set up a Committee to consider the sectional structure of the Academy, bearing in mind 'the need for the Academy's composition to maintain in future conditions a representative character in the fields of scholarship with which by its charter and traditions it is concerned'. That Committee found serious imbalances in the Fellowship, but its recommendations for change were rejected. Now, twenty-two years later, we have adopted proposals not wholly unlike those proposed on that occasion. Of course, as with any constitutional change, there is the risk that these reforms may have unintended consequences. Because of that, and because these changes are obviously controversial, Council has decided that the new arrangements must be thoroughly reviewed in three years' time. In addition we shall, later this afternoon, debate whether or not to explore further the possibility of enlarging the Fellowship.

The process of constitutional change is not over, however, for our Bye-Laws need to be brought up to date. For that purpose Council has set up a small committee, comprising Sir Robert Megarry and Professor Wiseman, with Dr Cretney as chairman, to bring forward proposals. Any Fellow with suggestions to make is invited to write to Dr Cretney.

When in 1874 Herbert Spencer declined an invitation to become a Fellow of the Royal Society, he commented on the tendency of many learned societies to become unduly preoccupied with the issue of whom to elect to membership. As he put it, 'co-operation for the advance of knowledge is the original purpose; the wearing of a badge of honour is the derived purpose; and eventually the derived purpose becomes more important than the original purpose.' (David Duncan, *The Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer* [1908], 169.) A newly elected Fellow of this Academy could be forgiven for thinking that the main purpose of Section meetings was to decide whom to put up, or not to put up, for election to the Fellowship. It is right that the business of elections

should be taken seriously, for the Fellowship of the Academy is a notable honour and should be bestowed in a discriminating way. But making such elections is our derived purpose, not our original purpose. Our primary objective is, in the words of our Charter, 'the promotion of the study of the moral and political sciences, including history, philosophy, law, politics and economics, archaeology and philology'; or, as we would say today, the humanities and the social sciences.

Now that the Academy has devolved many of its funding responsibilities to the Humanities Research Board and largely completed the task of structural reform, it can turn its attention wholeheartedly to the discharge of these primary responsibilities. Sections have already been invited to suggest ways in which the intellectual life of the Academy can be developed. But Sections are essentially electoral units. They all have matters of common concern and some function very cohesively. Others, though, are inevitably intellectual hybrids. Council therefore plans to bring forward proposals to supplement the Sections with the establishment of smaller Subject Groups which will sometimes cross sectional boundaries. The history of science is one obvious area for a subject group, but there are many others. We hope that both the Subject Groups and the Sections will generate new ideas for Academy activities. In addition, Council plans to establish a new Committee which will review the Academy's overall academic programme and offer a strategic plan for the future. It has already set up a Committee chaired by Sir David Wilson to review the work of the Overseas Schools and Institutes and the Academy's support for them.

There are many obvious ways in which the Academy might do even more to promote the interests of the subjects for which it caters. We need more research projects, over a wider intellectual area. We could develop our programme of lectures, symposia and publications, particularly on interdisciplinary topics. We should get out of London more often and hold meetings in other parts of the country. We should do more to raise public awareness of the importance of the subjects we represent and indeed of the Academy itself; for the sad truth at present is that a headline in the press about 'the British Academy' is more likely to refer to film and television awards than to Cornwall Terrace. With the encouragement of the Department for Education we have put in a bid for a new staff post concerned with public relations; and it would be good to have a regular newsletter.

Of course, the expansion of the Academy's activities will require money, not just public funds but also private ones. During the coming year, Council will be

giving serious consideration to the question of how our private funds can be augmented. We also urgently require new and better premises. Our present ones offer nothing by way of facilities to Fellows, the committee rooms are too few and too small, the office space is cramped, there is no room for new members of staff and we are under notice to vacate Canons Park by early 1996.

Above all, the expansion of the Academy's role will require the active participation of the Fellowship. If we can fully mobilise the astonishing quantity of learning and the intellectual distinction to be found within our ranks, then the possibilities are indeed infinite. Meanwhile, I hope that no Fellow will ever find any difficulty in answering the question, 'What is the British Academy for?'

As a new president, I have been disproportionately dependent during the year upon the help and advice of the Honorary Officers and the members of Council. I am particularly grateful to the two outgoing Vice-Presidents, Professor Donald Winch and Professor Peter Wiseman; the latter, on top of everything else, has also chaired the Research Fund Committee. The Academy owes a great debt to these public-spirited individuals who give up so much time and energy to the discharge of heavy but unpaid responsibilities. The staff of the Academy, by contrast, are paid, but their commitment and devotion are not of a kind which money can buy. I thank them all, most of all our Secretary, who does more than anyone to set the tone of the Academy and to keep it the civilised, humane and tolerant body which it has always sought to be.

The Presidential address delivered at the Annual General Meeting of Fellows of the Academy, held on 6 July 1995, by Sir Keith Thomas.

A year ago, I expressed the hope that, with the devolution of many of its funding responsibilities to the Humanities Research Board, and with the task of internal structural reform largely completed, the Academy would be able to concentrate upon developing its primary responsibilities as a learned society. I am glad to be able to report that the last year has indeed seen a beneficial shift of emphasis in our activities. But it is still too soon for the recent changes to have been completely digested or for their full consequences to have made themselves felt. Essentially, this has for the Academy been a year of adjustment and consolidation; and an exceptionally busy one.

The Humanities Research Board (HRB) came into existence in April 1994, when it took over the

responsibility for most of the funding programmes financed by the Government's grant-in-aid. Under the chairmanship of Professor John Laver, its members have embarked vigorously on their task, as can be seen from their first Annual Report, which was submitted to Council a few weeks ago. This Report will be distributed to all Fellows with the minutes of this Meeting, and subsequently incorporated into the Academy's own Annual Report. But I ought to draw attention here to some of the Board's main activities during the past twelve months.

The HRB has set out to be as transparent and accountable as possible. In particular, it has sought to make its procedures fair and open and to give them maximum publicity. The Chairman has addressed many universities and professional associations, while each Board member has been made responsible for maintaining links with a particular group of universities. The Board engages in extensive consultation and it publishes a regular newsletter. This policy has achieved great visibility for the Board and won wide praise. There has been an associated increase in administrative costs, as we knew there would be, but we can also point to increased expenditure on research.

Inevitably in the first year, much energy has had to be devoted to putting in place the necessary structures for the conduct of the Board's business. A pattern of committees and panels has been devised and a system of peer review for the assessment of applications. Working Groups have been set up to look into the interests of women and to examine the boundaries between the humanities and the social sciences and between the humanities and the creative and performing arts.

So far, the transfer of responsibility to the Humanities Research Board has not resulted in any great change in the pattern of Academy grants for research and publication. Despite some gloomy forebodings, neither archaeology nor the Academy's Research Projects turn out to have suffered as a result of the new arrangements. The Board has conformed to Council's instruction that it should seek to provide appropriate funding for the completion of the Academy's Research Projects, subject, of course, to continuing and rigorous review; and those Projects have duly received an overall increase in funding from £491,000 in 1994-5 to £530,000 in 1995-6, an increase which is proportionately somewhat higher than the general level of the increase in the Academy's grant-in-aid.

An important new initiative taken over by the HRB has been the Research Leave Scheme, which provides replacement costs for one term (or semester) to enable

scholars to bring a piece of work to fruition, on condition that the scholar's own institution matches the grant by paying for a second period of leave to follow immediately on the first. So far, 118 scholars have benefited from this admirable arrangement. Inevitably, the number of deserving applicants far exceeds the available funds; and more money is currently being sought from the Government to enable the scheme to be expanded.

In the coming year, the HRB will have just under £16.4 million in grant-in-aid to support its various activities. Of these, the postgraduate studentship scheme will absorb over £14 million, leaving only a little over £2 million for the support of all other forms of research, a figure, which is equivalent to roughly £250 for each of the 8,000 research-active members of academic staff in British universities. This pitiful sum has been supplemented by a further grant of £0.5 million from HEFCE, with the promise of increased amounts in subsequent years and the hope of support from the other Funding Councils, to finance a new scheme of Institutional Fellowships for collaborative, interdisciplinary research. The total available to the HRB for the support of advanced research in 1995-6 is thus £2.585 million, an increase of nearly 25% over last year, but still a tiny figure, especially when compared with the £1,281 million made available to Research Councils for the support of scientific research or even the £39.6 million at the ESRC's disposal for the support of research in the social sciences.

The HRB has therefore developed the case for raising the level of government support for research in the humanities. Council finds this case persuasive and has endorsed the HRB's bid for a substantial increase in research funds over the next three years. This bid, if successful, would have the effect by 1998-9 of quadrupling the amount of money available for research, other than postgraduate research. It remains to be seen how the Department for Education and Employment will react to this request.

Meanwhile, it seems clear that the activities of the HRB have been well received in the universities and that the openness of its procedures has been generally welcomed. Professor Laver is to be congratulated on the energy and imagination he has brought to his task. Inevitably, some minor tensions and difficulties were generated by initial ambiguities in the Academy's division of responsibility between the HRB on the one hand and Council and its committees on the other. But these teething problems appear to have been painlessly resolved. Liaison between Council and the HRB has been improved; and some early fears that the Academy would find itself standing to the Board as did Frankenstein to his

creation have proved groundless. Conversely, the Board has enjoyed freedom of operation during the year, unimpeded by any irksome intervention from Council. The HRB may have less money than a Research Council, but it has greater independence; and its activities are not constrained by the obsession with the creation of wealth which currently dominates the policies of the Research Councils.

The 1994 postgraduate studentship competition was already under way when the HRB was established, so it remained, for the last time, the responsibility of the Academy's Postgraduate Studies Committee. That Committee found itself faced by an increase in both number and quality of applicants: indeed the numbers have increased by 77% since 1990. The fact that only 982 awards could be offered, although 1,742 of the candidates had a first-class degree and 1,306 had postgraduate experience, gives some idea of the stiffness of the competition. In the event, 490 offers of one-(or two-) year awards were made and 492 of three-(or two-) year awards. In the latter case, only 41 awards were made to students without previous postgraduate experience. In other words, it has now become normal for successful candidates for three-year awards to have had prior experience of postgraduate work, often privately financed. We should be glad that so many young people wish to do advanced work in the subjects for which we are responsible, but it is abundantly clear that the increasingly fierce competition for these postgraduate studentships is going to present the HRB's selection panels with some very hard problems in coming years, particularly as the proliferation of universities has made it more difficult to measure candidates by a common standard.

Following the example of the Royal Society, the Academy has retained for itself the administration of its Research Readerships, Postdoctoral Fellowships and Leverhulme Senior Research Fellowships. We were delighted to hear this week that the Leverhulme Trustees have agreed to renew the latter scheme for another three years. The field for all these awards continues to be of very high quality and we are currently investigating ways of involving their holders in the Academy's programme of meetings.

The Academy has also remained responsible for providing financial support to the British Schools and Institutes overseas, currently at the rate of some £2.6m *per annum*. Fifteen months ago a Committee was set up under the chairmanship of Sir David Wilson to review the work of the Schools and Institutes and the Academy's provision for them. The Reviewing Committee has set itself a heavy programme of meetings and overseas visits and the Academy will wish to express its gratitude to its

members, who have devoted long hours to their task. Their main recommendations are now in draft and their report will come to Council in the autumn.

The Honorary Officers have had useful meetings during the year with Mrs Gillian Shephard MP, the Secretary of State for Education, Mr Tim Boswell MP, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, and Mr David Blunkett MP, the Shadow Secretary of State for Education. Most of these meetings have been taken up by the Academy's own business, but Council has also been much concerned by some of the consequences of the current tendency to subject universities to ever more stringent forms of accountability. In particular, we have expressed reservations about HEFCE's plans for its 1996 Research Assessment Exercise. We have pointed out to the Funding Council that its rules appear to downgrade the status of the work involved in compiling bibliographies, handbooks and similar reference works for learned societies, indispensable for the progress of scholarship though such publications are. We have also urged that account should be taken of research done for such collaborative ventures as the *New Dictionary of National Biography*, which, through no fault of the authors themselves, has to remain unpublished until after the closing date prescribed for the research assessment. In response to our representations, HEFCE has now agreed to modify the rules so as to take account of certain categories of unpublished work and to encourage individual subject panels to consider all forms of work which in their judgment is deserving of esteem.

Council, however, remains concerned about the more general effects of the Research Assessment Exercise. The current rule is that all research published by an individual over the whole six-year period of assessment (four- for the social sciences) should be credited to the institution of which he or she is a member on 31 March 1996. This has led to an undignified scramble by universities to buy in distinguished scholars from elsewhere so as to have them on their books on the key date. It has also tended to create an unhealthy separation between those who teach in universities and those who conduct research. Furthermore, the assessment exercise has encouraged much academic publication which is either premature or unnecessary or both. Very soon it may be only retired scholars, exempt from such pressures, who can afford to contemplate the production of a genuinely major piece of scholarship. In the natural and social sciences it may possibly be true that all research, however routine, is welcome, but I am quite sure that in the humanities it is infinitely more important that publications

should be high in quality than that they should be numerous. Indeed the effect of an outpouring of mediocre writing is to increase pressure on library budgets and to waste the time of other scholars, who have to wade conscientiously through the flood, for fear that they might miss an item of value. The President of the Royal Society and I plan to meet the Chairman of HEFCE in the near future in order to express our concern about some of these unintended side-effects of the Research Assessment Exercise.

The policies of the Economic and Social Research Council are also causing us some anxiety. Acting in response to government pressure for more directive programmes of research, the ESRC is currently planning to focus its funding of research projects upon selected 'themes'. We understand the thinking behind this approach, but we are concerned that it may unduly diminish the funding available for the support of original and fundamental research in the many areas of the social sciences which are not represented in the chosen 'themes'. We are also worried that basic training in all the social science disciplines may be damaged by the ESRC's plan to extend this thematic approach to the funding of post-graduate studentships, possibly for those studying taught courses as well as those doing PhDs. We have communicated these anxieties to the ESRC and are currently waiting to hear the outcome. The Academy is as concerned for the future of the social sciences as for that of the humanities and will wish to register its unease about any funding policies which threaten to cramp their free development.

During the past year Fellows have been learning to live with the changes in the Academy's internal structures which came into effect last summer: the amalgamation of some sections and the division of another; the establishment of Groups; and a limitation on the extent of cross-membership between Sections. After a general post in which all Fellows were invited to reconfirm their Section of primary allegiance, the new arrangements seem to have fallen easily into place; and, although some Fellows, I know, found them potentially unattractive, even threatening, they have adapted themselves to them with tolerance and good humour. The so-called 'hybrid' Sections are rapidly learning to function as a single unit, while the standing committees of all Sections have brought a new thoroughness to their survey of the field of potential candidates for election to the Fellowship. The Groups have rapidly justified themselves as essential elements in our electoral procedures, which have, as a result of all these changes, become fairer and more dependable. The Groups have also demonstrated their value as a forum for the expression of opinion on matters other than elections.

With these new structures in place, the Academy can now focus its attention upon the expansion of its academic activities. In order to achieve this end, a new pattern of committees has been established. The Activities Committee has a coordinating and strategic role: it meets once a year to agree an annual plan and to delegate responsibility for implementing that plan to the three subsidiary committees: the Meetings Committee, the Publications Committee and the Research Projects Committee (*alias* CARP). Those three committees have all been busy during the year.

Working in close collaboration with the HRB and responding to its stimulus, CARP has embarked on a series of joint visits to our existing Research Projects. Long-term scholarly activities, like the compilation of dictionaries and the publication of indispensable texts and data-bases, are among the Academy's most enduring achievements. These are works of fundamental research upon which successive generations of scholars will depend. CARP attaches the highest importance to them and is concerned to monitor their progress so as to ensure their speediest possible completion. CARP also wishes to broaden the Academy's portfolio by taking on new projects, particularly those which relate to the modern world and carry more involvement with the social sciences.

The Meetings Committee is investigating various ways of improving the Academy's programme of lectures and conferences and of reaching a wider audience. An innovation has been the successful one-day meeting for our Postdoctoral Fellows, which took place last December; and some promising ideas for future symposia and for joint meetings with the Royal Society have been put forward by Sections. The Committee is currently exploring ways of giving the wider public a better sense of the academic disciplines we represent by linking the Academy's lectures and meetings to programmes on radio or television.

The Publications Committee is seeking to develop a more balanced programme, paying particular attention to the needs of the social sciences and also considering the possibility of sponsoring the occasional shorter publication on a matter of topical interest. Its greatest *coup* this year is to have commissioned an informal history of the Academy, to be published in 2001, when we shall be celebrating our centenary. Fellows will be delighted to know that the author of this informal history is to be the Secretary, Mr Peter Brown.

How, you may ask, will the Secretary find the time to do that? The answer is that the Academy must help him to find it. At the moment our staff are immensely over-burdened. The operations of the Humanities

Research Board, the new and more elaborate electoral system, the review of the Schools and Institutes and the flurry of new activities have had one effect in common: they have all generated new work for the office and put our staff, and sometimes even the Honorary Officers, under almost intolerable pressure. This year some vital tasks have been delayed as a result of the new calls on staff time. Most notably, our Annual Report for 1993-4 is yet to be published; and the Committee on the Reform of the Bye-Laws, whose recommendations it had once been hoped to put before this meeting, has not yet begun work. The Academy's administrative budget has always been low for an institution of our size and our staff have always been exceptionally helpful and accessible, both to Fellows and to the general public. I am sure that the staff will continue to be helpful and accessible, but, in my view, that will only be possible if their numbers increase and our administrative budget becomes larger. Meanwhile, I know that the Fellowship will want to record its gratitude to the exceptionally able and devoted people who work here for us.

This year sees several changes in the Academy's Honorary Officers. Professor Timothy Smiley ceases to be Secretary for Postgraduate Studies. He was the first holder of that office; and he is also the last, for the administration of the postgraduate studentships scheme has now been taken over by the HRB, of which Professor Smiley is fortunately a member and of whose Postgraduate Committee he is chairman. To him, has fallen the demanding task of monitoring the competitions for postgraduate studentships and, since the number of deserving candidates always exceeded the supply of awards, the even more demanding task of defending, though with unflinching humanity, the difficult decisions which had to be made. He has established as a norm the new pattern of awards on a '1 year plus 3' basis, converting doubters and securing the confidence of the academic community. Professor Joe Trapp gives up the Foreign Secretaryship after seven years of devoted service. He has represented the Academy at innumerable meetings overseas and received countless delegations at home, with invariable tact, sensitivity and good humour, winning the gratitude and affection of many foreign scholars in the process. Professor Tony Wrigley has been Treasurer since 1989. He has rationalised the organisation of our private funds and established a firm basis for their future development. Council has benefited immeasurably, not just from his prudent and careful management of our finances, but also from his rocklike dependability and solidity of judgment.

The Academy is deeply indebted to all three Honorary Officers for the huge amount of time and energy they have voluntarily dedicated to its affairs; and I thank them most warmly. In their places we welcome Professor Barry Supple as Foreign Secretary and Mr John Flemming as Treasurer. The Vice-Presidents for the coming year will be Professor Gillian Beer, who continues for a second year, and Professor Peter Haggett, who has accepted my invitation to succeed Mr Flemming.

One of the most difficult problems in the Academy is that of how to make the actions of Council and the Honorary Officers genuinely responsive to the opinion of Groups, Sections and individual Fellows. With a Fellowship of over six hundred, it is inevitable that the Academy, like any large organisation, has to rely for its day-to-day decision-making upon a relatively small number of people. It is, of course, always possible for any Fellow to raise an issue at the Annual General Meeting. But what is also needed is a less dramatic or confrontational method of ensuring that during the course of the year Council acts in a way which the majority of Fellows regards as appropriate. Wherever possible, it is already the practice of Council to seek the views of Groups, Sections or Section chairmen. Moreover, the Secretary and I turn to knowledgeable individual Fellows for advice on particular issues on an almost daily basis. But there are many matters on which quick decisions have to be made in response to outside pressures without time for adequate consultation. In these cases, I fear that Fellows have no alternative but to rely on the good judgment of the members of Council and the Honorary Officers whom they have elected. The method of election of those persons is thus an important matter. A suggestion has been made that the responsibility for nominating candidates for Council should be transferred from Council itself to the three Groups, each of whom would nominate two members annually. This suggestion will be carefully considered by Council in due course. The main problem will be that of how to achieve a balanced membership for Council in terms of subjects, institutions and gender, when there are three separate nominating bodies and no general overview.

As for the election of the Honorary Officers, the Annual General Meeting next year will have to elect a successor to me as President. It is my intention later this year to write to all Fellows to seek their individual views on this matter. That will, I hope, help to ensure that our next President will be someone who commands the widest possible support within the Academy.

Our highest priority now is to find new premises in place of 20-21, Cornwall Terrace. The present building is much too cramped to accommodate the growing Fellowship and our greatly expanding volume of business; and we urgently need new headquarters. A month ago it seemed as if we had found the ideal solution in the shape of a distinguished building not very far away. Because it was larger than our present home, there would have been increased rent and running costs to pay, but the DFE was splendidly helpful and we were encouraged to think that we could afford it. I had confidently looked forward to concluding my address today with the news that next year's Annual General Meeting would be held in our magnificent new premises. Alas for human vanity! One sad day last month, we were informed that the landlords of the building in question had, contrary to all the expectations we had been given by their agents, suddenly and unpredictably chosen to lease the building, not to the Academy but to another party. So the search starts again, and with renewed urgency.

Painful episodes of this kind will be familiar enough to any Fellow who has ever tried to buy or sell a house. To the Academy they are less familiar and the experience has been all the more bruising. However, one of the lessons we have learned on this occasion is that the costs of acquiring and refitting new

premises, when we eventually find them, are likely to be considerable; and that it is very probable that we shall need to look for help, not just from the Department for Education and Employment, but also from private benefactors and possibly from Fellows themselves. In this connection, it is worth noting the example of our sister body, the Royal Society of Edinburgh, which a few years ago succeeded in buying its own premises outright after raising much of the purchase price from an Appeal to which the majority of its Fellowship contributed. My Scottish colleagues will forgive me if I suggest that, if that can be done in Edinburgh, it might *a fortiori* be possible to do it here.

Until new premises have been secured and a larger administrative staff recruited, there will be severe limits to what the Academy can hope to achieve. But the changes of the last few years have cleared the ground and the way is now open for us to demonstrate our vitality as the premier learned society and public representative of the humanities and social sciences. So I hope that it is with enhanced confidence that we assemble today for our annual ritual of renewal, in which we mourn our colleagues who have gone and rejoice at the election of the new Fellows with whom the future of the Academy will lie.