

The Presidential Address

Delivered at the Annual General Meeting of Fellows of the Academy, held on 1 July 1993, by Sir Anthony Kenny, PBA.

In his annual address, a President is expected to review the events in the most recent year of the Academy's history. That I shall do in due course. But a retiring President may also take the opportunity to reflect on the longer term environment within which the Academy functions. I would like to single out, as the most pervasive feature of recent years, the constant thrust to introduce into the academic community the values and structures of commercial competition.

We who are assembled here this afternoon call ourselves an Academy. We do so in emulation of the Athenian institution of which Plato was the founder and Aristotle the most distinguished alumnus. It was the common teaching of Plato and Aristotle that the greatest goods in life were non-competitive goods. Some goods, such as wealth, power, and prestige, are competitive goods: the more A has of such goods, the less there is for B and C. There are other goods which are non-competitive, such as virtue and knowledge. It is not true that the more I know, the less there is for others to know. It was the consistent teaching of the Academy that the non-competitive goods should be ranked above the competitive ones.

Our own time has seen a systematic attempt to reverse these priorities. The recent science White Paper has reformulated the missions of the Research Councils in such a way as to subordinate the pursuit of the non-competitive goods of knowledge and understanding to the creation of wealth and the enhancement of the UK's industrial competitiveness.

Competition in academic life is not necessarily a bad thing. Academics have long been competitive in the sense that they have wanted their research to be more highly valued than that of their colleagues, and have wanted their pupils to do especially well in examinations. All of us here are no doubt proud that we have been chosen from among our peers to be members of the British Academy. This kind of thing is what Plato and Aristotle would have called competition for honour. It is a less admirable activity than the pursuit of non-competitive values, such as the search for truth for its own sake. But it is not

ignoble, provided that it is kept in proportion. Examinations, peer reviews, and Academies are good things in so far, and only in so far, as they promote the values which are the real *raison d'être* of the academic life.

The new element now introduced into the national academic ethos is the element of financial competition: competition not for honour but for wealth. A generation ago, academics were much less interested in money than they are today. Of course they wanted a decent salary, and they appreciated material comfort as much as anyone. However, many of them had deliberately chosen academic life in preference to more remunerative careers which were within their grasp. Universities had statutes laying down that all professors should be paid the same salary; and professors were content with this, accepting each other as equal citizens in a republic of letters. Such statutes were good statutes; it is sad that Universities have been forced by outside pressure to repeal them.

The equality of the republic of letters has been replaced by a system in which individual academics compete with each other for perquisites, salary differentials and merit awards. It is not, necessarily, that academics have become more mercenary or avaricious. When academic merit was recognised by non-monetary means, academics did not feel that their academic worth was called in question if they were paid no more than their colleagues. Now, more and more, the self-esteem of academics is bound up with the size of their salary cheque.

Academic values are affected not only by the financial competition between individuals, but by the competition for funds between institutions. The current methodology of public funding, while intended to reward academic excellence, may actually promote a lowering of academic standards. Excellence in teaching is measured, in practice, by how many students are taught, not by how well they are taught. Academics who teach more have less time for reflection and study; yet they must write more than ever before, if their institutions are to score well in research selectivity exercises. New journals are created to absorb the new flow of articles thus generated; the circulation of existing journals becomes smaller, and their prices accordingly increase. A

vicious spiral is created as library funds become ever more inadequate to cope with the demands placed upon them.

These strains are felt throughout the higher education system, but the pressure on academic time and on libraries is felt especially strongly in the humanities. Some years ago the Academy became convinced that the most effective way to limit the damage threatened by recent developments was to set up a Humanities Research Council. Our arguments to this effect were first set out in a paper in 1990, which showed that without such a Council scholars in the humanities were at a significant disadvantage compared with their colleagues in other academic disciplines. In the intervening years, the Academy's conclusions have secured widespread acceptance in both educational and political circles.

In particular, a Joint Working Party set up by the Economic and Social Research Council and the British Academy under the independent chairmanship of Sir Brian Follett recommended decisively that there should be a Research Council for the Humanities, under the auspices of the Office of Public Service and Science.

Again, during a debate on the topic in the House of Lords on 17 February last every Peer who spoke from whatever party, with the exception of the Government spokesman, was warmly in favour of the humanities being brought within the research council structure.

On 20 May this year, however, the Government announced that it had concluded against the setting up of a Humanities Research Council. The government's decision was bad news for all those concerned with the health and development of the humanities in this country. The Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals, commenting on the new White Paper on science, published shortly afterwards, stated 'The CVCP regrets the Government's failure to support the establishment of a humanities research council (HRC). The CVCP believes that for a small investment, a separate HRC would make the funds allocated to humanities research more easily identifiable and thus protect them against other claims upon university finances. It would extend the benefits of the dual support system explicitly to the humanities, and give concrete recognition of the importance of humanities research to the nation.'

The Government's decision presented particular problems for the Academy. In recent years, but especially since taking on responsibility for the

postgraduate studentship scheme, the Academy has been acting as a *de facto* research council. The President and Council of the Academy have many of the responsibilities of the Chairman and members of a Research Council without the powers, remuneration, or support that belong with those responsibilities. The Secretary of the Academy is an accounting officer responsible to Parliament for the expenditure of public funds; yet he, like the honorary officers of the Academy, is primarily answerable, for the discharge of his duties, to the Fellowship of the Academy.

The Academy has every reason to be proud of the years in which it has discharged the functions of a humanities research council. Estimates, submitted in the wake of the Follett report, suggest that it would cost nearly £1.5m to set up a Humanities Research Council to disburse the funding which the Academy now dispenses. A large part of this would consist in rewarding appropriately those who would perform the duties which officers and fellows of the Academy now perform gratis. The nation, and in particular the humanities community, can regard the status quo as a very good bargain. But this has been purchased at the cost of great tensions within the Academy itself. It is difficult, and at times intolerable, for the same body to be both the voice of academia to government and the voice of government to academia.

The decision not to set up an HRC presented the Council of the Academy with difficult choices. It was clear that it would be futile to argue further in favour of an HRC: it must be accepted that at least for the life of the present parliament there will be no such body. One possibility which presented itself was for the Academy simply to acquiesce in the *fait accompli* and continue its present relationship with the DFE, perhaps laying down certain conditions for doing so: This course would have called into question the seriousness with which the Academy had presented the case for an HRC, and it would have reduced its role to that of an inert arm of government. Another possibility would have been for the Academy to withdraw or limit its co-operation with the Government in the distribution of humanities funding. It might, for example, have refused to operate the postgraduate studentship scheme, either with immediate effect or from a future predetermined date. This course, while it might well serve the Academy's own interests, would cause problems for the current generation of graduate students, and could well endanger the whole future of public funding for humanities research.

In the event Council decided that the interests of the humanities community would be best served by a third

course, whose adumbration owes a great debt to our senior Vice-President Charles Feinstein. It would be possible for the Academy to set up, under its own auspices, and out of its grant-in-aid from the DFE, a Humanities Research Board. Council would designate appropriate functions to such a board, appoint its members, and set its budget. The Board would however be granted as high a degree of autonomy as possible and be responsible for formulating its own policies and procedures. The membership and chairmanship of such a body should not be restricted to members of the Academy and its members should receive appropriate honoraria.

Such a Humanities Research Board of the Academy, operating at arms length from Council and the Sections, would present a number of advantages. The separation of functions would relieve officers and staff of the British Academy of burdens which have become intolerable; it would also defuse the criticism, widespread if unjust, that the Academy's Fellowship, being drawn predominately from a small number of universities, is not the appropriate body to be responsible for the distribution of research funding throughout the humanities community.

If such a Board were to be set up, the Academy's grant-in-aid would have to be increased to provide not only for the remuneration of the Board's members, but also for the necessary administrative support. Moreover, the separation of functions between the Academy as a learned Society, and its Research Board as a dispenser of public funds, might be best expressed by the physical separation of premises. The opportunity could be taken to provide for the Academy and its Fellowship premises more suited to its traditional role than those in Cornwall Terrace. This too might necessitate an increase in the grant-in-aid. Initial calculations suggest that the total extra funding necessary would be of the order of £350,000, which is of course a much smaller sum than the £1.5m hypothesised for a full HRC.

Council, at its meeting on 2 June, instructed myself and Sir Keith Thomas to explore these possibilities with the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Higher Education, and to seek the approval of the AGM for the broad lines of future policy thus proposed. Sir Keith and I presented Council's thinking to Mr Boswell at a meeting on 24 June, and our suggestions were received sympathetically, though obviously without, at this stage, any firm commitment to the additional funding which would be required to put them into effect. Later this afternoon a motion will be placed before you which will seek your support for

the strategy which Council recommends. The motion has been worded so as on the one hand to restate the Academy's support in principle for an HRC, and on the other hand to present a constructive, rather than a petulant, response to the Government's negative decision.

These are proposals for the future. In the meantime, the continuation of the present inadequate level of research funding in the humanities is a matter of urgent concern. The Chief Executive of the HEFCE, in response to the Government's statement about the research council, restated the Council's commitment to promoting research in the humanities. 'The Council in 1993-94' he stated 'will provide £75 million specifically to support research in the humanities subjects.' This is the nearest the Council has come to earmarking funds for the humanities, and I trust that all Fellows in post will strive to ensure that in their own institutions the funds intended for humanities research are used for that purpose.

The 1992 adjustments to the dual support system were designed to apply primarily to laboratory-based subjects, but there was always the danger that universities would make discriminate and general cuts of sums which could not be recouped by subjects which had no access to research council funding. A year ago I wrote to all vice-chancellors asking them to ensure that the humanities suffered no loss through a funding change which was meant to be neutral in their regard. Not all vice-chancellors were willing to give this assurance, and it is good to see the HEFCE at the present time reiterating its intention to take special measures to protect the funding of humanities research.

During the last four years one of the main issues between the Academy and the Government has been the performance of those who held British Academy research studentships. The DES, stimulated by the Public Accounts Committee, has long been concerned about the time taken by Academy award-holders to submit the theses for which they were funded. In the earlier part of my speech I have been critical of a number of Government policies concerning higher education: but on this issue, I have felt, since long before I became President, that Government had a legitimate right to be concerned and to demand reform. It was difficult to object in principle in 1990 when the Department, having fixed a target of 50% submission within four years, and having been faced with an out-turn of 30%, threatened to freeze the Academy's funding for graduate awards.

True, the Department chose an inappropriate indicator to assess the performance of Academy award-holders. The four year submission rate, however suitable it may be in respect of scientific theses, is unsuitable for dissertations in humanities subjects. Independent studies in the US and in continental Europe have shown that a typical arts thesis takes two years longer to complete than a typical thesis in the natural sciences. However, the six-year submission rate also gave ground for concern: in the years 1989, 1990, and 1991 the figures were 52%, 52% and 53%. It would have been wholly reasonable had the Department insisted that the Academy should take steps to bring the six-year rate up to 75%.

The Officers of the Academy did not believe, however, that the appropriate way to improve submission rates was to impose sanctions on institutions or departments with poor rates. This would have been particularly unfair at a time when there was clearly wide disagreement among the academic community about the nature and scope of a humanities doctorate. Instead, the Academy, jointly with the CVCP, set up a working party to make positive proposals to improve the system of postgraduate education and research in the humanities. The first and most urgent task was to reach agreement among institutions of higher education about what was to be expected of a doctoral candidate in the humanities. The second was to present concrete proposals for appropriate reforms to enable candidates to achieve these expectations in a reasonable time.

The main elements of the Working Party's proposed reforms were twofold: first, that four years funding rather than three should be made available to students in the humanities between BA and PhD; secondly, that these funds should be made available by means of two separate studentship competitions, the first to enable students with BAs to be funded for a first postgraduate qualification (whose nature was to be determined by particular institutions and departments), the second to enable students with a first graduate qualification to be funded to achieve a doctorate.

These features survive in the scheme eventually adopted by the Academy, which is now being operated in the current annual competition. The detailed proposals of the working party were considerably modified as a result of consultation with the universities and with the Academy's own Sections. The long and difficult consultative process produced a remarkable degree of consensus which was given

expression within the Academy on the day of last year's AGM. The scheme as now operated is, as a result of the consultation, a rather more untidy scheme than the one proposed by the working party. It exhibits both the strengths and the weaknesses of the politics of consensus.

It remains to be seen how well the new scheme will work in the long-term interests of scholarship in the humanities. In the short term, the Academy can be grateful for the progress made in the last four years. From a starting point in 1989 when the Academy could offer only 760 awards with a grant of £3,215, and there were threats that its funding would be frozen, we enter the present year's competition with the possibility of offering 1039 awards at £4,720. Moreover, the interim measures taken by the Academy to encourage timely completion of theses seem at last to be showing results. The six-year completion rate for the cohort of 1986 was 64%, an improvement of 11 percentage points over the previous year. If this rate of improvement is maintained during the present year, then the hypothetical target of a 75% six-year completion rate will have been achieved.

Sir Anthony Kenny
President