

The Presidential Address

It is just eighteen years since I was elected to the Academy: I feel that I have now come of age as a Fellow. Those years have been difficult ones for the disciplines which the Academy represents. Ten years ago the social sciences were the subject of deliberate and bitter attack. Now it is the humanities that are the victim, not so much of overt hostility, as of neglect and inadvertent damage.

The difficulties of the humanities arise from new policies on the public funding of research. But even to state the problem thus involves a risk of distortion. The word 'research' does not fit comfortably into the context of humanistic endeavour. It was borrowed from the natural sciences, in order to invest original work in the humanities with a scientific aura. For most such work 'scholarship' is a more appropriate title; but in the jargon of funding bodies that word has been downgraded to mean the effort to keep up with one's subject without any attempt at originality. To talk of humanities research has become unavoidable; but whoever does so must keep constantly in mind the differences between the nature of research in the humanities and in the sciences whether natural or social.

Most of us welcome the plans to offer higher education to more of the population: but many of us fear that the methods of financing the increase contain a threat to the very values which make higher education worthwhile. There is a danger that the separation of teaching funding from research funding will lead to a separation between teaching and research themselves.

One should not exaggerate the necessary connection between the two: we have all admired works written by scholars working in solitude, and we can all recall excellent teachers who somehow never completed the splendid book everyone knew they had it in them to write. But in general it was the combination of teaching and research that gave the British university environment its special character, distinct from an academy on the Soviet model or an American liberal arts college. Because of the solitary nature of much humanities research - as contrasted with laboratory team-work - it is important for scholars to keep contact with younger and fresher minds. The separation of teaching from research presents a threat to the scholarly community. In the arts there is unlikely

to be good teaching by a teacher who has lost all curiosity for research, and it will be unusual for there to be fruitful research by a researcher who has lost all contact with pupils.

We face a future in which many university teachers will be denied any real opportunity for research, because of the very heavy teaching commitments they will bear. And the selectivity exercises of the funding councils may mean that some institutions paradoxically will only be able to support research by doing too much research.

Unless the quality of teaching is to decline, the increase in student numbers must mean that individual staff spend more time teaching and less time on other activities. Thus, the new funding arrangements are tailor-made to produce bad research. The pressure to take more pupils means that teachers have less time to research; the need to achieve good research assessment ratings means that there is pressure to publish more. The upshot is that more work is being published which is written in ever shorter time. This is a recipe for the production of worthless material.

Last year significant changes were made in the dual support system. The Academy warned that these could threaten humanities if funds removed from the universities' block grants were top-sliced from all departments. The UFC, in response to our concern, notified universities that in calculating their grant from 1992-93 no cut had been made in cost centres for which there was no research council. At the request of Council I have recently written to all Vice-Chancellors seeking for assurances that they have respected the spirit of the UFC's methodology, and offering to make representation to Government about any difficulties which individual universities may have had in observing the guideline.

The UFC has also been responsive to the concern expressed by the Academy among others about the difficulties of research libraries. The Academy drew attention to them in the context of arguing for an HRC; but there are difficulties which would remain even if there were to be a research council for the humanities. Project funding, as practised in the sciences, is on a scale which is quite unsuitable for the humanities. It is at the same time insufficiently individual and insufficiently general. As an individual, a scholar in the

humanities commonly needs only a personal grant, not a team grant. On the other hand, the funding of research libraries for the scholarly community cannot be based on a project timescale. The humanities scholar when he starts research does not know what books he will need; and when he discovers what he needs it will commonly be years, if not centuries, too late to acquire those books in the bookstores. If there is to be - as there should be - a Research Council for the Humanities in this country, it will have to operate in ways which differ from the mode of operation of the scientific Research Councils.

The HEFCE has now set up a working party to address the special problems of libraries, and I have been asked to be a member of the working party. One important point to address will be the need for a national funding policy concerning the special collections - whether of books or of archives - held in universities. In the past these collections have fallen between two stools. Because they were in universities, the Office of Arts and Libraries in practice refused to fund them, regarding them as the responsibility of the DES. Because the collections were of national and international interest rather than serving local academic needs the UFC was unwilling to incorporate special funding for them in the block grants of the host universities. Now there are not just two ministries, but three, which can pass this responsibility around between each other: the DFE, the OPSS, and the DNH. It will be a task for the working party to end this game of pass the parcel and to see that responsibility for this important element in our national educational and scientific inheritance is given a clear and inescapable location.

The Academy has repeatedly argued for the setting up of a Humanities Research Council. The Academy has succeeded in persuading the Labour Party of the merits of this proposal, but as is well known the Labour Party failed to persuade the electorate of the merits of its policies. Accordingly, the Academy has returned to the task of convincing the present government of the need for a Council. The Academy's preference continues to be for a self-standing Humanities Research Council, but it has also expressed its willingness to explore the possibility of a new council with joint responsibility for the humanities and the social sciences. A joint Academy/ESRC working party was set up 'to consider the respective roles and relationships of the RC and the BA in promotion and funding of social science and the humanities; and to make recommendations'. Professors Snodgrass, Pullan and John Barrow, along with our Secretary, are the Academy members of this working party; and it is chaired by Sir Brian Follett,

who is biological Secretary of the Royal Society, and a good friend to the Academy and all it stands for.

When the new department for science was set up in the Cabinet Office under Mr William Waldegrave - the office that is now to be called the OPSS - there was some doubt about the future channel of public funding for the Academy. Would it remain under the DFE, as under the old DES; or would it move to OPSS along with the research councils? As the uncertainty seemed to reach the highest level in each of the departments concerned, Council asked me to write to the Prime Minister seeking clarification and expressing our preference for being located in the OPSS with the research councils. The Prime Minister recently replied saying that he would prefer to postpone a final decision until after the report of the Follett committee.

I continue to believe that it is essential to have a research council with responsibility for the humanities. As things are decisions of great importance for the future of research in the humanities were taken without any input from those most affected. The redrawing of the boundary of the dual support system, the abolition of the binary line, and the adoption of new funding methodologies by the UFC are all changes which have serious implications for arts scholarship. At no point while these decisions were being reached was there any consultation with the British Academy or any body with a brief to speak for the humanities.

So a research council, or something like it, is essential. But I would like to repeat what I have said elsewhere: I do not regard the research council model as being in principle the ideal context for humanities scholarship. I would prefer to see adequately funded institutions of higher education in which scholars with well-stocked libraries and access to modest research assistance facilities, freed from constraints of over-teaching and with reasonable provision for sabbatical leave, made their own decisions about the allocation of their time and energy between teaching and research. But in the present, very different circumstances, I regard a research council as an essential piece of damage limitation.

Our desire to move from the DFE to the OPSS was the logical consequence of our often expressed preference to be involved, along with the research councils, in decisions of principle about research funding. It was not in any way intended as a criticism of the officials who are responsible for us in the DES. Indeed, at a personal level, relations during the past year have been most cordial; and in the Grant-in-Aid

for 1992-93 we have good grounds for satisfaction and gratitude.

Grant-in-Aid amounted to £19,544,000, which was an increase of just over 15%. Our bid for postgraduate studentships was met in full, so that we will be able to make a full quota of 860 awards this year, with an maintenance grant at the level of £4450 now agreed by the ABRC and the Research Councils as the uniform base rate for students in all disciplines. This was the more gratifying as there had earlier been a danger that, because of the problems with submission rates in the humanities, the scholarship grant might have been frozen in money terms. Grant-in-Aid for learning and research allowed the Academy to make good the previous year's cash standstill for the schools and institutes overseas and to make them an average increase of 7.1% over the current year. Further, it enabled the Academy to fund an outstanding new project, the complete revision of the Dictionary of National Biography. A first-year grant of £25,000 has been budgeted, and a memorandum of agreement is being drawn up with Oxford University which is to administer the project with a view to eventual publication by OUP, the holders of the copyright of the existing DNB. A joint committee of Oxford University and of the Academy will oversee the project, and will shortly have its first meeting. The Academy members of the committee are Professors Crook, Luscombe, and Mathias; the Royal Society nominated Sir Arnold Burgen. Professor Colin Matthew has been appointed Director for seven years.

This has been a good year for private as well as public funding of Academy projects. The Wolfson Foundation has made a grant amounting to £116,000 per annum for five years, for the creation of two Research Professorships in the Humanities of which one is to be in history. It is hoped to make an election very shortly from among the very strong field of 69 applicants. The Leverhulme Trust has offered £510,000 for seven one-year Research Fellowships for each of the next three academic years. The Nuffield Foundation has given £50,000 to the Academy Development Fund.

The Academy has cultivated relationships with institutions of higher education and other academic and professional bodies throughout the country. Fellows will recall that in the previous two years the Academy organised meetings with the Deans of Arts of Universities to discuss matters of common concern. The Deans of Arts valued the meetings, and have now decided to take over the organisation themselves and

have meetings at regular intervals. The first was held at the Academy early in the present year.

The Secretary, Deputy Secretary and I have paid visits to many universities, and I have addressed a number of professional organisations such as HUDG, SCASS, SCONUL and CURL. In conjunction with a number of professional bodies the Academy has made representations about various unsatisfactory features of the UF funding methodology and selectivity exercises.

Relations with the Royal Society have been particularly close. The President and I joined with many others in the effort, eventually successful, to secure amendments to clauses 64 and 77 of the Further and Higher Education Bill. We were successful in persuading the Lord Chancellor to release to the PRO classified documents about German interned atomic physicists in 1945. Professor J Maynard Smith has been made Vice-President of the RS with special responsibility for relations with the Academy. Discussions are taking place about a forum for closer relationships between the Society, and Academy, the Fellowship of Engineering, and the medical colleges with a view to jointly influencing government policies on a variety of issues. The Academy and Royal Society organised a joint meeting in February 1992 on effects on research funding of changes in the dual support system. The President and I have made a joint approach to the Wolfson Trustees to establish a programme, akin to Rhodes Scholarships, to bring young scholars from Eastern Europe to Britain.

Professor Boden and I attended a well-organised and useful meeting of European academies at Stockholm in March. One subject discussed was postgraduate research training: it is instructive to find that other academies were struggling with the same problems and coming to the same conclusions. Another subject was relations between Eastern and Western academies. An irony of the present situation was that the new attitude of openness to the outside world in the east coincided with financial conditions which militated against contacts, with no money for travel or to buy books. It was agreed that the series of discussions between European academies should continue for the future, the next meeting in Paris and the one after that in London; the Royal Society was to provide a small permanent secretariat for communications between academies.

About once every six months a letter or article or feature attacks the Academy in the Press. The

complaints are always the same: the Academy is unrepresentative; that too many of its Fellows come from Oxbridge, study out-of-date subjects, and are male and old. On each occasion I have tried to respond by sorting out what is true but undamaging from what is damaging but untrue.

It is true that some institutions contribute a large number of Fellows to the Academy. This is because academic talent is not evenly distributed among universities, and Fellows are elected on individual merit, not as institutional representatives. The geographical distribution of the Fellowship does not justify charges of bias in Academy elections. Nonetheless, too great a concentration of talent in a small number of institutions cannot be healthy for the nation: and it is gratifying this year to see that thirteen institutions are represented among the Fellows newly to be elected.

What would be seriously damaging would be allegations that the Academy exhibits bias in the distribution of its funds between institutions. This allegation is sometimes insinuated behind complaints about unrepresentative membership: but once the damaging allegation is disentangled from the undamaging one, it is usually withdrawn, and certainly, to my knowledge, no evidence of such bias has ever been produced.

The Academy is also sometimes accused of bias against women. But though we would all welcome an increase in our female membership, we can take some pride in the fact that the proportion of women in elections to the Academy is about four times the proportion of women in the professoriate nationally.

The charge that the Academy is unbalanced between disciplines is a legitimate ground of concern, addressed some years ago by the Committee on Structures, but still needing further attention. Modern literature has long been held to be undervalued in the Academy. With the creation of the new Section Eighteen modern literature can now expect to have four times as many elections each year as, for example, classical literature. But the new pattern of elections will take a long time to remedy the imbalances, and can in any case only be continued if we make a change in the present Bye-laws.

I have been grateful, during the year, for the ready assistance I have received from my two Vice-Presidents. Professor Snodgrass now retires from office, as he is leaving Council. Professor Feinstein continues as senior Vice-President. I am happy to say

that Professor Wiseman has accepted appointment as junior Vice-President for the next year. In February an Order in Council brought into effect two new Bye-laws. One of these sets up the office of Secretary for Postgraduate Studies. Council will shortly nominate Professor Tim Smiley to this office: he has already rendered arduous service to the Postgraduate Studies Committee.

The other Bye-law permits the pre-election of officers. In particular it has permitted Council to nominate Sir Keith Thomas to take over as President in 1993. The succession to the Presidency was the subject of very careful and widespread consultation by Council, through Section Standing Committees. I think it can safely be said that more Fellows were involved in this consultation than in the election of any previous President. While the names of many outstanding Fellows were put forward, it soon became clear that Sir Keith commanded an unparalleled degree of support in all Sections of the Academy. In particular both humanists and social scientists wished to claim him as one of their own. It is with great personal pleasure that I will later put to the meeting, his unopposed nomination. I wish I could promise him that he will find the post as comfortable as it is honourable, but that would be difficult to say with truth. Perhaps I should distinguish. He will find that the office of President is a source of constant pride, interest, and delight; but he will find that the job of being unofficial head of a non-existent research council is far from being unmixed pleasure. But I know all Fellows will wish him well in both tasks.