

# Nationalism and the History of Ideas

**Professor John Breuilly** of the University of Birmingham summarises his *Elie Kedourie Memorial Lecture*, delivered on 27 May 1999 at the British Academy

**E**lie Kedourie treated nationalism as an idea (or 'doctrine'). This is but one way it can be approached; it can also be treated in terms of sentiments or politics. The talk considered problems with this approach. It began with the specific approach of Kedourie in his books *Nationalism* (1960) and *Nationalism in Africa and Asia* (1970). The approach in terms of 'organising ideas' was contrasted with the 'contextualising' approach to the history of ideas. The latter is generally regarded as more satisfactory but it presents problems about establishing connections in the long-run history of ideas and with the world of political action, whereas the 'organising ideas' approach does proffer certain kinds of connection.

However, these suggested connections do not work for nationalism. It was argued that both kinds of connections (ideas over time, between ideas and actions) could more effectively be established if

ideas are seen as deep answers to contemporary political problems and actions as both drawing upon and in turn further influencing those answers. This argument was developed in some detail using the example of late 18th and early 19th century Germany. Political modernisation posed intellectual problems which stimulated responses from political thinkers. These were taken up by political movements which were themselves products of the modernising process. The extent to which they succeeded was taken to confirm certain political ideas, including those concerned with nationalism.

This suggests modifications in the treatment of nationalism as doctrine. The talk concluded by noting the changing relationships between nationalism as idea, sentiment and politics when it ceases to be a novel response to modernity and instead becomes a banality of the modern epoch.

Members of the Kedourie family decided in 1993 to establish a Fund by appeal, to be administered by the British Academy, in memory of the distinguished modern historian and political philosopher, Elie Kedourie, elected a Fellow in 1975. The Fund's principal purpose was to establish an annual lecture in modern history, preference being given to subjects in Middle Eastern and modern European history, reflecting Professor Kedourie's own interests.