PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

By LORD ROBBINS

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MY first duty in addressing you on this occasion is to report an important change in the terms of our charter. For some years, in making its annual recommendations for election to fellowships, the Council has been aware that, purely for reasons of statutory limitation, it has been compelled to defer the nomination of an increasing number of candidates of full academic eligibility—a circumstance which doubtless is due partly to the mere increase of the population, partly to the very considerable extension, over the last quarter of a century, of positions offering opportunity for high academic studies. Such a position was obviously unsatisfactory: if it had persisted it would have meant that, as the years went on, the Academy would become less and less representative of the best elements in the studies in its terms of reference and hence less qualified to discharge the functions for which it was founded.

Accordingly this year it was decided to make application to the Privy Council for an alteration in our Statutes enlarging possible numbers. This application has been granted, so that whereas in the recent past the limit on the number of fellows was 200, it is now 300. I ought to say at once that this enlargement of our powers will not carry with it any lowering of our standards. It is not intended in any way to diminish the severity of the criteria of eligibility for election nor is it proposed immediately to proceed to the election of 100 additional fellows. All that is implied is that we are no longer compelled to exclude current merit merely on grounds of a statutory limitation no longer in harmony with the ability–composition of an enlarged academic population.

I now come to the work of the Academy. In my address last year I devoted considerable time to explaining and illustrating in some detail the nature of our activities in the central fields of research and publication. I propose this year to extend that

survey to certain international activities which, I suspect, are even less widely known to the general public and which in consequence are apt to receive much less recognition and support than they deserve.

One of our main functions in this sphere is to act as adviser to Her Majesty's Government and distributor of funds in respect of the various British schools and institutes abroad. There are now seven such institutions, in Athens, Rome, Ankara, East Africa, Teheran, Jerusalem, and Iraq respectively. The more senior among them, at Athens and Rome, owe their existence to independent initiative; the more recently founded have come into existence as a result of initiatives in which the Academy has taken part from the outset. But all now receive public assistance through the grant to the Academy; and it is the Academy which has the responsibility of advising the Government concerning the magnitude of the assistance to be afforded.

These institutions are in no sense propagandist bodies. Their purpose is the advancement of knowledge concerning the history and civilization of the societies amid which they work; and the activities in which they engage are essentially scholarly activities of a cultural kind which are necessarily, or most conveniently, carried out in the lands with which they are concerned. They are in no sense the agents of the British Government or the advertisers of our culture. Nevertheless I think it can be claimed that they make an outstanding contribution to international understanding at a high level. The presence in the communities in which they work of eminent British scholars, their friendly collaboration with the local academic and cultural institutions, not to mention the important contribution which many of them have made to the archaeology and history of the areas they study, are among the more agreeable episodes of international relations of this century and have done much to sustain that community of intellect, regardless of race or language, which is so important if civilization is to survive. To visit these centres with their libraries, their archaeological workshops, and their dedicated staff is to feel proud of the British contribution to this community.

But at the same time any such visit must inspire very considerable sympathy for the difficulties which attend these activities

and a certain sense of shame at the meanness of their support. The financial position of these institutions is poor. It is poor comparatively: it is humiliating to discover how much better supported are the similar institutions of certain other nations. It is poor intrinsically: the conception of such institutions developed in an age when it was perhaps reasonable to expect that they could be sustained by the labours of enthusiasts of private means, prepared to work for much less than the academic salaries which they could command in universities and suchlike institutions at home. But such days are over; and to expect comparable sacrifices from contemporary scholars is surely unfair and indeed shameful. I do not think that any independent observer could fail to conclude that the members of the staffs of these institutions are underpaid and that there are too few of them. Moreover, in recent years they have had to work in conditions of inflation; and, even if their grants were adequate at an earlier period, the purchasing power has been eroded long before any revision has taken place. In these circumstances the life of the heads of such institutions is a continual battle against rising costs which in the end tends to result in deferred maintenance, insufficient library purchases, and curtailed operations in the field—conditions which are not optimal for the pursuit of pure scholarship and which, in comparison with the better conditions enjoyed by other national institutes, tend to give an impression of the material and spiritual health of our society which may be true but is certainly not flattering.

With considerations of this sort in mind, this year the Council made a strong appeal to the Treasury for more money. This appeal was not altogether unsuccessful. At a time when, because of the financial crisis, other grants were kept stationary, we were granted an increase in this respect which at least will preserve the situation this year from further deterioration; and we were told, without any firm promises, that we might renew our application later on. I should like to express our gratitude for this consideration and to say that we shall certainly avail ourselves of the permission to renew our efforts. I will not conceal my view that, if the activity of these institutions is to continue on a basis commensurate with the requirements of modern scholarship and the place of this country in the world of learning, a most radical

revision of ideas hitherto prevailing as regards necessary finance will be absolutely essential.

Coming now to activities at home, I have first to report a most notable contribution to our permanent resources. A group of men and women who came to this country as exiles from racial intolerance and totalitarian tyranny and who have made their homes here and pursued successful careers, conceived the idea of expressing their gratitude by raising a fund for the endowment of academic activities designed to enhance the political and social welfare of the nation of their adoption. Accordingly they launched an appeal for this purpose and have announced their intention of giving the proceeds to the Academy for the foundation of an annual lecture and the provision of fellowships to enable qualified persons to undertake researches pertinent to the broad intentions of the fund. The fund, which will be called the *Thank-Offering to Britain Fund*, now amounts to over £75,000, a sum which will certainly substantially support these purposes. I should like on behalf of the Academy to express our admiration and gratitude to Mr. Victor Ross and his friends—admiration for a splendid and generous conception, gratitude for the energy and devotion with which it has been carried out. It is an episode which should surely warm the hearts of all: and touch especially those of us who as academics know from personal experience how much the cultural life of this country has been enriched and deepened by the coming into our common family of those who sought asylum from the greatest beastliness ever committed in civilized history.

In earlier addresses I have explained both the mechanism of distribution and the nature of the subjects covered in respect of our subsidies to research; it is therefore unnecessary this year for me to dwell in any detail on this branch of our activities. As you will have seen from the public announcements, we have again distributed some £38,000 to individual and collective research projects and we have subsidized learned periodicals to the extent of some £5,000. This distribution of our research grant has now become an integral feature of the year's proceedings; some of the most valuable work of the Sections is devoted to the sifting of the numerous applications we receive. I cannot think of any alternative mechanism which could ensure anything like the

same expert scrutiny; and I am clear that the modest amount at our disposal could not be more economically spent.

There is, however, one matter, briefly alluded to in my last address, on which I should like to expatiate further. The research which is subsidized by our grants is research which is not under our direct control: it is research by independent individuals; and although, in many cases, members of the Academy are involved, they are involved as individuals and not as representatives of the Academy. I make no complaint of this. It is one of our main duties to foster decentralized initiative. It would indeed be a deplorable thing if all research in the Humanities—or anywhere else—were controlled from the centre. But I cannot help thinking that it would be appropriate for the Academy, as it has long been regarded as appropriate for the Royal Society, to initiate and conduct major projects itself. In some fields at least there would be considerable advantages in comparison with any other possible arrangement, both as regards general support and as regards the continuous availability of expert supervision.

For this reason the Sections have been asked in the forthcoming year to undertake a survey of their respective subjects with a view to discovering whether, if funds were available, there would be scope for enterprises of this kind. There is no suggestion that projects should be invented where there is no serious need or where alternative arrangements would be superior. This is not a shop window inquiry, and if it is felt in any particular sphere that no important gaps exist, it is to be hoped that this will be said. But I think it would be a very singular circumstance if, over the wide field of the Humanities, there were no scope for this kind of collective action.

Now, it almost goes without saying, that if such projects were formulated there would be a need also for funds to finance their execution; and if grants to individuals and other collective enterprises were not to be curtailed, this would involve further subsidies from private or public sources. But I would not feel that an appeal for such funds would need any apology. Even with our recently enlarged resources the sums devoted to the support of pure scholarship in the Humanities are minute in comparison with what is taken for granted in other spheres of learning, let alone national expenditure as a whole. The amount spent on

physical research in a year would finance all the research needed in the Humanities for a generation. If our annual research grant were raised from the £45,000 which it now is to £100,000, it would still be an utterly negligible fraction of the annual expenditure of the central government. I personally am an economist by profession and as such I am greatly concerned with the desirability of keeping aggregate expenditure within the limits dictated by national productivity. But when I think of the objects on which tens of millions are wasted every year, I count it a reproach to the public opinion of this country that we should think twice about furnishing the comparatively trifling sums which are necessary to provide a sufficient support for those branches of art and learning which are the essential basis of humane culture.

Considerations of this sort lead directly to the very fundamental question of the *raison d'être* of the Academy as such.

When I am asked, as I am asked sometimes, what is the Academy for, my answer usually—since I am disposed to deal with questions of this sort in as concrete a manner as possible—is to refer to the Annual Report. I do not think that any candid person reading this unvarnished account of the many activities which are carried on under the supervision and inspiration of our distinguished Secretary and his indefatigable assistants, could doubt the positive value of what is done, or could fail to realize that if some such organization did not exist in this day and age, it would be necessary to invent it. But when one has satisfied oneself of the detail it is still perhaps useful to try to see things in a wider perspective and to formulate in more general terms the purposes for which we exist.

Let me begin with certain negations. I am quite clear that, whatever conceptions may prevail elsewhere, the purpose of this Academy is not to act as a censor of thought or language. We do indeed seek to foster the advancement of learning; and for that purpose we must always uphold the strictest standards of objectivity in the examination of argument and evidence and of lucidity in the expression of thought. But these are purposes which we share, it is to be hoped, with all self-respecting academic institutions and we make no claim to enforce them save by way of example. The idea fostered by Arnold's celebrated essay, of

an academy which is to act as

> . . . . . a rod
> To check the erring and reprove

is not part of our practice or our purpose.

Nor are we an organization for the distribution of marks of distinction. It is true that it is an honour, highly esteemed in the public eye, to be elected a fellow of the Academy. But the election is an election to the performance of a function rather than to a mere status. The Academy makes its elections with a view to a proper representation of that part of the world of learning for which it stands and whose interests it exists to foster. It expects of its fellows that they be available, either through the Sections or, more generally, to advise, to represent, to administer. That the discharge of these functions involves a certain public distinction is an accompanying circumstance, it is not the heart of the matter.

As I conceive it, the true function of the Academy is to represent and advance the common interests of those branches of learning of which it is composed. It represents Humanistic studies. It endeavours to advance their interests by advising governments, by raising and distributing money, by promoting lectures, publications, and certain individual and collective academic enterprises of research and compilation. No one would deny the utility to the natural sciences of the performance of functions of this sort by the Royal Society. The case is equally strong in regard to the field which we cover.

It is difficult to conceive of any civilized society in which there were no scope for a body with these functions. But, at the present day in our own society, there are at least two circumstances which render it more essential than ever.

The first is the growing fragmentation of knowledge, the tendency for the academic field to be split into more and more differentiated sections. This tendency is inevitable. It is the way that knowledge advances: it happens this way just as much in the Humanities as in Natural Science. But none the less, there persist common interests between the different sections; and unless there exists some body to represent and promote these interests, they are apt to be overlooked. Moreover, although the words inter-disciplinary co-operation and intellectual

cross-fertilization often stand for nothing but empty talk and mechanistic juxtapositions, there are still sufficient examples of non-bogus enterprises of this sort to make worth while the existence of a permanent association under whose auspices they can naturally emerge and be fostered.

The second contemporary circumstance reinforcing the general justification for our existence is the growing involvement of governments in the advancement of learning. For good reasons or bad, the private or corporate sources on which in the past this advancement depended are drying up or proving insufficient for modern needs. In any event this would be likely as a result of the tendencies of taxation in this country. It is enormously accelerated when, as has happened with us, the resources of academic institutions are impoverished by continuous fall in the purchasing power of money, itself the result of action—or inaction—on the part of government. In such circumstances, unless there are bodies, such as the Academy and the Royal Society, capable of speaking for large parts of the world of learning, then in a world where public affairs are more and more dominated by the claims of brash pressure groups, the claims of scholarship and science are likely to be dissipated in a host of minor and, from the public point of view, virtually inaudible complaints. To take a very concrete example, by means of its research grants the Academy is able to preserve the solvency of no less than twenty-six learned journals. It is impossible to believe that any direct organ of government would have the time or the inclination to receive twenty-six different representations from the societies by which they are published.

Such then are the functions which we exist to perform and such their rationale. And, descending from these speculative heights to actual achievement, I would venture to claim that our history since our foundation, as recorded in successive annual reports, provides extensive evidence of their substantial value. Much work by British scholars this century would not have been possible if it had not been for the existence of the Academy; and the recent reinforcements of our funds afford hope that this usefulness will extend. Nevertheless the needs are still very great; and if there is anything in what I have said earlier in this address concerning outstanding gaps, we have still quite a long way to go.