



THE ONE HUNDRED AND ELEVENTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Thursday 18 July 2013

President-Elect

Fellows

It is an honour and a challenge to be about to take up the position to which you have elected me. The wisdom or otherwise of your choice will become clearer over the next four years. Thank you for your confidence. I believe this is a highly significant moment to be assuming office.

Thanks to Adam, the Academy is in robust health, responding actively and thoughtfully to its many challenges. There is confidence to be drawn from the initial outcomes of the 2013 Spending Review, to which Adam has made a hugely effective contribution. The Academy's health owes much to Adam's admirable leadership, as well as to the excellent work of the Officers, Robin Jackson and the staff. Adam has taught us many things, including how much stronger and creative we are in the world if we walk arm-in-arm with the Royal Society and other academies.

As our new strategy, adopted today, makes clear, the Academy will sustain its role in support of scholarship and research – fostering excellence, bringing on the next generation of scholars, promoting (and where necessary, defending) the interests of its disciplines, taking a lead in building international links and partnerships, serving the needs of researchers. These are the traditional roles of this Academy, never more important.

The Academy's great strength is that it is an autonomous self-governing association of eminent scholars in the humanities and social sciences, elected for their distinction in research. This enables it to lead and speak on behalf of these disciplines: it is not simply a society of scholars with narrowly defined interests and functions. It is a national academy, whose commitment to excellence and independence enables it to advance the interests and values of the wider academic community, and to play a significant part in public life.

Under Adam, the Academy raised its game in shedding light on matters of public policy, in an independent and non-partisan manner. I am convinced that increasingly the Academy will be expected to play a public role, and that this is a challenge to which it should rise, with enthusiasm. My own career has been largely about scholarship with a public dimension, and in an international context. My first books were on tea in Kenya, on crime and the theory of punishment, and on the 'green revolution' in India, where I lived for 8 months in a village in Uttar Pradesh. I have followed

that village, and the lives of its families and individuals, including their tragedies and their optimism, for 40 years trying to understand the processes of development in a rapidly changing country. It has been, and continues to be, at the core of my research life and my understanding of the world. And I am very happy to record that my first ever research grant, which funded that work, was in 1974 from the British Academy.

Besides universities, I have also worked in public institutions – including the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the World Bank and HM Treasury, in each case as Chief Economist in some shape or form. I am familiar from personal experience with the vagaries of policy making processes and of the difficulties and importance of promoting the robust use of evidence. Nevertheless, the power of ideas, clearly communicated, should never be underestimated.

My work on the economics of climate change has been inspired by the urgency of responding to the two defining challenges of this century, managing climate change and overcoming poverty – they are closely intertwined. Such work may be seen as an example of a view I hold strongly – namely that the major challenges facing us are not going to be solved by science and technology alone, important though they are, but will require partnerships with disciplines in the humanities and social sciences: social, political and behavioural issues are at the core. I must emphasise tackling such issues goes beyond the social sciences: a historical perspective is vital, as is familiarity with the linguistic and cultural contexts in which people live, including their identities, values, relationships and understanding of rights and responsibilities.

My own commitment to the humanities is I trust clear: I have been a Trustee of the British Museum since 2008 and Deputy Chair since 2012. The museum, a major national and international resource, a museum of the world for the world, shows vividly the value and importance of the study of culture, history and archaeology, and how the ideas and stories reflected in its objects can inform and inspire.

I believe that we are at a historic point of change. The world faces a lack of trust in institutions and a lack of confidence in existing ideas and models: it is hungry for new insights into meaning, identity and policy. We can see this wherever we look. There is a lack of understanding and often hostility towards the way the geopolitics and the international division of labour is changing and the ways in which people and ideas are moving. There is decline in membership of political parties, a lack of public engagement in political issues, especially amongst the young. These processes are magnified and intensified by the revolution in communications and social media. A crucial part of the public political arena, the quality and quantity of questioning and the serious discussion of evidence, is shrinking before our eyes. We will all be the losers if this continues. This is, I think, a world-wide phenomenon but it is intense in the UK.

What is urgently needed is a new focus on public discussion of a host of difficult challenges. What kind of society do we seek to live in and what are the roles of individual and community responsibilities? How can we rekindle economic growth and development that can last and is responsible, that delivers through its activities and products the kind of outcomes and lives that people find fulfilling? We should drive public debate forward on issues that face us all – issues such

as ageing, migration, well-being, liberty and equity, and environment and climate change. These all require deep understanding and reflection, for which research from the humanities and social sciences is essential.

Science, engineering and medicine are vital drivers of human progress and we must celebrate, nurture, and partner with, them. However, without the humanities and social sciences we can never find serious responses to the urgent issues that trouble us. From history to psychology, economics to law, literature to philosophy and languages to archaeology, our research helps us understand what it means to be human, to try to make sense of our lives, to understand the choices we make for it, and how we interact. Above all they bring insights into our identity, what our values are and what they could be, and how we can live and change. It is for us to show the power and importance of analysis and ideas. And it is for us to show the importance of public reasoning for how we function as a society.

The Academy is about what is created by our fellows, our universities and the intellectual life of the country and the world. But we must also bring arguments of a more mundane kind if we are to sustain support. The UK economy is now around 75% services, hugely reliant on the analytical, imaginative, negotiating and communication skills which humanities and social sciences disciplines can help develop. The crucible for this learning is at universities where 65,000 UK academic staff teach these subjects, accounting for 50% of active researchers. Almost a million undergraduate students in the UK (nearly half) study humanities and social science subjects, and a further 230,000 postgraduates (around 60% of the total). These subjects attract a quarter of a million overseas students annually (nearly 60% of the total), contributing not only to the economy now but also, as many of us know from personal experience, creating international links which are vital to further research, friendships, economic relationships and international understanding. Cultural and creative industries are amongst the fastest growing in our economy. Most of the leaders in public life – government, commerce, public and private enterprises and institutions – were educated in humanities and social science disciplines.

Just as important, however, is to recognise that the humanities and social sciences are not only about prosperity, however widely and deeply understood. They are also about challenge and questioning. Sometimes being awkward; always demanding rigour and honesty; often forcing ethical issues and choices into the open. Academics and politicians have to share in the responsibility of bringing to the public table, evidence, ideas, challenge, and the best research. As access to information becomes faster and more widespread, there is a great danger its use will become more trivial and decision-making become based more and more on the polling of superficial or gut reactions based on instant impressions.

The UK faces profound and difficult challenges in the years ahead – economically, politically, socially, constitutionally – including tough decisions for public spending. Tackling these issues will require the kind of radical and thought-through responses which expertise from humanities and social science can and must provide. Leading British researchers can help us understand the choices that confront us as a society and as individuals, and how best to respond. As I have argued, the younger generation are not as politically engaged as earlier generations and it is our responsibility

to help create an intellectual environment where they feel moved to contribute their ideas, commitments and inspirations.

Let us work to raise the level of public discussion, drawing on research and reflection to set the terms of the debate, rather than allowing the questions to be set and the issues framed by the cult of the focus group or bi-partisan media campaigns. From 2014 the Academy will be launching a new programme: the British Academy Debates. These will be a series of high profile public discussions, held in London and other regional centres. They will showcase “the humanities and social sciences at work” – presenting the latest academic research and demonstrating its application across a series of topics high on the public agenda, involving participants from the media, government and civil service. But, first and foremost, the questions will be set and their analysis presented via the contributions of the best of the humanities and social sciences. The first two themes will be Ageing and Immigration: ambitious, often controversial, topics that represent grand challenges for our society, where lazy and often ill-informed views are pervasive, and on which insights from humanities and social sciences are crucial to sensible debate and decision. The aim is not to force discussion to policy conclusions or to make for or against propositions. That is not what we mean here by debates. Our purpose is to highlight and define the issues and to show what a serious discussion must tackle.

Let me emphasise that invigorated public engagement will not be at the cost of support for traditional scholarly undertakings. On the contrary: an Academy that is demonstrably dealing with major issues of the time will be an Academy that is respected, and better positioned to command support from public and from private sources to deploy for its scholarly priorities. These are tough times for public funding, and the Academy’s own operational grant from the government is falling in real terms. In my view there is no better way to make the case for our disciplines than by showing the varied contributions they make to public life and debate.

It is increasingly an important responsibility for organisational leaders to raise funds, and I expect to be engaged in fundraising to support the Academy’s activities across the full spectrum of its activities. And let us recognise that support from private sources depends fundamentally on support from the public and from public sources. We can ask private sources for support with much more conviction if the society shows through its public actions that what we do is important. The sources complement each other and it is crucial that all involved see this clearly.

Thus, as Adam did four years ago, let me summarise these thoughts with four priorities:

- Investing still more strongly in excellence in the humanities and social sciences. At the same time I hope we can deepen the sense in which excellence is understood, particularly in our universities.
- Strengthening our public engagement, not only to improve public discussion of the vital issues of our time, but also to show how our subjects can shape debate in a world that is all too often driven by the instant and the superficial.
- Help create a response to a troubling feature of our times: an intellectual and political malaise expressed as a lack of trust in institutions and a questioning of identity, values and models. It is our subjects that ought to be able to lead. I hope that as part of the Academy’s

work here we can engage more strongly with early career scholars and excite young people more generally in the exploration of ideas and their search for a deeper way of discussing their concerns and their future.

- Building funding that can support these activities by joining together public and private support, emphasising that they complement each other rather than being substitutes.”

Conclusion

Let me repeat my sense of honour at being elected to be President of this Academy. I believe that this Academy, with the support of its Fellows and staff, and confident in the value of its disciplines and its scholarly calling, must first and foremost foster the creativity of its Fellows and universities; that is at the heart of what we do. But let us also show what our special and vital community of outstanding scholars can contribute to a nation and to a world which is hungry for ideas.

Professor Nicholas Stern (Lord Stern of Brentford)
President of the British Academy