

Presidential Address

The Presidential address delivered by Sir Tony Wrigley at the Annual General Meeting of Fellows of the Academy, held on 2 July 1998.

The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, commonly known as the Dearing Committee, published its report in July 1997. The report dealt with almost every aspect of higher education in this country. Much of it was of interest variously to Fellows of the Academy because of their positions and responsibilities, but one section in particular was of importance to the Academy as an institution, that which proposed the establishment of an Arts and Humanities Research Council to be set up in parallel to existing research councils under the Office of Science and Technology.

This was one of the two issues which have absorbed the lion's share of the time and attention of the officers and Council of the Academy which, in the course of the past year, could be spared from routine matters. The other issue, of course, was the move to Carlton House Terrace from our previous premises in Cornwall Terrace. The Secretary will describe the seemingly endless complications and delays in the building work, the vicissitudes of the move itself, and the continued uncertainties concerning its final cost, but, before returning to the proposal to establish an AHRC, I should like to express the thanks of the Academy to those who were most generous in helping to make the move to Carlton House Terrace possible. We have received a particularly munificent gift from the Wellcome Trust and most welcome gifts from many other trusts or foundations, notably the Rhodes Trust, the Wolfson Foundation, the Nuffield Foundation, the Michael Marks Charitable Trust, the Rayne Foundation, and the Aurelius Trust. Our ability to enjoy the delights of a well appointed library is due to the generosity of Mr Lee Seng Tee. The Academy has benefited greatly from the willingness of many Oxford and Cambridge colleges to ease our financial problems in moving to 10 Carlton House Terrace: in Oxford, especially All Souls, Balliol, Christ Church, and Nuffield; in Cambridge, especially Christ's, Gonville and Caius, Jesus, St John's and Trinity. We have also been fortunate in receiving gifts from many individual donors, and it is with a particular pleasure that I record the remarkably high proportion of Fellows who have made gifts or taken out covenants in

favour of the Academy to ensure that the comfort and convenience of our new premises will greatly exceed what we were accustomed to in Cornwall Terrace.

The Academy has been intent upon the creation of a research council for the humanities for many years. In his presidential address of 1990 Sir Anthony Kenny reported that Council had set up a working party to consider whether the creation of a Humanities Research Council 'would be in the interests of the disciplines which the Academy exists to foster.' The working party had reported and Council 'wished to go on record as supporting the setting up of a Humanities Research Council on condition that such a Council was so constituted as to recognize the special characteristics of research in the humanities, that it was adequately funded, and that the transfer of funds to it from the Academy would leave the Academy with a role in the humanities and social sciences analogous to that of the Royal Society in respect of the natural sciences.' Thereafter in each subsequent year except one the President has returned to this issue, reporting the vicissitudes of negotiation, and the frustrations induced by government vacillation. At one stage it seemed probable that the government of the day would take heed of the arguments made by the Academy, but this did not happen, and the Academy created the Humanities Research Board in 1994 as a research council in waiting, once it became clear that the then government was unwilling to set up an HRC. In the event the HRB rapidly developed a character of its own which made it both well known and well liked in the wider academic community in this country. The new body was exceptionally fortunate to have had as its first chairman Professor John Laver, who gave it devoted and discreet leadership and was notably successful both in defining the objectives of the HRB and in increasing the funding available to the Board, though necessarily always on a relatively modest scale.

Then came Dearing. What Dearing advocated closely resembled what the Academy had initially advocated, though the constraints under which research councils operate have changed considerably in the interim. In one respect the proposals which Dearing made were particularly welcome in that he not only proposed a very much increased scale of funding for the humanities, but also based the calculation of an appropriate figure on comparison with the scale of

funding of the social sciences by the ESRC. Dearing envisaged that the proposed research council should dispose of a sum of £45m–£50m in underwriting research, of which £25m would be additional funding, the balance representing the existing funding of research studentships in the humanities transferred from the HRB. It should be noted, however, that this figure was to cover research funding not only for the humanities but also for the arts. Dearing reiterated the importance of enabling the Academy to concentrate upon paralleling for the humanities and social sciences what the Royal Society does for the biological and physical sciences, a point which had also been a key feature of the Follett report on 'The future of research funding in the humanities and social sciences'. This report was produced by a joint working party of the Academy and the ESRC in 1992. Dearing recommended that the AHRC was to reside within the structure of the Office of Science and Technology. The proposals remain in limbo in the sense that the government has yet either formally to accept or to reject the recommendations made by Dearing. It was, however, quite soon clear that the proposals were not welcome to the Office of Science and Technology. If there was to be an Arts and Humanities Research Council it would be unlikely to come into being within the umbrella of the OST.

In December 1997 the Higher Education Funding Council for England, prompted by the DfEE indicated that it would make available £8m in the year 1998-9 and £15.5m in the following year to support project-based research in the arts and humanities. It was then suggested that the Academy, as the parent body of the existing HRB, should explore with HEFCE the possibility of creating an Arts and Humanities Research Board through which these moneys and other sums, including a major contribution from the Academy, might be channelled to support research in the arts and humanities. There ensued complex discussions which have taken several months, in spite of the extreme urgency of a quick conclusion because of the deadlines implicitly imposed by the wish to bring the new organisation into being in time to dispense research moneys in the course of the year beginning in April 1998. In the last few weeks discussions have reached the stage at which HEFCE and the Academy have agreed a document which sets out Heads of Agreement describing the structure and functions of an Arts and Humanities Research Board. The Heads of Agreement were reviewed by Council at its meeting on 23 June last and were approved by Council. Until a decision has been announced by the government concerning the proposal for an AHRC made by Dearing, of course, any document concerning the nature and activities of the AHRB is necessarily provisional only.

The Heads of Agreement are quite detailed and therefore cannot be described in detail in a brief address, but the main provisions may be summarised as follows. The new organisation will have a three-tier structure. The AHRB itself, as the name suggests, has much in common with the old HRB. It will consist of a Chairman, a Chief Executive, and up to 16 members. The members will be the chairs of the Research and Postgraduate Committees, the conveners of either the research or postgraduate panels in each of eight subject areas (with the proviso that at least three of the eight shall be either research or postgraduate conveners), four lay members, and two independent academic members. I am particularly pleased to be able to announce that for an initial period of two years Professor Paul Langford will be the chief executive and that he has also agreed during the first year to take on the role of chairman in addition. Professor Langford would have succeeded Professor Laver as chairman of the HRB if that body had continued in existence on Professor Laver's retirement on 30 September next. Beneath the AHRB there will be a Postgraduate and a Research Committee on the HRB model and eight subject panels, which will once again resemble the structure made familiar by the HRB. Above the AHRB there will be a Funding Group which will meet twice a year and whose function will be to appoint the Chairman, the Chief Executive, and members of the AHRB and the conveners of subject panels, to allocate funds to the Board, and to provide broad guidance on the policies to be adopted by the Board. The Funding Group will consist of one representative of each of the three bodies which are providing the initial funding for the venture, namely the Academy, HEFCE, and the Department of Education for Northern Ireland, accompanied by an identified officer from each body, in our case the Secretary as our accounting officer. Provision is made for additional membership if other bodies also become funders.

This brings me immediately to the one aspect of the new institution which seems to me a proper cause for concern. HEFCE is a funding council for England only, and as a result any moneys deriving from HEFCE may only be expended for the benefit of scholars in England. The Academy, of course, has always been, I was tempted to say, a national body, but the adjective 'national' is now ambiguous and I should perhaps better say a body whose remit was the United Kingdom as a whole, though it is proper to point out that one very large element in the funding which has come from the DfEE via the Academy to the HRB was also restricted in a comparable fashion, since our studentship scheme is limited to students who are ordinarily resident in England or Wales. There is separate provision for students ordinarily resident in Scotland. It will be this element in our current

grant-in-aid which will in future go via the Funding Body to the AHRB. It will be recalled that the Academy's grant-in-aid in 1998-9 totals £29.307m, of which 64 per cent, or £18.817m is to be devoted to postgraduate awards.

A particularly welcome feature of the current reorganisation of research funding is the clear recognition that the future role of the Academy in relation to the humanities and social sciences will closely parallel that of the Royal Society in relation to the biological and physical sciences. The Academy will be responsible for the provision of postgraduate research fellowships, research readerships, and research professorships; for conference grants; for overseas exchange agreements; and for personal research grants, that is research grants of less than £5,000. In addition the Academy will retain its longstanding responsibility for schools and institutes abroad. It will be recalled that the HRB had assumed responsibility in 1994 for the funding of Academy research projects. These will, of course, be eligible to seek funding from the new AHRB, but during a transitional period it is important that arrangements should be made involving both the Academy and the AHRB to guard against any unnecessary disruption in existing expectations. Meanwhile Council, advised by CARP, intends to embark on a review of its policy generally in regard to Academy research projects and their funding. Some existing projects and also some future projects may be such that they are unlikely to be eligible for support from the AHRB and the Academy must formulate policy in that regard.

While giving broad support to the Heads of Agreement, Council also agreed that a memorandum should be forwarded from Council to the Funding Group setting out a number of possible causes for concern about the new arrangements. There were three principal elements in the memorandum: comments on the uncertainty arising from the fact that the AHRB, unlike the research councils, will not be a separate legal entity; some issues concerning the constitution of the Funding Group; and a proposed definition of what should be regarded as constituting research in the humanities. The first meeting of the Funding Group took place last Monday, 29 June and the memorandum was one of the agenda items.

The first issue mentioned in the memorandum proved to be one which has also been of concern to HEFCE. I anticipate that the Academy will wish to seek legal advice on some of these issues. If it should then emerge that the advice received by the two bodies were not in harmony, it was agreed that they should be addressed as a matter of urgency.

The second issue relates principally to the membership of the Funding Group. The Group consists essentially of representatives of those bodies which contribute to the funding of the AHRB, though there is provision that SHEFC and HEFCW should send observers to meetings of the Group, since it is hoped that in due course they will join in as funders. The memorandum made reference to the provision which vested the chairmanship of the Group in one of its members, and expressed a preference for an independent chairman of high public standing, or, if, alternatively, it were clear that the principal burden of decision making would rest with the AHRB, that it was equally important that when, in succession to Professor Langford, a new chairman of the AHRB was appointed, he or she should be a prominent, independent figure to safeguard the integrity of the Board and to raise its public profile.

The Funding Group, it will be recalled, appoints the chairman, the chief executive, and the members of the AHRB, and the conveners of the panels. It will receive an annual report from the AHRB and determine such high-level issues as management cost targets, the indicative division of overall funding between the arts and humanities, and comparable policy issues, but the function of the Funding Group will not extend to matters of academic policy. These are the province of the AHRB. It was agreed when the Funding Group held its first meeting that chairmanship of the Group will rotate among its members, but that the chairman of the AHRB, when a successor to Professor Langford comes to be appointed, should indeed be a prominent, independent figure.

The third issue raised in the memorandum from Council to the Funding Group, the distinctions to be made between research and advanced work in the arts and humanities, was agreed to be a matter essentially for the AHRB, which will come into existence formally on 1 October next. The memorandum itself contained a proposed definition of research in the humanities and this will no doubt be considered by the AHRB when it first meets. Much of the time of the first meeting of the Funding Group, incidentally, was taken up with the interim arrangements to be made between now and next October which are necessary to ensure that the research community is made aware of the new opportunities for research funding as expeditiously as possible.

It is most encouraging to be able to report that the DfEE has informed the Academy that the sum of £2.5m which is currently spent annually on research by the HRB will be made available to the Academy to enable it to develop its role as a learned society. This sum is in addition to those elements of our grant-in-aid which

have supported the activities of the Academy proper in recent years, and therefore represents a very substantial boost to the resources at our disposal. Council has embarked on a review of the possible combinations of enhanced activities which will be made possible in the new circumstances from 1999-2000 onwards, having regard to the functions, paralleling those of the Royal Society, which I listed earlier. For the first time, incidentally, the Academy may also be able to appoint an information officer with a brief, among other things, to improve 'the public understanding of the humanities and social sciences', once again in parallel with the similar functions performed by the Royal Society for the sciences.

Issues to do with the AHRB have absorbed a very large fraction of the time of the officers of the Academy. In consequence less progress has been made in some other directions than it was hoped might prove feasible at the outset of the year. The Structures Review Committee had intended to complete its work in the course of 1997-8 and to have reported to Council. It rests with Council to accept such a report or to modify it as seems best. But, although sections of such a report exist in draft, the report as a whole is not yet ready to be discussed by the committee itself, which in turn means that Council has yet to receive it. Each of the review exercises conducted by the Academy in recent years has involved first defining the nature of the information judged to be relevant to the identification of appropriate Fellowship election quotas for each Section, and then embarking on the collection and analysis of the considerable quantity of statistical data required. In parallel with this aspect of the exercise each successive committee has sought to obtain from Sections and from individual Fellows their views on a range of possible reforms.

Much has been done in relation to both these aspects of the task by the current committee, but pressure of time and other commitments have prevented the collection and tabulation of data from being brought to completion. This in turn has delayed the completion of a draft report to be considered by the committee. Nevertheless some of the main features of the report are clear. For example, the key criterion by which the appropriate benchmark entitlements for election should be calculated will be the number of staff in the 1996 RAE exercise in Units of Assessment rated 4 or higher. There will be recommendations on issues such as the disciplinary coverage of the Academy, cross-membership between Sections, the routine business of Sections other than elections, and the possibility of reducing the number of Groups from three to two, one for the humanities and one for the social sciences. As in the previous comparable exercises information will be presented relevant to

what is usually referred to as the golden triangle question, and to the composition of the Fellowship by sex and age. An important general issue which has surfaced in the course of the work of the committee is the question of what constitutes the minimum viable size for a Section. It is a straightforward matter to calculate the number of Ordinary Fellows (that is Fellows under 70 years of age) which a Section might expect to contain given any particular annual frequency of election and an assumption about the average age at election. There must a total of Ordinary Fellows in a Section beneath which the Section cannot be regarded as being in a healthy condition or well able to meet its obligations, though it is as yet a matter for discussion what such a total should be.

The National Academies Policy Advisory Group (NAPAG) was created in 1992. It consists of the four presidents and four other senior officers of the Academy, the Royal Society, the Royal Academy of Engineering, and the Academy of Royal Medical Colleges. Chairmanship of NAPAG rotates between the presidents of the four academies. The secretarial support necessary for the venture has been provided principally by the Royal Society. It was conceived as a body to which the government or other bodies might turn for authoritative and independent advice on a wide range of topics, all or most of which were of interest to each of the four bodies. It would operate by creating from time to time ad hoc committees to produce reports which, it was hoped, would then attract wide notice. In several instances the reports which have been produced have been of outstanding quality and have not passed unnoticed. Nevertheless, it has become apparent that the venture has not fulfilled the hopes which were invested in it when it was set up, and NAPAG agreed in 1997 to initiate a review of its structure and activities by a committee chaired by Sir Denis Rooke with four other members, Professor Tony Atkinson, Professor Alastair Bellingham, Sir Martin Rees, and Professor Ian Shanks.

The review was presented by Sir Denis to a meeting of NAPAG in May of this year. In my view, the report confirmed the value of periodic external review. Often a prime merit of such an exercise is that it makes it easier for an institution to do what it well knows should be done but is reluctant to put in train without securing what can be regarded as 'objective' advice. The Rooke report represents an exception in this regard, since the thrust of the report was to suggest that NAPAG should either greatly enhance the resources put into its joint research exercises or accept that the experiment had not been successful: 'double or quits' as the options were described in one section of the report. In the event all the academies concerned reacted similarly, believing that it would prove

valuable for the senior officers of the four academies to continue to meet regularly using NAPAG as a forum as in recent years, but not to devote additional resources to the body and its activities, at least in the foreseeable future. One might summarise the academies' reaction by describing their attitude as a wish to see NAPAG continue on a care and maintenance basis. The opportunity regularly to discuss matters of mutual interest or concern was thought helpful, and the academies may continue from time to time to commission studies as in the past where there appears good reason to do so. Two other points may be noted. It is probable that the word 'Advisory' in the title of the body will be changed to 'Analysis' (the National Academies Policy Analysis Group) and the newly formed Academy of Medical Sciences will replace the Academy of Royal Medical Colleges as a member of the Group.

One of the most exciting of the possibilities opened up to us by the increased resources which will become available to the Academy from 1999-2000 onwards is the opportunity to increase the scope of our overseas links. In September of last year I was a member of a small Academy delegation which visited China and Taiwan principally in order either to renew exchange treaties which already existed or to agree them for the first time. China remains a country where an individual scholar is very greatly assisted by the existence of an exchange scheme. Indeed, without one scholarly activity is sure to be greatly restricted. This was until recently the case also in many other countries which lay behind what we had become accustomed to call the Iron Curtain before the astonishing events of 1989. For several decades a high priority had to be given to the negotiation of agreements of this type and to ensuring that they operated in a reasonably satisfactory fashion. This took up much of the time and energy of the Foreign Secretary, the Overseas Policy Committee, and the international relations department of the Academy. As a result the range and nature of contacts with academies in other countries was not as extensive as might be thought ideal. It is very much to be hoped that in a new era, and, with the benefit of the increased resources shortly to become available to the Academy, there will be a new urgency in exploring ways of creating and confirming such links. For example, in this country we have seen how valuable conferences jointly sponsored by the Academy and the Royal Society can be. Similar international meetings might prove to be of equal value, ensuring that, over a period of time, a wide cross-section of individual Fellows would draw benefit from our international activities.

In closing I know that I shall be expressing the views of all Fellows present here today when I pay tribute

both to the high quality of the staff of the Academy and to their exemplary willingness to meet the varied and severe burdens put upon them, sometimes by circumstances wholly or mainly outside our control. Any year in which an institution abandons its existing premises in favour of a new location is likely to involve exceptional calls on the time, patience and understanding of staff, and if, in addition, there is both an increasing volume of ordinary business and a number of demanding extraordinary items to be dealt with, it must be clear that pressures will be acute. I am thinking especially of the work related to the bringing into being of the Arts and Humanities Research Board but many other new developments contributed to the heightened demands made upon everyone in the Academy. Despite this, I believe it to be true to say that Fellows and honorary officers continued to receive courteous and well thought out support to the point where I am tempted to say that if mistakes were made it would be more likely to be an evidence of misjudgement on the part of the honorary officers, Council, or the Fellowship than the product of any deficiency in the advice which we have received. In helping to ensure that this was so, we owe a particular debt to the two most senior members of the Academy staff, the Secretary and the Deputy Secretary.

The past year has been challenging, but by providing us with premises far better in keeping with our needs than any which we have previously occupied, by helping to clarify the nature of the future role of the Academy, and by bringing the promise of significantly increased resources, it has also proved to hold promise for the future. By this time next year much that is at present still subject to uncertainty will have grown clearer. Rapid change is unlikely to be free from disappointments, but I hope that next year at this time it will be possible to report that many things which are at present only aspirations will have taken shape in forms profitable to the Academy.'

Tony Wrigley