

MEMORANDUM BY THE PRIME MINISTER.

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congressus
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G. H. M

10. 4. 07

I concur in the view that no money can, in existing circumstances, be given to the British Academy. But, as I do not concur in the views expressed in the Treasury Memorandum to which both the Chancellor of the Exchequer and Sir George Murray refer me, it may be desirable to express briefly my grounds of dissent.

The Memorandum incidentally takes objection to the mode in which the Academy is recruited. No doubt there are objections to co-optation. It may, for example, offer temptation to jobbery; although when, as in the case of the Academy, the only privilege acquired by an unworthy member appears to be that of paying ten guineas entrance fee and a three guinea annual subscription, the virtue of the ordinary citizen ought not to prove unequal to the strain. However this may be, co-optation is the system of election commonly adopted by other learned Societies; it certainly seems better either than universal suffrage, nomination by the First Lord of the Treasury, or even Civil Service Examination; and the Academy do not lose any claim they may possess to public support by following the general example.

The fundamental error, however, of the Memorandum appears to me to lie in this:— It seems to be taken for granted that an Academy dealing with a whole group of subjects is not required because these subjects are already separately dealt with by a variety of more specialised Societies. This is, I think, a superficial view of the case. If it constitutes an objection to the Academy, it is an objection at least equally valid against the Royal Society. There is, so far as I know, no important branch of scientific study which has not at least

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one Society - in some cases more than one Society - specially devoted to its furtherance. The Mathematical, Chemical, Geographical, Geological, Botanical, Astronomical, Entomological, and Physical Societies will at once occur to every one. Nor are these insignificant Corporations without scientific status. On the contrary, they carry on a great and necessary work, which the Royal Society (to which their most distinguished members also belong) could scarcely perform unassisted, although strictly within its sphere.

The overlapping, therefore, of which complaint is made, is inevitable both in the case of the Royal Society and the Academy. Nor is it, on the balance, to be regretted. If there were but one Society occupied with natural science, the organisation would be insufficient for the work to be performed. If we had nothing but a collection of Societies, each occupied with a special scientific subject, there would be no co-ordination and no common meeting-ground for men of science. Either of these alternatives is open to greater objection than the existing system; and the Academy represents an effort to apply that system to the sciences with which the Royal Society is unwilling to deal.

An attempt is made in the Memorandum to shew that the Royal Society is more worthy than the Academy of Treasury support because "the objects which science has in view are practical". I suggest that, in the main, the Royal Society (as we know it) is occupied with the discovery of the laws of nature, not with their utilitarian application.

The idea of seeking advice from the Academy on literary matters with which the Government may be concerned is treated in the Memorandum as an absurdity. With this

I cannot wholly agree. It is true, no doubt, that British Governments do not greatly concern themselves with these matters, and I am quite ready to believe that the Treasury, as at present constituted, is thoroughly competent to make a comparison of the relative importance of such undertakings as the publication of Leibnitz's works and the support of an Archaeological School at Rome - to take two of the instances mentioned in the Memorandum. But these conditions may not be eternal; and, should they cease, it may prove as useful to the Government to be able to consult a body representing a large group of studies, but bound exclusively to none, as to pursue the present more haphazard practice. In other words, they may put the Academy to the same kind of use that, in certain circumstances, they put the Royal Society.

The writer appears to be of opinion (see the Treasury Minute No.6242) that the Academy has arisen out of an "attempt to transplant the French Institute to an alien soil". Unless I am greatly mistaken, this is a total mis-reading of the facts.

The Academy represents an endeavour to do for other branches of learning what the Royal Society has so successfully done for Physical Science, and which it was originally intended to do for the Sciences in general. Had the Royal Society felt itself able to carry out the design of its founders, no Academy would have been needed. It decided, however, to restrict its activities to the fields which it had in practice cultivated, and to leave untouched much of the ground mapped out in its original Charter. Whether this decision was right or wrong, I do not venture to pronounce. But, in any case, it was not in the French Institute that the Academy has sought
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its model, but in the Royal Society. It represents no attempt to carry out what the writer of the Minute describes as the impossible task of "grafting French lucidity and logic on to English public life", but only an effort to copy in other regions of learning a Society of purely English growth, which has a longer history than four out of the five branches of the French Institute, and a more glorious history than any.

Personally, I have always been doubtful whether the Academy will be able, even with the lapse of time, to conquer a position at all resembling that now actually held by the Royal Society. But that, if this should happen it would be a great national advantage, I have no doubt at all, and I shall therefore like to see it given all due encouragement. In the meanwhile, however, it seems to me clear that if we have any money to expend upon Science and Learning, it is more required by such Institutions as the Natural Physical Laboratory even than by the Academy.

I therefore concur in the refusal which it is proposed to give to their request.

(Intd.) A. J. B.

April 7th, 1904.