PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

By PROFESSOR OWEN CHADWICK

12 July 1983

We are very glad that Her Majesty visits us later today: the first visit from a reigning monarch in our history.

Under its charter the Academy has the duty to promote the study of the moral and political sciences, including history, philosophy, law, politics and economics, archaeology and philology.

In 1952 Sir Mortimer Wheeler, as he describes in his book on the Academy's history, arranged for the funding of the British Schools and Institutes abroad to be administered through the Academy, and at the same time for a substantial addition to our research grant.

In 1962, following a survey of the needs of the humanities by a distinguished group from our number, the government agreed to make substantial further resources available and entrusted their distribution to the Academy. In the following year my predecessor Lord Robbins—to whom our sympathy goes out today in his illness—announced the creation of our Research Fund Committee and used these words:

> Whether or not there is to be a separate Council in connection with Social Studies—a matter which is now the subject of special consideration—the British Academy is now the chosen instrument in all other branches of the humanities. We regard this both as a great honour and a great responsibility.

In 1977 we undertook the administration, with additional funds, of the Small Grants Scheme in the Humanities. Most recently of all, we have been invited to undertake another great extension of our activities—a subject which has been the subject of debate in the Fellowship during the past year and will come before you in substance later in this meeting.

A question has been asked even before the subject-matter of that motion was raised. Put in its most challenging form it is—'Should the Academy become a Research Council for the Humanities?'

The first answer to that question is that like is not compared with like. A research council is a body whose members are

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appointed by government: eminent, distinguished, independent, but still appointed by government. The Academy is, and by virtue of its charter, must remain, a self-constituting Fellowship, election to which is based on individual distinction as judged by colleagues.

No one doubts that the function of supporting research in the humanities needs to be performed. That milestone is far behind us. Our grants for research now run at well over a million pounds a year. These grants play an indispensable part in sustaining the humanities at a time when it is hard to know where else to look for such help. Those who have been concerned in assessing such applications, or even look through the list of the grants we make, cannot fail to be impressed by the high standards, the diversity of subject-matter, and the range of institutions they exhibit.

It would be regrettable if we were to shrink from that part of our present work. By fostering research in this way we run risks because any responsibility carries with it a possible burden which at times might become onerous. Yet to shrink from it would be regrettable from our private viewpoint. To regard the Academy as a selecting or co-opting body is not a trivial function because it makes for high standards. But we also have the duty to try to reach out to benefit the study of the humanities in this country; and in some essential areas it is hard for those who want to benefit the humanities to know where to look except to ourselves. Partly perhaps by an historical accident, we have acquired expertise in this area and a reputation for even-handed recognition of merit achieved or of promise on its way to maturity.

To shrink would also be regrettable from the point of view of the public interest. The tradition of British scholarship has been free. In the circumstances of our age most good things need subvention from the public purse if they are to prosper; and mercifully for the standards of our nation we have never been plagued by Philistine attitudes in government; in the Department of Education and Science, in the University Grants Committee, or in any other of the public bodies which have been concerned with these matters. Those humane attitudes in government, of whatever party, are attitudes for which we cannot cease to be thankful. In that free philosophy of higher education which has marked our society and nation, the free institutions like ourselves and our godmother the Royal Society, have come to play an integral part. And it is well to remind ourselves that in some other countries governments try to dictate the kind of history which shall be written, or the kind of philosophy which alone may be taught at the public expense. When we remind ourselves of such circumstances, we see how

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happy are the circumstances which have so far consigned the area of public support of research in the humanities to the guidance of a body of free scholars which reflects, and is bound to reflect, many different points of view.

I mentioned that responsibility carries risks. If the needs of our nation and society turn in our direction we need to be sure that we can perform what we may be asked to do without corruption of our nature, without turning into a different animal from what we were created to be. But if it is only a question of procedures, about most of them there is nothing particularly sacrosanct. It would be ridiculous and irresponsible to avoid doing good to the humanities solely because somebody would have to take time thinking out how best we could do that good.

With regard to the subject of postgraduate studentships, it is odd to anticipate an item of the agenda but it fits naturally here. The first thing is that this did not arise out of any initiative of ours. It came to us out of the blue, in an invitation from the Secretary of State; and it must be said that the invitation showed a confidence in us and respect for our judgement for which we may be grateful. Naturally, we felt that we have to look at the problem with due care, and were resolute that it should not affect our essence or our proper work. Sections had two opportunities of debating it with the material available to Council before them. The great majority of sections have reported in favour of pursuing the proposal, and Council commends the course proposed without a dissentient voice. That is the basis of the proposal which is to be made to you at a later item. The fact is, we have a chance of doing some good to higher studies in the humanities and since that is what we are in business for, Council felt that, whatever hesitations some of them might feel, it must be right to pursue the proposal.

One result of these newer activities is to bring us into a closer relation, though still a very indirect relation, with the universities. We are no sort of body that ought to try to interfere in the policies or decisions of individual universities. But in present circumstances we can at times help a little. The Readership scheme has been widely welcomed in universities. We expect to resume it next year. And we were able to help, and hope in future to be able to help a little more, with advice on what are oddly called New Blood posts. I express the gratitude of Council to those members of the Academy, chairmen of sections and others, who have helped us, and not only us, with valuable recommendations, often at very short notice and large expenditure of time. In particular, one of our Vice-Presidents in the year just ending, Professor H. W. R. Wade,

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generously accepted an invitation from Council to chair a small committee on both these matters of Readerships and New Blood. The conclusions of this committee are expected to come forward before long.

John Carswell has been our Secretary for six years and this is the last Annual General Meeting which he will service. From the first years of the Academy the Secretaryship has been held by men of distinction and Sir Mortimer Wheeler made it an eminent office. John Carswell came to us after a distinguished career in the Civil Service, latterly as Secretary of the University Grants Committee. He has had more know-how in coping with the ministries of government, and indeed with the passage of bills through Parliament, than any of our previous Secretaries; and at times like the last few years, ending with our problems during this last session over the original draft of the National Heritage Bill, his know-how has been of lasting benefit. In a way his appointment was a recognition of the growth of our business and the enlargement of our horizons, and of the need for someone who knew his way about the various territories, hitherto unknown, into which we need to tread. He had the duty of finding premises where the staff could do their work adequately and so giving us for the first time a self-contained home of our own. In the other main developments—Readerships, New Blood posts, publications programme, the work of the Overseas Schools—he has taken a close and informed interest. In addition, we have had the service of a man who showed in his own scholarly publications that he well understands what is first-class work in the humanities. All of us who have worked closely with him have come to feel for him not only admiration but affection. He is not going out of the office today and we shall have the benefit of his experience for nearly three months more. We wish him and his wife, therefore, a very happy retirement, with more time for those scholarly concerns which are never far from his thoughts. But I wanted to say now, in all your names, thank-you.

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