

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

By SIR DENYS PAGE

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MY first duty this evening is to say something about what is in our minds when we reflect upon the departure of Mr. Derek Allen from the office of Secretary. When I contemplate the relation of our Secretary to his President, his Council, and the Fellows at large, I find the closest parallel in Greek mythology: President and Council are Zeus and the Olympian gods, at ease in the sky above, indulgent in nectar and ambrosia without a care; the Fellows at large are heroes and demigods, privileged among the inhabitants of the pleasant earth; the Secretary is Atlas, on whose unwearied shoulders the whole structure rests. In all seriousness, we should reflect for a moment on the immensity of the burden, both of work and of responsibility, which is nowadays imposed upon our Secretary. Mr. Allen entered office on 1 January 1969. Four and a half years may seem not a very long time; but they have been years of extraordinary expansion, with consequent multiplication of responsibilities and of administrative duties. I shall not attempt to discuss or even to outline these in full: but it should be mentioned that at least a third of our Major Research Projects and Academy Committees date from Mr. Allen's period; our network of foreign contacts has become huge and complex; our annual grant from the Department of Education and Science has risen from £294,000 to £467,000; we have a new Institute in Afghanistan, and our Secretary has played a very important part in the planning of others in Egypt, Jordan, and Singapore. No praise can be too high for the smooth, efficient, and amiable manner in which these floods of activity have been channelled and controlled by our Secretary and his small but infinitely devoted staff during these years. I should like to say to Mr. Allen on behalf of the Academy, that we are deeply grateful to him, and that we shall always remember his years in office as a period of great initiative and progress and efficiency.

The search for a successor to Mr. Allen was undertaken during the year with a lively sense of the extreme importance of the outcome. Much work was done; from time to time some despondency was experienced. Then, quite suddenly, we focused our gaze upon Dr. Neville Williams, and with instant

unanimity agreed that our problem was solved. In Dr. Williams we welcome a scholar of distinction, an administrator of long experience, and a man in all ways, we believe, ideally suited to the post of Secretary of the British Academy. We wish him a successful and enjoyable term of office. It would not at all surprise me if he found himself quite soon engaged in turning us out of Burlington House into new premises. I said last year that our staff needs a new structure and more room; this year I will modify that judgement only by saying that we need much more room, and that it would have been to our advantage to have had a staff-structure capable of retaining instead of losing the services of Miss Alexandra Wiggin.

Before I leave these personal topics I must draw attention to another resignation. Sir Roy Allen, our Treasurer for nineteen years, wishes now to retire from that office, and Council has appointed Mr. Derek Allen to succeed him. Sir Roy has always, in my experience, made light of his services to the Academy, as if they were neither extensive nor arduous. This is not a view held by anyone else; and it is a pleasant duty to thank Sir Roy most warmly for the time and trouble which he has devoted to the finances of the Academy for so long a period.

The world little notes, nor long remembers, what Presidents of the Academy say in their annual addresses. It is customary to be brief, and I confine myself to comment on one or two matters as follows.

First, a matter of great importance to the future of the Academy—the progress of a critical inquiry into our internal organization, in particular into the system by which the Fellowship is divided into Sections, and the related question whether our machinery for election to Fellowship is satisfactory.

‘For some years . . . I have had the impression that existing classifications might well be improved’: those words are not mine but Lord Robbins’s, and they were spoken exactly ten years ago, on 10 July 1963. He added that ‘it would probably be appropriate for the Council to turn its attention to this problem, and to consider very seriously whether some re-classification may not now be appropriate’. In the present year an immense amount of work has been done by a Committee under the chairmanship of Mr. Colin Roberts. A special meeting of Council was summoned in May to consider the Committee’s report; and I take this opportunity of giving notice that all Sections will be invited to find time in the coming year to devote serious consideration to this matter. The procedure

will be as follows: at its October meeting Council expects to reach agreement on a policy-paper defining the questions at issue and setting out the arguments for and against certain possible courses of action. This paper will be sent to all Fellows well in advance of the January Section-meetings; and comments from Sections will not be expected by Council until after the March Section-meetings. There will therefore be plenty of time for Sections to set up sub-Committees to advise them if they so desire; and Council will proceed in the summer to examine the matter afresh with the views of the whole of the Fellowship in front of them. We have to ask ourselves, among other questions: are we quite sure that our machinery for election to Fellowship is as satisfactory in the present, and for the future, as it has been in the past? That our sectional structure is well adapted, or adaptable, to the interests of new subjects, of subjects on the borderline between us and the Royal Society, and of certain rapidly growing—and proliferating—studies which are generally grouped together under the title of Social Sciences? I say no more now, except again to quote Lord Robbins in 1963: 'I do not wish to prejudge the result of such an examination. I submit only that it is desirable that such an examination should take place.' I would add, if evidence of defects emerges, let them be remedied; if gentle methods plainly suffice, let them be adopted; if more drastic, let them not be feared.

The same Committee made one recommendation which was heartily approved by Council and which is already in force. I observed last year that the Fellowship of the Academy had reached, for the first time, the statutory total of three hundred. This meant that the number of vacancies for 1973 would be a mere half-dozen, *plus* an unpredictable number of vacancies (if any) caused by death or resignation. This intolerable pressure has been relieved by reducing the age of Senior Fellowship from 75 to 72. It is to be stressed that this measure gives only temporary relief; but longer-term measures must await the outcome of the study of our internal structure and our machinery for election.

Secondly, I ought to draw attention to a substantial change in our policy for administering the Thank-Offering to Britain Fund. In November 1965, at a meeting in London, a cheque for £90,000 was presented to the British Academy by Mr. Behr acting as spokesman for a very special group of people. The donation was described as a token of the gratitude felt by men and women who came to this country as refugees from

oppression abroad, and who found here not only a refuge but a home. This very moving and very generous gift has enabled the Academy to promote a number of enterprises suitable to the spirit in which the gift was made: but we have wondered in the past year or two whether we were making the best and fullest possible use of the opportunity offered; and this year we adopted a new policy. We advertised widely for applicants from the whole range of humane studies, offering a very substantial research-grant for a year. The response was most gratifying. There were thirty-two candidates. The quality was high, and the best were very good indeed. The new policy has been a striking success; it is the best of omens for the future use of a Fund which I hope and believe the Academy will always cherish with a special warmth.

Thirdly, a word about the adventures of the Research Fund this year. We decided to make, for the first time, a clear-cut distinction between the Academy's Major Research Projects and special Committees on the one hand and applications from outside institutions and from individuals on the other. Last year, when all were included in the same list, the result was that 43 per cent of the available money went to the Major Research Projects and Committees, 57 per cent to 'the field'. This year we raised the former percentage, subtracting 48 per cent from the whole to devote to the Major Research Projects and Committees. This left us with about £60,000 to distribute among the remainder of the applications. There were 168 of these. Study by the competent Sections resulted in strong recommendations for 105 of them, secondary support for 16, and rejection of 47. £60,500 was distributed among 98 of the 105, and a further 20 shared £6,100 from the Academy's special funds—the Albert Reckitt, Caton-Thompson, William Buckler, Stein-Arnold, and Henriette Hertz Funds. Thus we were able to promote the researches of 118 persons or societies, while subventing on an increased scale our own Major Research Projects and Committees, and incidentally finding £4,300 to allocate among 19 periodical publications.

If I dwell on this, it is for two reasons. First, because this is, in my view, the most important single function which the Academy discharges in the world of learning at large. Our Major Research Projects and Committees include a dozen very large undertakings of high academic importance, of which it may confidently be said that if we did not run them nobody else would. And the same applies to our support of individuals

and societies all over Great Britain: we are, for many of them, their only hope; for almost all of them our support, moral as well as financial, is of decisive importance if their work is to be done at all. Secondly, I dwell upon it because it is right that we should from time to time remember that the present felicity is the fulfilment of a dream, a vision which manifested itself to Sir George Clark, Sir Maurice Bowra, and Sir Mortimer Wheeler not many years ago. If you ask, what size was this Treasury grant for Research twelve years ago, the answer is that there was no such thing. From 1958 onwards, four years of laborious study and negotiation led to a day in 1962 when Sir Mortimer Wheeler left the Treasury with £25,000 in (more or less) his pocket. This year we had four and a half times as much; and no doubt there will be those who say it was still not enough. It never will be. I am perfectly aware that if we had more, we could spend it wisely and well; but it is proper from time to time to pause and count one's blessings, and to thank those who continue to confer them upon us. We are deeply obliged to Mrs. Thatcher and her Department, not only for their understanding of our financial problems, but also for the interest they show in other ways. Of course we can and shall make a strong case for asking them for more: that is quite consistent with saying that we are extremely grateful for what they have already done for us.

Finally, a very brief and non-committal progress-report on something I have already mentioned,—the possibility of adding a South-East Asian Institute to our overseas establishments. This is a matter of great and general interest to our Fellowship, but I must be careful to say nothing at this stage which might prejudice the outcome. Council has indeed included in its triennial estimates a modest sum under this heading, but I stress that the fundamental decisions remain to be taken. Nothing has yet been authorized by Council except the preparation of a Report, most ably produced by Professor Freedman, and the establishment of a committee under the chairmanship of Professor Grahame Clark to tell Council in specific terms what it is that they have to decide for or against. In briefest outline, it is likely that we shall be considering the founding of an Institute in Singapore, on a modest scale, concerned initially with archaeology and history within certain time-limits. The academic case for an Institute in that area is obviously strong, and the opportunities are manifest. It is an enterprise which appeals strongly to the imagination; but we

have to be sternly practical. It remains for Council and its Committee to study certain problems and if possible to solve them.

There is much that might be said on many other topics, general and particular, but time presses. Work presses too, and it may give you some indication of the demands made on the time of our Secretary and Foreign Secretary if I conclude by listing briefly what they have had to organize in the field of our foreign relations since Professor Dickens became Foreign Secretary four years ago: there have been 12 Leverhulme Visiting Professors, 16 exchanges with Eastern Europe and agreements concluded with 5 countries, 3 exchanges with Japan, 1 with Israel, 26 financed by the Wates Foundation, and 59 financed by the Rippon Fund. You will correctly infer that this has been a busy year; I think it has been a successful one. The main streams of the Academy's activity are in full spate, and there is no present reason to expect that they will become anything but broader and deeper in the visible future. We try to discern obstacles ahead, and the Secretary in his Report has drawn attention to two of them which cause increasing anxiety. First, the difficulties which threaten to overwhelm a number of Learned Societies, in danger of submergence by rising costs. Secondly, the grave problems which, for the same reason, confront the author and publisher of learned works. I noticed the other day, in a bookseller's, that if I wished to refresh my memory or enlarge my knowledge of the use of the verb 'to be' in ancient Greek, I must pay £18.50 for the privilege. That may seem an extreme example, but many other books on the same shelves seemed to be catching up fast. We have done a little this year, but only a little, to help individuals; we have included a sum under this head in our triennial estimates; and we have begun a study of the wider and longer-term problems.

I have been more concerned in this Address with particulars than with policy. That is mainly because the Academy's general policies have become, especially in recent years, quite clearly defined; and the question now is, how well those policies are being translated into practice. A President is quite well placed to pass judgement on this. He has an unrivalled view of the scene at large, without being too much involved in the detail of the work. My impression is that our Schools and Institutes are flourishing; our subvention of Research is on a large scale; our foreign contacts and exchanges have expanded hugely; our publications grow apace; our lectures are of high

quality and very well attended. We have quite enough problems to save us from the danger of complacency; and we remind ourselves that we must be constantly on the watch for new fields in which we can be active, new areas to which we can bring relief.