

President's Notes

By Sir Tony Wrigley PBA



This is the first 'normal' issue of the new *Review* in that it covers a six-month period, the second half of 1999, whereas the first issue, as indicated in its foreword, covered the whole of the academic session of 1998–99.

Council meets twice in the latter part of the year, in September and November. Inevitably, much of the business of all Council meetings is routine. In September, for example, Council customarily considers the wording of the guidance to be offered to Sections and Groups on the conduct of the annual round of elections to Fellowship. Or again, the annual letter specifying the terms of the grant-in-aid given to the Academy by the DfEE, which normally arrives in November, is preceded by a period in which the Academy is able to make the case for additional funding for new or existing activities, and is followed by the formulation of a budget which specifies the way in which resources will be allocated between different Academy programmes, the process as a whole taking up a significant fraction of the business transacted by Council in the course of a year. In addition, however, there are always matters, both important and trivial, which do not feature regularly year after year but arise because of the particular circumstances of the day.

Among the latter in the two meetings of Council in the second half of the year were the question of graduate studies in Britain and the launch of an Academy of Learned Societies for the Social Sciences. The former issue was raised by Colin Matthew whose tragic death represents a most serious loss to the Academy. He expressed concern at the September meeting of Council that what had once been a largely British representation in each new cohort of research students was increasingly being replaced by a pattern in which overseas research students predominated. The probable implications of this development for scholarship in the humanities and social sciences need no elaboration. There is widespread concern that the situation can only become worse when the effects of the change in undergraduate funding arrangements, which will cause promising students to reach their graduation day carrying a heavy load of debt, are more fully apparent. They will

presumably be less willing to embark on doctoral studies. Other evidence in support of the view that the situation is grave is plentiful, though there is also evidence to suggest that the grounds for concern may have been exaggerated. In recognition of the importance of providing an informed and balanced survey of the situation and its implications, Council at a later meeting authorised the appointment of a committee to review the evidence and to report. Professor Bob Bennett has agreed to chair the committee. It is hoped that the work of the committee will be ground-breaking in another sense, since Council intends to initiate a flow of reports on issues of concern, some of which may be expected to have policy implications, in a fashion analogous to the reports which the Royal Society publishes on questions such as genetically modified crops, or complementary medicine. The graduate studies report, if all goes well, will therefore be the first in a continuing series.

In November ALSISS transformed itself into the Academy (formerly: Association) of Learned Societies for the Social Sciences. Council had been concerned over many months about a development which was sometimes seen as posing a threat to the Academy which is, as the cover of this *Review* states, an Academy equally and indifferently for the humanities and social sciences. Some of the statements issued by ALSISS suggested that neither the constitution of the Academy nor the nature of its activities was well understood by ALSISS. At times during the period in which ALSISS was maturing plans for its metamorphosis, contact between ALSISS and the Academy was slight. On the other hand, the constitution of ALSISS suggested that both the composition and the aims of the new body were substantially different from those of the Academy, though with an area of overlap. The range of issues involved have been set out in several communications sent out to the Fellowship or to Sections. The names of only four Fellows of the Academy appeared in the initial list of Fellows of ALSISS. In general, it appears premature to reach any conclusion about the extent to which the two bodies will prove to be either complementary to

or competitive with one another. The situation will continue to be monitored closely.

There were a number of very pleasing developments during the latter half of 1999. The Leverhulme Trust generously offered to mark the centenary of the Academy by supporting the award of a Leverhulme medal and prize 'for a significant contribution to knowledge and understanding', the medal to be of gold and the prize in the sum of £5,000. The medal will be awarded every three years after its initial award in 2002 and will be awarded alternately in the humanities and social sciences, but on the first occasion two medals will be awarded, one in each of these two main areas of scholarship and research falling within the province of the Academy.

One of the most successful and most appreciated of all the Academy's methods of supporting research has been its small grants scheme. In the course of each year, several hundred such grants are made, with an upper limit of £5,000 for any one grant. Council recognised, however, that, particularly in view of the reluctance of the ESRC and AHRB to provide finance for what they would regard as relatively small grant applications, there was a gap in the provision of funding nationally for grants in the range between £5,000 and £20,000, notably for fieldwork studies. Consultation with the academic community took place during the latter half of 1999, and support for larger research grants was evident. A new scheme for larger research grants is currently being prepared, though not at the expense of the small grants scheme, the funding for which has been 'ring-fenced'. It is hoped that the Academy will

succeed in securing enhanced funding for a larger research grants scheme in later years. The upper limit of £20,000, though arbitrary, was proposed having it in mind that this is approximately the largest sum which does not permit the appointment of a research assistant for a full year.

This year's *Directory* contains on the facing page to page one an 'organogram' displaying the committee structure which came fully into being at the start of the 1999–2000 year. The revised structure represents a clarification of the preceding structure as well as embodying the implications for committee structure of new activities such as those associated with the Public Understanding and Activities Committee. Experience so far suggests that it is working very satisfactorily.

Whilst it is true that every Fellow of the Academy owes a great debt to its salaried staff for their dedication to the best interests of the Academy and willingness in many contexts to go far beyond a strict interpretation of their formal obligations, it is also true that, in marked contrast with many academies in other countries, the work of the British Academy is supported and carried forward in large measure because its Fellows and Honorary Officers give time and thought to its affairs in a manner which I find deeply impressive and heartwarming. It is the best and soundest tribute to their recognition of the value of the Academy as a body whose presence is of critical importance to the well-being of the humanities and social sciences in Britain. I should like to express my deep appreciation of the devotion to the Academy of all those who contribute in this way to its success.