

# Presidential Address

*Delivered by Sir Tony Wrigley PBA to the 97th Annual General Meeting of the Academy, on 1 July 1999.*



A large part of my address last year was taken up with a description of the events which were set in train by the publication of the Dearing Report in July 1997, and with an attempt to assess the implications of these developments, both actual and prospective, for the future life and work of the Academy.

## *Arts and Humanities Research Board*

In the main, the policy and activities of the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB), whose Chairman and Chief Executive is Professor Paul Langford FBA, have developed in the manner which had seemed likely twelve months ago. The competition for research funding from the AHRB is already stiff and is likely to become even more so in the future, a feature which is at once to be welcomed as proof of the healthiness of the demand for research support and to be regretted from the point of view of individual applicants.

I remarked last year that the AHRB appeared likely to realise many of the aims of an Humanities Research Council, set out at the beginning of the decade by the then President, Sir Anthony Kenny. I noted that there was one cause for concern, however, in that the Board would be able to accept applications from England and from Northern Ireland, but not from Scotland or from Wales, since the funding councils of these countries had initially decided against participating in the AHRB. Part way through the year, however, came the splendid news that both the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) had decided to become full partners in the AHRB. Both SHEFC and HEFCW are now members of the Funding Group, the overarching body which makes the chief academic appointments to the AHRB, and deals with such matters as the indicative division of overall funding between the arts and humanities, but not matters of academic policy which are the province of the AHRB. It is gratifying that henceforth the Board will be fully UK-wide in its coverage.

## *Review of the Structures of the Academy*

In the early part of this year, Council considered the final report of the Structures Review Committee, established in 1997. Since any decisions made by Council arising from the Committee's report are of importance to the affairs of the Academy, I summarise the most significant recent developments.

It will be recalled that the terms of reference of the Committee were:

*to consider whether the reforms instituted in consequence of the 1993 Report of the Committee on Academy Structures appear likely to achieve the goal of making the Fellowship representative, and perceived as*

*representative, of the best British scholarship in those disciplines whose interests the Academy exists to serve; and if not, to propose further and more efficient reforms with the same purpose.*

The report of the Committee began by providing information about the changing composition of the Fellowship since 1987, the date when the first of the three Structures Review Committees' reports was presented. The information related principally to the changing relative size of the Sections,<sup>1</sup> to age structure, to gender, and to the issue frequently referred to as the 'golden triangle' question (the perceived dominance of Oxford, Cambridge and London). Concern about the representativeness of the Academy under each of these heads has surfaced from time to time. The report focused predominantly on the first of these issues, and arrived at a method of measuring an equitable distribution of membership between Sections, based on the number of staff in RAE units of assessment which were rated 4 or higher in the last RAE exercise and the present composition of the Ordinary Fellowship of the Academy.

The application of this criterion was complicated for a number of reasons, but it proved possible nonetheless to derive a 'score' for each Section which in turn implied a particular average number of elections each year for that Section. If these proposals had been implemented in the form embodied in the final report, however, this would have meant that five Sections would have lost what has often been regarded as a defining feature of the annual round of a Section's activities, the virtual right to secure the election of at least one new Fellow.

In the light of the comments made by Sections on this issue, Council has decided to restore to the five Sections in question the expectation that at least one new Fellow will be elected in each year. Taking this change into account, the present upper limit of 35 elections to Fellowship in any one year puts some restrictions on the freedom of manoeuvre of the Fellowship Standing Committee. Council intends to return at a later stage to the question of the upper limit. There are persuasive arguments for an upward revision of this figure, though a point noted in the report of the Structures Review Committee should not be overlooked, namely that a comparison with the Royal Society Fellowship, using the same RAE-based criterion, suggests that the size of the two Fellowships bears an almost identical proportion to their respective constituencies. The same is true also of the present annual election quota limits of the two bodies.

<sup>1</sup> The Fellowship of the Academy is organised into 18 disciplinary Sections (see page 2).

It is noteworthy that the effect of implementing these changes will be that, in future years, the Academy will elect equal numbers of scholars in the humanities and social sciences. The balance of elections had been moving in this direction in any case in recent years and indeed in this current year, 1999, the number of elections to social sciences Sections will be exactly the same as that to humanities Sections. It is important also to note, however, that by the criterion used by the Structures Review Committee, some of the most marked under-representation was to be found in humanities Sections.

One further issue raised by the report calls for comment. I refer to the revision of Article 2 of the Charter, which reads 'The objects of the Academy are the promotion of the study of the moral and political sciences, including history, philosophy, law, politics and economics, archaeology and philology.' The Structures Review Committee, whose membership represented the whole sweep of the existing Sections, concluded that a change in the present wording is much to be desired. Council agreed. The present wording in its reference to 'the moral and political sciences' has become out of keeping with current usage and it is inconvenient that certain subjects are individually listed as falling within our scope, while others – including several which, by modern usage, are central to the intellectual life of the Academy, such as literary studies, linguistics, anthropology, geography, psychology, or sociology – are not. Customary usage will no doubt change again in the future and therefore a simple and inclusive formulation has much to commend it, especially as the grant-in-aid letter which we receive annually from the Department for Education and Employment routinely refers to the purpose of the grant as being to enable the Academy to make provision for the humanities and social sciences to parallel that made by the Royal Society for the physical and biological sciences. The proposed wording is 'The objects of the Academy are the promotion of the study of the humanities and the social sciences.' It is true that the proposed revision is not expressed in the most elegant English, using a plural subject and verb where the singular might seem more appropriate. However, in proposing this formulation, Council is following in the footsteps of those who framed the parallel sentence for the Charter in 1902. Furthermore, when the issue was raised in Council, we were advised on legal grounds that it was preferable on balance to prefer consistency to elegance.

## ALSISS

The Association of Learned Societies in the Social Sciences (ALSISS) has been in existence since 1982. It has devoted most of its energies to the attempt to secure a wider recognition of the importance of the social sciences to policy formation; to the better understanding of contemporary social problems; and to the more generous funding of social science research. Recently ALSISS has decided that it would like to reconstitute itself as an academy. The nature of the proposed new body may prove to be a source of confusion in relation to the Academy. Inasmuch as membership of ALSISS in its new guise will consist of learned

societies or of individuals who choose to become members rather than being elected as Fellows, there is no conflict of roles with the Academy. But inasmuch as membership consists of Fellows elected by a process broadly similar to the Academy's in electing social scientists into Fellowship, there is clearly a potential conflict of roles. ALSISS intends that eminence as a practitioner rather than as a scholar should be one ground for election to Fellowship. This means that the grounds for election are not identical, but they appear to be closely similar and are liable to give rise to confusion.

Meetings have taken place between officers of the Academy and members of the implementation group charged by ALSISS with bringing the new body into being. At these meetings and by prior correspondence the misgivings of the Academy have been made plain. As a result, the ALSISS representatives have shown some willingness to modify their proposals in the light of our discussions, notably over the question of the title of any new body. A small liaison group has been formed with equal membership from both sides, and it is to be hoped that most of the issues which are at present uncertain will be resolved over the coming months.

## New Activities

The resources of the Academy are limited and make it difficult to embark on new forms of activity even though it may be highly desirable to do so if the best interests of the Academy are to be served. I should like to mention three areas in which new appointments should make a significant difference both to the image and to the reality of the life and work of the Academy.

## Public Understanding

The creation of a Public Understanding and Activities Committee (PUAC) under the chairmanship of Professor Colin Matthew is testimony to the importance of our 'outreach' into a much wider world of education, and more generally into the public domain. If vitality in the humanities and social sciences is to be recognised as valuable in the intellectual, cultural, and moral life of the country as a whole, there is an implicit obligation upon the Academy to play a part in achieving this end. The Royal Society has made substantial efforts in this regard in recent years in relation to its constituency. Furthering public understanding of the significance of the humanities and social sciences in the cultural and intellectual life of the country is now listed as one of the reasons for which this Academy receives public funding. PUAC has been giving consideration to the kinds of new activities which the Academy should sponsor for university staff, for postgraduate students, for schoolteachers, and for the wider public; to the geographical spread of such activities with an eye to reducing the dominance of London-based events; and to the role of the new post of information officer to which an appointment will shortly be made. 10 Carlton House Terrace provides an excellent base for such work. A suitable appointment should serve substantially to change the image of the Academy in the public mind, over the next few years.

## Academy web site

Specialist skills will be important in another new post which should have come into being before the next AGM is held. The Academy already maintains an informative web site which is visited increasingly frequently, and we have a wide measure of expertise in-house. But the importance of web sites is certain to grow rapidly in future and this represents a major opportunity for the Academy. It would be splendid if our web site became a place of first resort for scholars in the humanities and social sciences for a very wide range of purposes. Either through information input by the Academy itself or through links to other sites, it should be possible to make it a simple matter for a scholar in any relevant discipline to discover what conferences and symposia are to take place; or to step out to find details of the holdings of general or specialist libraries; or, in suitable cases, to download text, images, or data which may be of use for research purposes. The list could be greatly extended. Translating dream into reality, however, will call both for specialist technical skills and a flair for making and consolidating the personal and institutional links which must underpin an exercise of this kind. The person appointed must possess an unusual combination of personal accomplishments and qualities and may confidently expect not to be short of work at any stage in his or her career at the Academy.

## Library

A third aspect of Academy life where an additional appointment, if feasible, would bring great benefit is a more domestic matter. Thanks to the generosity of Dr Lee Seng Tee, we now possess an excellent library and reading room. The shelves of the library are rapidly filling with books and our holdings are already much greater than they were when the Academy was still in Cornwall Terrace. But a library which lacks a librarian is rather like a boat without a crew. Due to the goodwill and expertise of an existing member of staff, Stephanie Betts, progress has been made in identifying what needs to be done, and in defining the main library categories, and Council has appointed a Library Committee to oversee its development; but only the routine presence of a librarian will turn it into a well-used facility.

At this point I should like to express my thanks to all those Fellows who have most generously responded to the appeal which I made to donate such of their works as they believe best reflect their contribution to learning and scholarship. It is principally because of this response that the library shelves have been filling up so rapidly. I should like to renew my appeal in the hope that other Fellows will follow suit. One of the most valuable features of the Academy library in the longer term should be that it provides the means for future scholars to examine the intellectual developments which are reflected in elections to Fellowship. In that connection, I very much hope that if and when we have a librarian in post, it may be possible to persuade every Fellow to provide the librarian with a complete list of his or her publications, ideally in a machine-readable form, so that it would be possible to trace the intellectual career of every Fellow of the Academy.

## Publications

One of the most encouraging and important features of recent years has been the steady expansion in the publishing activities of the Academy, outstanding amongst which has been the new scheme for publishing postdoctoral fellowship monographs. In relation to the slender resources which the Academy is able to devote to publication activities, both the volume and the quality of the output are exceptional and reflect particular credit upon James Rivington, the Publications Officer.

## International Relations

For scholars from many countries the Overseas Policy Committee (OPC) in a sense *is* the Academy. The opportunity to visit this country may depend upon agreements negotiated via the OPC, and the arrangements made by the OPC secretariat enable their visits to be productive. The same is true in reverse of scholars from Britain visiting these countries. But there are in addition a very wide range of formal and less formal agreements with national and international bodies which exist because of the activities overseen by the OPC and which bring benefits by promoting exchanges, conferences, and meetings in bewildering variety. It is greatly encouraging that the substantial increase in the budget of the OPC, made possible by the redeployment of the Academy's grant-in-aid, will enable many initiatives to be taken in the future which were frustrated by lack of funding in the past.

## Outgoing Officers

For the past four years, Professor Barry Supple has been the Foreign Secretary of the Academy and therefore chairman of the OPC. His term of office ends with this meeting and this is an appropriate moment for me to express on your behalf our deep obligation to him for all that he has done in this office. His achievement goes well beyond the framing and implementation of policy, important though this may be. The Foreign Secretary carries a heavy load of formal and informal duties related to the reception and entertainment of the steady stream of individuals, delegations, and committees which visit this country from abroad, and to the reciprocation of such visits by visits to other countries to represent the Academy. The Foreign Secretary is the face which the Academy presents to the outside world. Barry Supple has been immensely successful in this role, possessing as he does the personal qualities which count for so much in face-to-face meetings. We have also benefited greatly from the fact that he brought to the Foreign Secretaryship the experience of being director of a major charitable trust (the Leverhulme Trust) as well as the fruits of a very distinguished academic career. The former often provided a perspective on particular issues which was both relevant and illuminating. Professor Supple is succeeded by Professor Nico Mann to whom we shall come to owe an equally great debt. The days when being an honorary officer of the Academy involved a comparatively light burden are long gone, and when account is also taken of the much heavier

routine loads associated with academic life, the Academy is fortunate that we are able to find from among the Fellowship men and women willing to shoulder the burdens in question.

Vice-Presidents serve a two-year term. Professor Roger Kain's term has therefore coincided with my first two years of office. His presence and influence have been of the greatest value and help to me personally and I should like to underline this point in thanking him for all the work which he has done. Since his base is at a distance from London, the effective calls on his time, which would in any case have been very substantial, have been significantly greater than would have been the case if he had been from the golden triangle. It is very greatly to our benefit that this did not deter him from accepting the office. His good judgement, balance, and restraint have been of outstanding benefit to the Academy.

Professor Richard Hogg is also completing a period of service in a major Academy office. He retires as Research Posts Co-ordinator. The Co-ordinator plays a key role in developing the policies which underpin the research posts schemes, and has a significant involvement in ensuring the smooth running of each award. Professor Hogg's tact and persistence have been invaluable, and helped to ensure that those who hold Academy research posts have been able to derive maximum benefit from their awards.

I should further record the thanks of the Academy to Professor David Lockwood, Sir Peter North, Baroness [Onora] O'Neill, and

Professor Hugh Williamson, all of whom have just completed their periods of service as members of Council. Both the level of attendance at Council and the quality of the discussion which takes place at Council meetings bear witness to the seriousness with which Fellows treat their periods of service on Council.

### *Staff*

I have left myself far too little time in which to attempt to express your gratitude to the staff of the Academy. The past year has been a very taxing period for all concerned above all because of the stresses associated with the coming into existence of the AHRB whose studentship programme continues to be administered from within this building by staff who remain in certain important respects a responsibility of the Academy. Academics are accustomed to repining over the steadily rising level of calls upon their time. It is easy to forget that what is true of institutional life within a university setting is just as true of other institutional settings. It is certainly true of this institution. We all have good reason to be grateful that the additional burdens have been assumed so willingly by the staff and that we as a Fellowship find the initiatives which we devise translated into reality so efficiently. As for the Secretary, Peter Brown, I should like to emphasise that what is true generally of the staff of the Academy, I have good reason to know to be true *a fortiori* in his case.