

Presidential Address

Delivered by Sir Tony Wrigley PBA to the 99th Annual General Meeting of the Academy on 5 July 2001



The Academy is entering its centenary year. Most Presidents have served for a four-year term and it is not surprising, therefore, that I should be the twenty-fifth in office. Sixteen of the twenty-five have served for the conventional four-year period, though one, Lord Balfour served for as long as seven years. Long periods in office, however, such as his, or that of Sir John Clapham who was President for six years during the Second World War, have been counterbalanced by several much shorter terms. 1997, the year in which I assumed office, now seems a distant memory. At that time 20–21 Cornwall Terrace was still the Academy's address and we were busy digesting the implications of the Dearing Committee's report and in particular its strong plea that the time had come to establish an Arts and Humanities Research Council. As it happens, these are both issues which have continued to figure in the affairs of the Academy throughout the intervening period, though the latter much more than the former.

Premises

We are now, I think, thoroughly at home in Carlton House Terrace. The move has proved of the greatest importance to the Academy, for both practical and symbolic reasons: the space available to us has been more than doubled; and in location and appearance, our present accommodation represents a major advance on any of the previous habitations of the Academy.

AHRB

The creation of the AHRB and its subsequent rapid development, first with Professor Paul Langford and more recently with Professor David Eastwood as Chief Executive, has had major implications for the Academy. It will be recalled that from 1998–99 HEFCE's funds for project-based research and the Academy's funds for postgraduate studentships were united, so that the AHRB could assume the majority of the functions of a conventional research council. The total available to the AHRB in its first year was £27m. So rapid has been the expansion in the funds available to the AHRB that in a couple of years' time it will be disposing of a total sum in the order of £70m, not far short of three times its budget in its first year of existence. Already the AHRB has become a company limited by guarantee, which significantly enlarges its capacity for independent action, and within less than a year will have brought together all its staff in a single building, probably in Bristol. The wish, which the AHRB itself has often expressed, to become a fully-fledged research council, has been echoed more and more widely in recent months, and seems increasingly likely to come about in the near future.

The changing role of the Academy

These developments have already changed the landscape for large-scale research in the arts and humanities. They are also of great importance to the Academy. When, in 1984, the Academy agreed to take over from the then Department of Education and Science the administration of the award of research studentships in the humanities, it reinforced the widespread perception of the Academy as a body principally concerned with the humanities and only to a lesser extent with the social sciences. The creation of the HRB as a research council in waiting tended to reinforce this impression. The ESRC had long been in existence as a source of funding both for research and for studentships in the social sciences. The Academy had been doing all that was possible to provide comparable funding for the humanities, but there was a conspicuous imbalance between the moderately adequate funding for the award of studentships in the humanities and the miserably inadequate funding for project-based research which was available to the Academy. In the wake of the Dearing Committee's report and with the creation of the AHRB, these funding anomalies have largely disappeared and there are now, for all practical purposes, research councils both for the humanities and the social sciences. As a result, the Academy has been afforded the opportunity to redefine its role in relation to the funding of research and research-related activities for both the humanities and the social sciences.

Several other recent developments have encouraged a reassessment of this issue. For example, the DfES in making its annual grant-in-aid to the Academy has defined the overall role of the Academy as acting in relation to the humanities and social sciences in a manner to parallel that of the Royal Society in relation to the physical and biological sciences. In general, the circumstances which for a time necessarily gave the Academy a differentially high profile in the funding of the humanities are now a thing of the past. Our funding is now directed to scholars in both groups of disciplines without distinction. It is entirely appropriate, therefore, that we should recently have sought to establish reliable means of communication between the Academy and both research councils (it is convenient, even if not strictly accurate, to refer to the AHRB in this fashion) so that we can inform each other of our actions, intentions, and long-term aims. I hope that the three bodies will prove able to ensure that their roles are distinct, but equally that they will collaborate effectively where appropriate and will deal with any 'boundary' problems which may arise from time to time in a manner which avoids penalising scholars whose work lies at or close to a boundary. A system of both bilateral and trilateral meetings has been brought

into being, with the intention of facilitating this process. It is already proving to be one of the advantages of the creation some years ago of two Groups within the Academy, intermediate between the Sections and Council, that one matches, so to speak, the AHRB while the other matches the ESRC.

It is often said that the Academy has a tripartite nature: it is at once a national academy, a learned society, and a body which supports research. It is especially in relation to the third of these that the creation of the AHRB has obliged us to rethink our role. In round terms the Academy has £10m to be dispensed on research, or £7m if Schools and Institutes abroad are treated as too distinctive to be grouped with other research expenditures. This is a relatively modest sum when compared with the sums disposed of by the AHRB and the ESRC. In 2002–03 the probable combined expenditure of the ESRC and the AHRB on research will be in the order of £90m, a figure which dwarfs that for the Academy. It might be feared, given the nature of research councils, that this would leave the Academy without a distinctive research role. Happily, this is not the case. There are two areas where the existence of programmes in support of research provided by the Academy are of vital importance to the health of scholarship and research in this country and these are both areas in which the Academy is the sole or a principal source of support.

Research Grants

The first is in making available small grants to enable scholars to visit libraries and museums, to consult material in archives, to hire short-term research assistance for such tasks as data input, and so on. For sums under £5,000 the Academy is one of very few sources of funds for enterprises of this kind. Some 500 scholars benefit each year from the existence of this scheme. Under our new larger research grants programme, still in its first year, we also make grants of between £5,000 and £20,000. There is overlap of provision in this range between the Academy and the two research councils, but experience suggests that the latter are not active in this market, so to speak, and the evidence to date strongly suggests that a programme of the kind which the Academy has initiated is very greatly appreciated. Certainly, even in its first year, the scheme attracted a large number of excellent applications. It was frustrating that we were able to fund only a proportion of them.

Research Appointments

The second area in which the Academy provides schemes of the greatest importance to the advance of research in the humanities and social sciences is in the provision of means to enable individual scholars to secure a period of leave from conventional teaching and administrative duties. The value of our Postdoctoral Fellowship, Senior Research Fellowship, Research Readership, and Research Professorship schemes may be regarded, I think, as clear beyond doubt. The Academy is not alone in providing such schemes but both their success and their high standing are scarcely open to challenge. Here, as with research grants, if the Academy commanded larger resources it would be possible to

make many more grants without any appreciable decline in the quality of those appointed.

These schemes have it in common that they are directed to the needs of individual scholars, whereas the bias of funding by the AHRB and the ESRC is very much in the direction of larger-scale research. The Academy therefore has a role that is both important and distinctive to play in achieving a balance between the large and the small. Final decisions about how far the Academy can or should go beyond the funding of individual scholarship and research and the character of such initiatives will need to be made in the course of the next few months.

Elections to Fellowship

In its role as a learned society, the second element in its tripartite nature, a prime concern of the Academy must be, in the words of our charter, to elect new Fellows ‘from among persons who have attained distinction in some one or more of the branches of scientific study which it is the object of the Academy to promote.’ In recent years we have gone to great lengths to try to ensure that this goal is achieved. There is now an established pattern whereby every four or five years a Structures Review Committee is appointed to consider such matters as the number and intellectual scope of the Sections, election quotas, gender balance, the place and treatment of minority subjects, the function of the Fellowship Standing Committee, the ‘golden triangle’ question, and the like. It is my belief that, as a result of the work of the three Committees which have reported over the past dozen years or so, the Academy is far better informed on these issues than in the past, and it has changed and improved its practices in several respects so that it is much better able to withstand scrutiny, whether internal or external, than was once the case. However, there is one respect in which our practice is open to question. It is arguably more a question of appearance than of substance, but perhaps for that very reason deserves careful attention. It is a matter of ensuring, to make use of an old chestnut, that justice is not merely done but seen to be done.

The nature of the issue has come home to me quite forcibly in the visits to several universities, both old and post-1992, which I have paid during the past 18 months. In the main the response to such visits is encouraging, at times heart-warming, for although there is often considerable ignorance about our affairs there is also much appreciation of what we are doing to assist scholarship and research, and widespread recognition of the standing and importance of the Academy. However, one criticism, expressed in slightly different forms in different universities, is widespread. It is an aspect of the ‘golden triangle’ issue. Not only is it widely apprehended that Oxford, Cambridge, and London predominate in the Fellowship and in the affairs of the Academy generally, but this is seen as a self-repeating, even a self-reinforcing state of affairs. Accordingly, Council at its last meeting has agreed to institute a procedure under which heads of department in a given subject area are periodically given an opportunity to propose to the relevant Section the names of scholars whom they believe worthy of election as part of the annual process by which each

Section assesses the field of candidates for election. Provision will be made to avoid any danger that heads of department themselves might be disadvantaged by this procedure.

International Relations

The third role of the Academy is of equal importance. It is because we are a national academy established under a royal charter that when we celebrate our centenary next summer we may expect that the occasion will be graced by the attendance of representatives of national academies throughout the world. This role, however, entails much more than exemplifying the dignified and the symbolic. The Academy is active in fostering and facilitating scholarly exchange between countries and is able to provide significant financial support to further such activity. There are a large number of formal Agreements with the academies of other countries, some of which still prefer exchanges to be made through national bodies rather than by individual contact. An especially interesting and potentially most important recent development relates to our near neighbours in continental Europe. The Academy has been active in assessing the value of the various possible links with European bodies, benefiting greatly from the Foreign Secretary's expertise in this regard. A report on the best means of ensuring that the Academy becomes productively involved in European Union issues was commissioned recently from Mr William Solesbury because of his wide knowledge of the question.

Some interesting results of the initiative are beginning to emerge. For example, the European Commission's Research Directorate has displayed much interest in our proposal for a programme of research on *The quality of life*, and intends to include this as a pilot project in the final call for proposals under the Fifth Framework Programme. And aspects of the proposal have been incorporated in the Citizens and Governance section of the Commission's Sixth Framework Programme. ALLEA (All European Academies) has circulated a consultative paper suggesting that the Commission should adopt this proposal as a major part of its social science initiative. We owe a debt of gratitude in this connection to Professor Gallie both for his willingness to place his expertise in European affairs at the disposal of the Academy and for his initiative in playing a key role in framing *The quality of life* proposal. The Academy has also been involved in the European Science Foundation's proposal for a new European Collaborative Research project on *The origins of man, language and languages*. The financial commitment which is required of participating countries is substantial and discussions are in train about the ways in which Britain might be able to meet its obligations. It is gratifying that many scholars in this country hope to become involved in this project assuming that the necessary funding can be secured.

Publications

Publishing the results of research has long been an integral part of the life of the Academy but recent years have seen a marked expansion in the number of volumes published by the Publications

Committee and also in the scope of its activities. Both commercial and university publishing houses are showing an increased tendency to favour established scholars with a proven ability to sell well and are chary of supporting young scholars or of accepting important but arcane monographs. As a result, it is likely that the initiatives taken by the Publications Committee will be increasingly important to scholarship. The Committee maintains rigorous standards. Yet it is noteworthy that a concern to support traditional standards has been accompanied by a keen interest in ensuring that paper and print should not be regarded as the sole appropriate method for publication. Some of the most interesting discussions over the next few years will be those relating to electronic means of disseminating the fruits of scholarship.

Public Understanding

The recently created Public Understanding and Activities Committee cannot claim to have the most exciting, resonant, or seductive title, but it carries the responsibility of organising many of the events – lectures, symposia, and the like – which are of greatest interest to the Fellowship, and of attracting and sustaining the interest of a far wider swathe of the public of this country in the humanities and social sciences. This is a challenging commission and the Committee is still feeling its way towards the achieving of several objectives: the devising of programmes and activities which will attract a wider audience than in the past; the provision of new means of disseminating information and ideas, notably via the world-wide web; the creation of an institutional framework for enabling the Academy regularly to publish policy studies similar in nature to that which will appear shortly as the outcome of the work of Professor Bennett's Graduate Studies Review Committee; and so on. For such a wide range of new activities to succeed and flourish it will be necessary to secure additional resources and make some new appointments to add to those made recently (an Information and External Relations Officer, Jonathan Breckon, and a Web Content Manager, Abigail Cooke). It will be surprising if, within a few years, the work of PUAC in these areas does not come to be regarded as just as central to the affairs of the Academy as, say, that of the Overseas Policy Committee.

Graduate Studies Review

I should like to pay tribute to the work of Professor Bennett and his Graduate Studies Review Committee. The report of the Committee is virtually complete and will have a public launching on 21 September before a distinguished audience. Among those who will be present and speaking will be the Chief Executives of the ESRC and the AHRB, Dr Gordon Marshall and Professor David Eastwood, and Sir Howard Newby, the Vice-Chancellor of Southampton, who will then be on the eve of becoming the Chief Executive of HEFCE. I shall not summarise the findings of the report but would like to emphasize that, in my view, it fully justifies the importance which Council has attached to the exercise. The Committee was faced with reconciling the quantitative evidence derived from a wide range of official

statistics with the qualitative evidence revealed by its extensive survey of departmental heads. The resulting picture is complex. Its complexity is made evident in the report but so also is the urgency of taking action in the near future if grave difficulties are to be avoided. It is one of the strengths of the report, incidentally, that a range of possible remedial actions are reviewed and their relative importance assessed.

Centenary

Plans for the celebration of our centenary are now largely complete and indeed most of the individual events have been worked out in full detail. Information about the programme as a whole will be circulated to every Fellow towards the end of the current calendar year. While events related to the centenary will take place throughout the year, the main Centenary Conference will take place on the three days, 3–5 July, a period which will include the next AGM. Venerable though the Academy is becoming, however, it is surely worthy of note that we still have one Fellow who was born before the Academy was granted its charter and who has been a Fellow for more than half the period of the Academy's existence. Sir Raymond Firth celebrated his one hundredth birthday on 25 March, 2001.

Valediction

It goes without saying that it is an immense honour and privilege to serve a term as President of the Academy. It is therefore particularly gratifying to be able to say that it is also deeply enjoyable. If it would be an exaggeration to say that I have enjoyed every minute of my Presidency, it would be only a small exaggeration. Certainly, it is true to say that I had little idea when I started how rewarding the experience would prove to be. It is rewarding in one respect principally because the honorary

officers of the Academy are so marvellously well served by the staff of the Academy. My personal thanks go first and foremost to the Secretary, Peter Brown, whose grasp of the affairs of the Academy is unrivalled but is matched by his devotion to the Academy. His ability to put these strengths to effective use is much enhanced by his diplomatic skills, his discretion, and his sureness of touch in distinguishing between short-term expedients and long-term strategy. My thanks go second to Susan Churchill, the Assistant Secretary for Fellowship Programmes. Her knowledge of all things most relevant to the work of the President is astonishing, especially as the existence of her impeccable files seems almost irrelevant in that the information they contain seems available as fully and accurately in her memory as it is on the paper contained in the files. And her comments are as valuable as her stores of information.

I am in the happy position that I am not only delighted to wish Garry Runciman equally good fortune but I am confident both because of his personal qualities and because of the support which he will enjoy from his fellow officers, from the Fellowship, and from the staff of the Academy that he will find himself able to make very similar valedictory remarks in four years time.

There is a further respect, however, in which my time as President has been both enjoyable and encouraging. It has steadily increased my conviction that the Academy has an important part to play in securing and enhancing the health of the humanities and social sciences in this country. We have much to contribute in this regard. No other comparable body has finer opportunities before it. Our resources may be limited, and we must strive to increase both our public and our private funding substantially, but even with our existing resources we can do much. With larger resources great things might be accomplished. I await future developments with great interest.

Medals and Prizes

The winners of the 2001 Medals and Prizes were announced at the AGM. A ceremony for the prizewinners will take place in the autumn at the British Academy, and a report will follow in the next issue of the *Review*. The winners were: Dr J.B. Stockigt (Derek Allen Prize, for Music); Professor R. Smend, FBA (Burkitt

Medal for Biblical Studies); Professor M. Godden and the late Professor P. Clemoes (Sir Israel Gollancz Prize, for English); Dr L. Newlyn and Dr A. Peach (Rose Mary Crawshay Prizes, for English Literature); and Professor D.M.G. Hirst, FBA (Serena Medal, for Italian Studies).