
Scholarship and international relations

The British Academy welcomed the Rt Hon William Hague MP, Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to an event on 16 October 2012. Mr Hague spoke to an audience of ambassadors, Foreign and Commonwealth Office staff, and leading academics on the different kinds of expertise necessary to maximise Britain's diplomatic influence in the world. In response, Adam Roberts, President of the British Academy, spoke about the particular importance of understanding the languages, history and cultures of other countries, and the valuable role that research and scholarship can play in this process.

IN RESPONDING to the Secretary of State's remarks, let me start by stating the obvious. While there is naturally a great deal on which we co-operate, it is also inevitably the case that there are some differences of perspective and interest between a government ministry and a self-governing body of scholars such as the British Academy.

I will just briefly mention two examples, the first of which relates to the laws of war. I applaud the action, which the Foreign Secretary has just emphasised, to address the crime of rape in war, and make positive moves to get actual prosecutions. But on the laws of war there is one concern about UK policy which I should raise, even though it is slightly tangential to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). In October 2010 the British Academy joined a number of other national bodies in pressing the Prime Minister to make progress on the ratification of the 1954 Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in War. As we noted, the lead on this matter is taken by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. The question of UK ratification will inevitably be mentioned in the report of the Iraq Inquiry chaired by Sir John Chilcot, due in 2013. In December 2011 the government did announce that it would 'make every effort to facilitate the UK's ratification'. I know it is a matter of finding parliamentary time, but I have to say that, after 48 years, the doctrine of unripe time is beginning to run out, and it is about time we took action on that front.

Secondly, on several occasions the British Academy has expressed concern that, from 1997 onwards, the FCO's statement of priorities did not mention the importance of understanding the history, political systems, culture and languages of the societies with which we deal. The Secretary of State has done a huge amount to address the matter, including through his strongly-worded evidence to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee in early

2011, and his memorable and important speech at the FCO on 8 September 2011.¹

We warmly welcome the Foreign Secretary's commitment to restore the central importance of diplomatic skills, especially the in-depth understanding of other countries. Research, especially in humanities and social science disciplines, plays a vital part in developing this kind of understanding.

A good example of a contribution by a Fellow of this Academy was the work of Charles Webster, who was our President between 1950 and 1954. Early in 1943, he joined the Foreign Office group that was working on plans for the United Nations, and with the other members of that group he played a critically important part in shaping and drawing up the UN Charter. Academics can play a useful role in policy-making.

The British Academy's contributions

Today, the British Academy has some special contributions to make in regard to Britain's roles in the world. First, it forms links with other academics around the world and keeps in touch with them. One of the Academy's traditional international activities is to create opportunities for UK researchers through its sponsorship of a number of overseas research institutes, whose work contributes to historical knowledge, cultural debate and international understanding.² They also do wonderful archaeological and historical work.

A second area in which we have a contribution to make is language. Language learning, as we have heard, is central to the understanding of and respect for different societies. The Academy has, alongside the education and business communities, long been an advocate of strengthening this country's language learning. We have been trying to stop a very worrying downward trend in the

¹ The full text of William Hague's 8 September 2011 speech at the FCO is at www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-best-diplomatic-service-in-the-world-strengthening-the-foreign-and-commonwealth-office-as-an-institution

² For a list of organisations abroad that are currently sponsored by the British Academy, see www.britac.ac.uk/institutes/orgs.cfm



Sir Adam Roberts, President of the British Academy, and Foreign Secretary William Hague, at the event on 16 October 2012.

teaching of languages in schools and universities. In July 2012, we launched an inquiry entitled *Lost for Words*, which is looking at just how important languages are in meeting UK public policy objectives, especially in the areas of international relations and security.³ We have consulted key stakeholders on the front line in public policy, including your own office and many others, and the full report of our inquiry will be published in the spring. We are already encouraged by the increasing recognition throughout Government of the importance of languages.

A third area of British Academy activity concerns ‘soft power’ – a not uncontentious term that was coined by the Harvard academic and Fellow of this Academy, Joseph Nye. We are launching a project on the subject led by the Academy’s own Foreign Secretary, Dame Helen Wallace. This project will seek to assess how the UK’s assets in such areas as culture, values, heritage, law, media services and education have made a long-lasting global impact, and will analyse the implications of these findings for future policy priorities.

These are but glimpses of a few areas in which the British Academy – and the great subject areas of social sciences and humanities that we represent and advance – have a significant international role to play. Others could point to areas where we have difficulties of one kind or another, with one part of Government or another – not least over the question of visas for overseas students.

People could remind us of the way in which our universities – though far from perfect – have done a better job than some national institutions that I could name in the last decade, as evidenced by their continuing capacity to attract overseas students.

But, whatever differences there may be, as an Academy we warmly welcome the emphasis on strengthening diplomatic skills, languages and the historical work of the FCO. We should be ready to explore ways in which, in addition to those I have mentioned, we can make a positive and independent contribution to the long and interesting story of the United Kingdom’s engagement with the rest of the world.

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An audio recording of the event, plus a link to the full text of William Hague’s speech, can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/events/2012/mhir.cfm

³ www.britac.ac.uk/policy/Lost_For_Words.cfm