

An irresistible argument

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In his address to the Annual General Meeting on 16 July 2015, Lord Stern of Brentford presented the case for continued investment in the humanities and social sciences. This article is an edited version of that Presidential Address.

A major event this year was, of course, the General Election. Following the outcome of the Election, I have sought to engage with the new Government and its policies. I have exchanged correspondence with the Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer, and it is clear that the role of the British Academy and its ability to contribute the best of scholarship to help examine the great issues of our time is well understood.

There was a special Budget last week. The Chancellor affirmed continued support for research excellence. We know that he is personally committed to science and research – and that can only be encouraging – as is the Prime Minister, as I know from my membership of the Council for Science and Technology, the highest advisory body on science and research.

We will not know the outcome for the ‘science budget’ – which funds research in universities, including humanities and social sciences, and also the national academies¹ – until the Government Spending Review in the autumn. The new Minister for Universities and Science, Jo Johnson, has declined to be drawn on likely funding levels, but it was encouraging that the science budget was excluded from in-year cuts recently announced. BIS – the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, which funds universities and research – has to shoulder major cuts in its budget. I understand that efforts are being made within BIS to accommodate those cuts while protecting the science budget so far as possible. There is also a major capital commitment running currently. Nevertheless the funding prospect is tough.

Together with partners, the British Academy will contribute creatively and positively to this debate. We have

1. The British Academy, the Royal Society, the Royal Academy of Engineering, and the Academy of Medical Sciences.

a powerful story to tell about the importance of research for innovation, growth and quality of life. Research is, of course, important in its own right as well as for its practical benefits. It is natural that governments will want to prioritise those benefits, especially at a time of major economic challenges. Here our argument is surely irresistible: it is knowledge that drives innovation and growth, and enables us to prosper wisely. It is important to stress that prosperity has many dimensions, not all of them easily measurable, and not to forget the ‘wisely’. This is not just about economic growth, important as that is – it is about quality of life and community and the full range of human flourishing – the things that are at the front of the humanities and social sciences.

In the past few weeks I can report that – in consultation with the Cabinet Secretary – the British Academy has drawn together senior policy-makers, Fellows and other experts to discuss ways in which policy could be developed to tackle two major national challenges: how to improve the UK’s productivity (on which the Government released a policy paper last week),² and how to respond to rising levels of obesity, especially among the young. We plan to engage further with both issues this coming autumn.

Building a stronger future

Yesterday I joined with Presidents of our sister national academies in an appearance before the new Commons Science and Technology Committee. We followed the Minister, in what to my mind was powerful symbolism, recognising that the four academies speak for the research community, and that they speak with one voice. We were able to reinforce the message of our joint publication from earlier this year, *Building a stronger future*:³ that if you are serious about seeking growth and innovation, it

2. HM Treasury, *Fixing the foundations: Creating a more prosperous nation* (Cm 9098; July 2015).

3. In February 2015, the British Academy, together with the other national academies – the Royal Society, the Royal Academy of Engineering, and the Academy of Medical Sciences – issued a joint statement, ‘Building a stronger future: Research, innovation and growth’. The statement may be found at www.raeng.org.uk/resandinnov

is vital that you invest in science and research.

We urged four priorities to make the UK the location of choice for world-class research, development and innovation.

- Place research and innovation at the heart of plans for long-term economic growth.
- Secure prosperity by strengthening public investment in research and innovation.
- Meet demand for research skills through a flexible and diverse workforce.
- Strengthen policy by embedding expert advice across government.

We also urged government to raise investment in research and development to that of comparable international levels. As a proportion of GDP our expenditure is substantially below the OECD average and around half that of leading countries. The Minister made the point that UK research is world class, and vital for innovation and growth: to which the obvious response is that that is where we should be investing.

The British Academy has for some years now sought to emphasise a community of interests with the other disciplines. I firmly believe the humanities and social sciences should avoid any kind of false competitiveness with science, technology, engineering and medicine. The disciplines are intertwined and mutually supportive. It is not zero-sum: if the overall settlement is strong, then our disciplines will do well too. I continue to be struck by the support that the other academies express for our subjects: they too see that the major challenges cannot be tackled by science and technology alone, but need understanding of history, society, languages, cultures, behaviour. It is hard to develop effective interdisciplinary responses without strength across all areas of research.

Of course, national policies are not only about growth and the economy. The Academy has an important part to play in informing discussion on major issues across



At a public event held on 5 March 2015 entitled 'Tackling the Great Challenges of the 21st Century', Lord Stern, President of the British Academy, and Sir Paul Nurse, President of the Royal Society, discussed the new opportunities – and need – for collaboration between the different academic disciplines to respond to the big issues of our time. A video recording of the event can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/events/2015

the board, including such things as constitutional developments in the UK, the forthcoming EU referendum, housing,⁴ productivity, obesity, and so on. In this, the Academy seeks to make expertise available to shed light on the issues – its approach is analytical, rather than advocacy. The Academy is not a think-tank.

And while much of the focus is on the major challenges of public policy, we do not forget the many fascinating issues that scholars explore in their work that do not have a direct link to policy. Most of the British Academy's activities – lectures, conferences, fellowships, workshops, etc. – are of that nature. But you will at this time forgive me if I have focused on matters of consequence for the funding of research – and the Academy – on which all else depends.

Higher education matters

Whilst the Academy is studiously neutral on most matters of general public policy, we do have strong views on matters closer to home, those with a direct connection to research and higher education (HE).

In the Budget the Chancellor noted the excellence of the UK's universities: 'Britain's universities are one of the jewels in the crown of the economy and are vital to the country's future. The UK has four of the world's top 10 universities, second only to the US'.⁵ There are record numbers of students in HE, including record numbers from disadvantaged backgrounds (we must be watchful that the latest changes to grants do not undermine that), and record numbers of graduates in work (the latest Graduate Labour Market survey showed the highest employment rate for working age graduates since 2007, at 87.5 per cent). It is true that the 'graduate earnings premium' has slipped from 55 per cent to 45 per cent over the last decade, but HE is still an excellent investment for a young person or their family. And we all have a shared interest in sustaining the excellence of the HE system.

4. *UK Housing: Setting out the Challenge*. Output of a joint ESRC BritishAcademy Conference, 29 October 2014 can be downloaded via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/uk-housing

5. HM Treasury, *Summer Budget 2015* (HC 264; July 2015), p. 58.

Building a stronger future
Research, innovation and growth

THE ROYAL SOCIETY
BRITISH ACADEMY
ROYAL ACADEMY OF ENGINEERING
The Academy of Medical Sciences

Humanities and social sciences are real strengths for the UK: international league tables show that there are more UK institutions highly ranked for humanities and social sciences than for other disciplines. And, in open competition for European Research Council awards, it is in our disciplines that the UK has the strongest record.

Value

It is in the nature of this moment and the role of the British Academy that the emphasis of my words has been on arguing the case with government for the value of research and of the Academy's disciplines. We have a very powerful case to make. We should not be defensive. Indeed defensiveness can be self-defeating. At the same time we have to stand for quality and independence and must be clear and robust in our arguments.

Thus, amid ongoing discussion of how universities are funded, it is worth reminding ourselves *why* they are funded. And, in particular, why there is a value to university work and life that exceeds their ability to transfer specific skills and stimulate economic growth. A university is about more than the acquisition of competences, more than the total of 'impact' and 'learning outcomes' – terms that represent a narrow but sometimes dominant discourse of higher education. A university must be much more than a production arrangement for generating skills and qualifications. I certainly think that it is proper for an academy like this one to underline that education should have an exalted purpose, and a special place in society. We must

emphasise that a university is a place where a student learns to think and academics are free to pursue their thinking wherever it might lead, regardless of its potential cash value or the inconvenience to some of the ideas or conclusions that follow. When we put together *Prospering Wisely* a year ago, in which we sought to articulate the value of our disciplines, we deliberately did not put the economic case first.⁶ In a contemporary economy and society our disciplines do have enormous practical and economic value – but that is not the only or indeed the primary reason we should cherish and support them.

Farewell

The phrase 'and last but by no means least' has special poignancy for me and for all of us this afternoon. For today we also bid farewell to Dr Robin Jackson, Chief Executive and Secretary for the past nine years.

Onora O'Neill and Adam Roberts, my predecessors as President, and myself have all relied on Robin enormously. His steering, guidance and judgement have been hugely valuable. And it has been a working relationship which has brought warmth and friendship. I am deeply grateful. I am sure that this AGM will want to express its deepest gratitude, on behalf of the whole Academy, to Robin for all that he has done and achieved. We have been extraordinarily fortunate in having such an outstanding Chief Executive and Secretary.

6. *Prospering Wisely: How the humanities and social sciences enrich our lives* (February 2014). www.britishacademy.ac.uk/prosperingwisely



Elizabeth Mortimer was commissioned to create a bust of Dr Robin Jackson, who was retiring as the British Academy's Chief Executive and Secretary, having served since 2006. The finished bronze was unveiled at the Annual General Meeting on 16 July 2015.