

# Presidential Address by David Cannadine, 2019

## **Address by the President, Sir David Cannadine, to the Annual General Meeting of the British Academy, 18 July 2019.**

I have delivered many speeches during the past twelve months, as well as writing many letters to the newspapers – of which more later. But this is surely the most important address that any President is called upon to give, for it is the one special opportunity to catch up Fellows in person on what has been happening in and to the Academy since we last met, as well as in the wider world beyond, to which we certainly cannot be – and certainly have not been – indifferent.

Here at the Academy, too, there has been much change particularly at senior levels, with the resignation of the Chief Executive and several vacancies on the senior management team. We are putting in place a programme of ‘Academy Renewal’, and I am confident we will emerge as an even stronger institution as a result.

I am eager to report that the Academy staff and Officers have pulled together with great commitment, collegiality and goodwill during this difficult and challenging time. And, of course I want to thank Robin Jackson for emerging from retirement, as our latter-day Cincinnatus, for resuming the role of Chief Executive and Secretary, and for providing much needed continuity and much appreciated reassurance. I should also say that plans are now well advanced for the appointment of a new Chief Executive and Secretary, which I regard as a great and exciting opportunity.

Since this time last year, the Senior Management is much changed in other ways too. At our last AGM, I reported that we had recruited a new position of Director of Policy. The Policy team is making a significant impact across Whitehall in putting the case for the importance of the humanities and social sciences in government thinking and policy making, and also in providing ample evidence in support of that case. The Academy is also leading, with Professor Julia Black FBA from the LSE, on co-ordinating a broader coalition across the arts, humanities and social sciences, ranging from Peter Bazalgette to David Willetts, to press our case yet more strongly.

A few months ago, we said farewell to our Director of Research, and we will soon be appointing her successor. We have also recently recruited a new Director of Finance. By this time next year, then, we shall have in place a transformed and rejuvenated Senior Management Team to carry the Academy forward.

Two Vice-Presidents complete their terms this year – Ash Amin, our Foreign Secretary, and Roger Kain, our Vice-President for Research and Higher Education. Both have been exemplary in their devotion to the Academy, and the Academy owes them a great debt of gratitude. We welcome Simon Goldhill and Simon Swain into these positions. I also want to thank Roy Goode, who steps down from the Development Board after many long years of devoted engagement.

These are significant changes at the top of the Academy, as well as being great opportunities, and I must repeat that we have weathered them well, that we are weathering them well, and that the Academy will emerge from them stronger and better. I wish I could be as confident

that the significant changes that will be coming in Westminster and Whitehall in not much more than a week's time will be equally well-managed, positive and transformative, and that they might lead to some much-needed political stability and decisiveness. But I am not sanguine. Although I have only been in my Presidential post for two years, I have already worked with three Ministers for Universities, all of them good, and the minister incumbent, Chris Skidmore, the most sympathetic to our subjects and disciplines. But will he still be in office in ten days' time?

These are not the only uncertainties that the Academy faces, both for itself and on behalf of the subjects it represents. There may, or may not, be a Spending Review to be completed by the end of December, or it may be held over until the following year. We have a strong case to make for deserving more money to deliver our upscaled agenda, especially but not exclusively in terms of international engagement; but the state of the public finances is such that we must be braced for a much less sympathetic outcome. Although the main concern of the Augar review is further education rather than higher education, it has significant implications for universities in general and for humanities and social sciences in particular; but since it is so identified with Theresa May, no one knows whether it will be actually implemented or not, and even if it was, it would probably not be until 2021.

We also face uncertainty about future collaboration with our EU partners. As I am sure you know, the UK performs excellently in competitions such as those bids for research awards to the European Research Council, and the humanities and social sciences do disproportionately well in gaining funding compared to STEM subjects. Will this essential relationship continue after Brexit? We have strongly supported the need for the UK to negotiate the closest possible continuing association with what are termed EU Framework Programmes, including the ERC. But if not, will our government continue to provide the opportunities and resources for collaboration that the UK currently enjoys? What mechanisms would be created for such alternatives and would the humanities and social sciences continue to do as well as they do at present? The answers to these questions are: we actually do not know, and I am not sure who does.

A final uncertainty concerns the issue of open access, especially regarding journals. From one perspective, this is an exceptionally complex and detailed matter; from another, it is relatively simple and straightforward, as follows. The whole debate on open access is set up in terms of scientific journals, and the grant-based financing of the research that gets published in them. But the humanities and social sciences do not work like that, and there is a real danger that our subjects and our journals will be put at a serious disadvantage if the proposed new arrangements come to pass. Several Fellows have rightly raised this matter, both at Sections and in correspondence, and we have recently produced yet another document outlining our concerns and suggesting modifications to what is being proposed. We are hoping to give it maximum ventilation and publicity, but I fear the STEM juggernaut may be unstoppable.

This is but a specific example of the constant battle that we have to fight against the view that prevails in too many parts of Whitehall that STEM subjects are the only ones that matter. In fairness, I ought to say that that is not the view that prevails in BEIS, our sponsoring government department, and nor is it the view of my opposite number at the Royal Society, who wrote to *The Times* earlier this month to highlight the deficiencies of the current A-Level system that, and I quote, "forces people to science and maths versus arts and humanities as a zero-sum game." And the same point has been made by several of us at

meetings of the Council for Science and Technology which advises the Prime Minister on research, and where Patrick Vallance, the recently appointed Government Chief Scientific Adviser, is genuinely sympathetic to our subjects. But the name of that organisation is itself revealing, because although ostensibly concerned with all academic subjects, using the word 'science' in a continental sense, CST is in practice concerned overwhelmingly with science, medicine and technology.

And although I hope some impending changes in its composition and membership may shift that balance more in our favour, the prevailing ethos at the Department of Education is that the more people who take STEM subjects at A-Level and study them at university, the better it will be for them, and the better it will be for the country. Innovation will thrive, the economy will go from strength to strength, graduates will earn more, and never mind the arts, humanities and social sciences, because as a result, all will be for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

Please believe me when I say that I do not caricature these arguments, if such they can be called, by very much. But I am eager to reassure Fellows that we are making greater efforts than ever before to speak up on behalf of our own subjects. I spend a great deal of time talking to ministers and mandarins in Whitehall, I have written many letters to *The Times* and *The Guardian*, and I have spoken up for our subjects on the *Today* programme, as have several other Fellows, notably Diarmaid MacCulloch and Catriona Seth. The Comms team has been working tirelessly to get the Academy better known among journalists and across the media, there has been a three-fold growth in inquiries that have come our way from them, and recent polling suggests that wider awareness of the Academy has significantly increased across the last twelve months.

We have made headlines with our policy programmes examining issues such as skills, languages and declining appetite for subjects such as theology and religious studies. We are in demand from policy-makers who are flocking to our briefings – just last week we welcomed over 100 civil servants to a session on research methods, the Summer Showcase held at the end of last month attracted almost 2,000 visitors – many of them new to the Academy, and the feedback was overwhelmingly positive – and the Academy has been using its considerable convening power to bring together academics, key figures in civil society, and decision makers to learn about the work we are doing on topics as varied as The Future of the Corporation, Modern Slavery, Sustainable Development, and Cities and Infrastructure.

In one way or another, all of these activities that I have been describing (and they are only a limited selection) showcase the activities, celebrate the work, and acclaim the involvement of the Fellowship in everything that we do. Although it is true that I yield to no one in my admiration for our devoted staff and the work they do, which is so often far beyond the call of duty or obligation, I am constantly reminded that it is the Fellows who in every sense make the Academy what it is, and that the Academy works best, and justifies its existence most convincingly, when we bring our Fellows into contact and into conversation with those broader audiences that it is the ultimate purpose of the humanities and social sciences to connect with and engage with.

More than ever, we are reaching out internationally, and drawing in ever larger and more diverse audiences to learn about what our Fellows do and why what they do matters – both intrinsically and for its own sake, but also for the public benefit and enrichment it provides. And it is those beliefs and those activities that underlie and inform our exciting plans to

transform this building, creating new spaces in our basement, and installing the latest IT equipment, which will enable us to reach wider audiences than ever before, here in London, across the country and around the world.

This time last year I was able to report that BEIS, our sponsoring department, had given us a one-off grant of £14 million, to enable us to extend the lease on 10 and 11 Carlton House Terrace from 30 to 125 years. This was the essential precondition for undertaking any serious building works, and last autumn our plans received a significant endorsement and boost from the Wolfson Foundation, which gave the Academy an unprecedented gift of £10 million – unprecedented for us and, indeed, unprecedented for them. We have committed a further £1 million from the Academy's reserves to this project and we are actively pressing other donors to help us reach our target.

I noted in my remarks last year that we were living in difficult times: where xenophobia, intolerant nationalism, hostility to ideas and evidence-based learning were becoming all too widespread; where the political climate in this country was in many ways worrying; and where the outcome of Brexit seemed at best uncertain and at worst gave cause for serious anxiety. I cannot, alas, report that matters have improved in the interim: rather the contrary.

Be that as it may, and despite or perhaps even because of our own local difficulties, I can also report that the Academy itself, over the last year, has shown exceptional vigour, energy and commitment in championing the disciplines we represent and in proclaiming the values for which we stand. We shall continue to do so during the year ahead, and I remain both honoured and grateful to serve as your President.