

Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences: Why Should We Care?

The British Academy's Director of External Relations, Tim Brassell, reports how the Academy has been corraling evidence of the public value of the humanities and social sciences

WELL BEFORE the General Election of 2010 it became clear that financial clouds would darken the higher education and research landscape. The years of steady growth and rising public investment were numbered. Tough debates about national priorities, economic and public value and demonstrable impact lay ahead.

By their nature, there are no simple, stark answers to questions such as 'What do the arts, humanities and social sciences do for the UK?', or conversely 'What is at stake if there are major cuts to public investment in these areas?' However, as its contribution to this inevitable and perfectly legitimate debate, the British Academy started to draw together a set of narrative arguments that could illustrate the economic, social and cultural contribution that research and scholarship in our disciplines makes to the UK's health, wealth and international reputation.

The resulting booklet, *Past, Present and Future: The Public Value of the Humanities and Social*

Sciences, also contains ten case studies that illustrate this impact – ranging from the way research on different kinds of social disadvantage influenced the billion pound 'Sure Start' initiative, to how Nicholas Stern's seminal report on climate change has influenced government policies around the world.

Launch

The booklet was launched at the House of Commons on 17 June 2010, in partnership with the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Economic and Social Research Council, Universities UK (UUK), and the Russell and 1994 Groups. Lord Patten, the Chancellor of Oxford and Professor Steve Smith, President of UUK, joined our President, Sir Adam Roberts, in speaking of the importance of sustained public funding for science and research.

The publication and event received considerable media attention and political recognition. In his speech to University Vice-

Chancellors on 15 July, the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, Vince Cable, acknowledged how 'what my father used to describe as "arty farty" subjects feed into the rapidly growing and successful industries like creative design, publishing and music. Many employers simply want people who can think clearly, which is why study of philosophy or history or classics is a lot more than an interesting diversion. An essentially utilitarian take on universities doesn't necessarily mean philistinism. The British Academy report, *Past, Present and Future*, recently made this case more eloquently than I have.'¹

At the UUK Conference on 9 September, the Minister for Universities and Science, David Willetts, confirmed that 'a strong research base is vital for our future in a global knowledge economy – strong in both fundamental, curiosity-driven research and research applied to the challenges facing businesses and public services.'²



Figure 1. David Willetts MP, Minister for Universities and Science, beside Sir Adam Roberts, President of the British Academy, at the Academy's panel discussion on 20 September 2010. Photo: David Graeme-Baker.

Debate

On 20 September, David Willetts took part in a British Academy panel discussion on 'Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences: Why Should We Care?', to debate the issues raised by the Academy's booklet.

Professor Geoffrey Crossick, Vice-Chancellor of the University of London, argued that humanities research increased understanding of some of the toughest issues facing modern society, including global security and terrorism, an ageing society and the ethics of stem cell research. 'The complaint is sometimes made that humanities don't give clear answers and this is often true,' he said. 'People are complex – shaped by language, identities, history, faiths, cultures – but humanities help us understand that complexity.'

Dame Hazel Genn FBA, Dean of the Faculty of Laws at University College London, argued that 'social science is a critical resource to society and to government'. It provided crucial insights in comprehending the world – the behaviour of individuals, groups and whole societies – and how structures influence, constrain or encourage particular behaviour. And 'the partnership between social and natural science is the key to facing and effectively managing the challenges that confront our society' – whether climate change, family structures and stability, demographic change, public health and well-being, or economic stability and regulation (Figure 2).

Value

David Willetts began his response by seeking to reassure the audience that 'I understand –



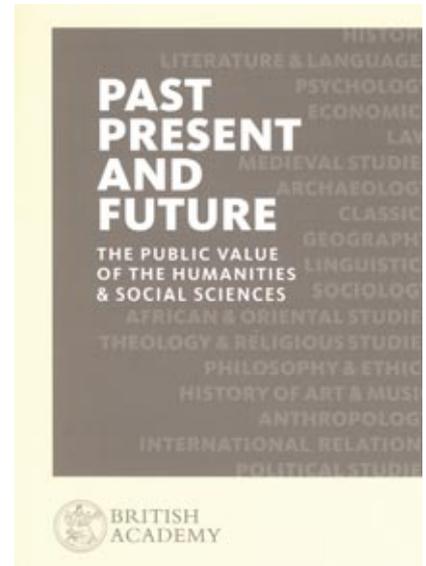
and not just me, the Government understands – the value of the disciplines – the arts, humanities, and social sciences – represented here this evening.' His own recent book, *The Pinch*, 'was only possible because of an extraordinary amount of research from social scientists and others, on which I shamelessly drew.'

He commended *Past, Present and Future* for the way it provided 'exactly the right arguments put in the right way at the right time', adding that 'something that comes out very clearly is the sheer strength of the links between the humanities and the social sciences and public policy and public debate.' And he reiterated the point that these disciplines 'contribute enormously to our national life and our national economy.'

The Minister went on, 'One of the most important and attractive features of some of the disciplines represented here today is the importance of individual scholarship. And I pay tribute here to the role of the British Academy in supporting individual scholars who make ground-breaking discoveries without necessarily being dependent on quite such large-scale pieces of equipment as are sometimes necessary for advance in the physical sciences.'

David Willetts concluded, 'So yes, what goes on in the arts, humanities and social sciences is worthwhile in its own right. There are challenges because of the fiscal position we are in. There is absolutely no desire on the part of government to pick on arts, humanities and social sciences as somehow of less value than other disciplines: we have not fallen prey to the belief in that kind of reductionism. There will be tough decisions to take, but I know that all of us around the table who are participating appreciate the power of the arguments set out in this excellent British Academy pamphlet.'

Figure 2. Former Chancellor, Lord Nigel Lawson, and Sir John Vickers FBA, at the British Academy Forum on 'The future of banking: stability, competition and regulation', held on 30 September 2010. Sir John is chairman of the Government's Independent Commission on Banking.



Notes

- 1 Vince Cable, Secretary of State, Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 'Higher Education', speech at London South Bank University, 15 July 2010.
- 2 David Willetts, speech at the Universities UK annual conference, 9 September 2010. He went on to say, 'Public funding for university research will continue to be delivered through independent arms-length bodies – including the national academies which support outstanding individual scholars – and distributed on the basis of excellence determined by expert peer review and assessment.' A video and transcript can be found via www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Events/Annual-Conference-2010.

Past, Present and Future: The Public Value of the Humanities and Social Sciences can be downloaded via www.britac.ac.uk/policy/

Audio recordings of the panel discussion 'Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences: Why Should We Care?' may be found via www.britac.ac.uk/medialibrary