



# Interview Helen Wallace

This is the latest in a series of interviews with Fellows of the British Academy, showing leading humanities and social sciences academics at work.

Dame Helen Wallace was previously Professor in the European Institute at the London School of Economics. Since 2011 she has been the British Academy's Foreign Secretary, with overall responsibility for the Academy's busy programme of international activities.

## **What was the initial spark that first made you want to work in and study international relations?**

I didn't really start studying international relations. I did a Classics degree, which I suppose with hindsight you could call ancient European studies. I then decided I'd like to be more contemporary, and jumped two millennia to contemporary European studies. I did that just around the time Britain was, for the second time, trying to become a member of the European Economic Community.

My parents were both graduates: my father was a classicist, my mother a linguist. They were both very much engaged in policy and the political, and had met working at Bletchley Park.<sup>1</sup> The fact that they were both linguists of one kind or another I think meant that we were brought up being very aware that Britain wasn't the only place in the world. Both of them were schoolteachers, and my father then became a university teacher.

## **Your interest in contemporary European affairs was very timely.**

There is something about being caught up with what's going on around you. After I'd done my degree in Classics, I went and studied for a year in Belgium in 1967-68. I saw the television broadcast in which General de Gaulle for the second time said, 'No, the United Kingdom shall not join the European Community.' But then de Gaulle passed on his way and the application was revived, and then it became very engaging. At the time, there were very few people in Britain who were following the European story, and it was quite exciting to be in at the beginning of that story and to be one of the first people doing academic research on it.

1. For more on Bletchley Park, see in this issue Nigel Vincent & Helen Wallace, 'Lost without translation: Why codebreaking is not just a numbers game', pp. 42-46.

It's one of the paradoxes of Britain's relationship with the rest of Europe that, in matters academic and intellectual, the British are often much more proactive than people in other European countries. So during the 1970s several British universities set up European studies departments – I worked in one of them in Manchester. I was an officer of the University Association for Contemporary European Studies in my twenties, in a period when this British association was much bigger than that in any other country. Similarly now Britain has far more foreigners working in its academic life than is true in other European countries. We've always been very open and engaged.

## **Have you always been interested in the practical policy dimension?**

I've always been interested in the interconnection between the academic world and the world of practice. I was brought up in a very political family where we were always involved in elections and political activity of various kinds; it is in the blood.

For my PhD thesis, I interviewed many senior policy-makers in the then six member states of the European Economic Community and produced some written work on that. So I was able to come back as a very young PhD student to talk to senior British officials. They said, 'Tell us what they said! Tell us what they said!' That was good fun.

I've done a lot of teaching of plurinational groups of students ever since the mid-1970s. In particular, I developed courses – when most other people didn't think it was possible – in how to negotiate in a European context. And wherever I was teaching I ran simulation exercises: I ran them both for civil servants and for students; I ran them both in Britain and in other countries. Many of my former students went on to become practitioners – I currently have two prime ministers, one in Finland and



one in Denmark. That is the contribution of academic experience, I suppose, to the world of practice.

I don't have a conventional academic background. I worked for several years at the Civil Service College, where I was responsible for a programme of training courses on European affairs and also wider international relations. I then went and worked in the Royal Institute of Affairs, Chatham House, which is also an intermediate organisation between the world of academics and the world of practice.

After that I went to the University of Sussex. This was shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and one of the things we did, working with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, was to develop a programme for bright youngsters from Central and East European countries to come and learn about how the European Union operated. Many of those went on to help their own countries make the transition from the Soviet empire to democratic, liberal market economies. It was very interesting to have been able to see that interface.

With colleagues, I developed a textbook, *Policy-Making in the European Union*, the seventh edition of which was formally published on 25 December 2014. That has become a standard text and is used extensively in many different countries. Because earlier editions were co-edited with my husband, it was known as 'Wallace & Wallace', but apparently some students call it 'Wallace & Gromit'!

### **Can you give any examples of where you have been able to influence policy-making?**

These are hard stories to tell about oneself, because we all want to think we've had some importance, don't we? Others have to make that judgement. There are specific occasions when one may have had a particular impact on a particular piece of policy – maybe yes sometimes, maybe no sometimes.

I was quite involved in the discussion in the early 1980s – because I also worked in the Foreign Office for a bit – on what became the 1992 single market programme, and was involved both inside government and then at Chatham House in bringing people together to discuss ways of turning what had been a set of rather miscellaneous ideas into a more orchestrated single market strategy. Maybe what I did made a little bit of difference.

### **Do you think politicians and civil servants listen to academics?**

I don't think one can generalise about that. Some academics are more articulate than others in explaining to the world of practice the results of their knowledge and expertise. Some practitioners, whether politicians or civil servants, are more interested than others in listening to people from outside the beltway. Wherever I've worked and whatever subjects I've worked on, I've always been interested in trying to encourage that exchange.

Let me give you an example from what is now quite a long time ago. In the early 1980s the Labour Party had a policy that was very hostile to the European Community, and indeed fought one General Election with a commitment to negotiate Britain's withdrawal from the European Community. We've heard this story before and we're going to hear it again. One of the things I tried very hard to do at Chatham House, as the Labour Party had been beginning to rethink its European policy – despite my not being a member of the Labour Party – was to provide opportunities for people from the Labour Party to inform themselves, and to move beyond the slogans and the headlines to a deeper understanding of Europe. Those of us who were involved in that helped enable the Labour Party to develop a very different approach which, from my point of view, was a more sensible one.



### **Is Europe going to be a key issue in the forthcoming General Election?**

I am not sure I would quite say that the European issue is going to be a big topic in this Election campaign. What we know from public-opinion evidence is that Britain's relationship with the rest of Europe is quite low in salience for the median voter: it is something like ninth or tenth on the list of topics listed by importance. What we also know, however, is that immigration is very near the top of the list of salient topics, and latterly the immigration issue and the European issue have been conflated. So, whether it is the European issue or the immigration issue, and how that will turn out, we shall see.

Of course, because of the new configuration of parties in the United Kingdom, there is an expectation that attitudes on this mix of immigration and European policy may have a very important bearing on the final outcome. What I think is very clear is that, if we end up on 8 May with a situation where no single party has a majority in the House of Commons, which many people regard as very possible, the European issue will figure very prominently in any negotiations that take place about creating a composite government from several parties.

We also know that the European issue is extremely divisive for the Conservative Party, and although this may not play out so obviously in the Election campaign as such, it is going to play out in the politics within the Conservative Party after the Election. But the real test will come if and when an EU referendum is held.

### **Can academics help inform the debate about Europe?**

Academics may be able to contribute background and insights and expertise that others may draw on.

But my sense of the European debate is that many people have rather fixed opinions. There are three segments of opinion on the European issue. There is a small Europhile segment, a larger Eurosceptic segment (a mix of soft and hard Euroscepticism), and in between there are people for whom the issue is not terribly important, and who might swing in either a more pro or a more anti direction. The assumption is often made that those 'don't know' and 'not quite sure' people will be influenced by reasoned argument. In the closing stages of the Scottish independence referendum campaign, arguments were made about the potential outcomes for the Scottish economy of independence, and some people infer from that that similar arguments will be very important in the European case. I am not entirely sure that those cognitive dimensions will carry the same weight on a European issue.

My guess and my expectation are that the affective arguments – that is to say the emotional, the heart rather than head arguments – may turn out to be very important, and those are harder ones for academics to gain traction on. But they may be some of the ones to which, if we at the British Academy want to think of engaging with these issues, we should give some serious thought.

### **The European Union is very important in funding academic research, and the British Academy has contributed to discussions about the EU's research**

### **and innovation programme, Horizon 2020. In December 2014, you wrote to the Prime Minister expressing concern about a recent European Commission proposal affecting Horizon 2020.<sup>2</sup> What are your concerns about?**

We at the British Academy have been very involved throughout the whole of the period in which Horizon 2020 has been put together in trying to plead the cause of having a vibrant, robust, European research framework programme, and also arguing that the role of humanities and social sciences should be firmly in the middle of that and not at the margins. We have worked together quite hard with colleagues in other European academies on that. We had the previous European commissioner here a couple of years ago,<sup>3</sup> who made some helpful statements which were not entirely followed through, latterly because of the wider problems in the European economy.

The new President of the Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, has proposed establishing a new investment fund, but he hasn't got any euros to put in there, so he needs to find them from somewhere, and one of the ways is to raid the budget for Horizon 2020. All of us in the scientific community have been quite upset about that. We have a particular worry that the social science and humanities part of the Horizon 2020 budget may be particularly vulnerable. So we, amongst others, have been trying to make the case that, if you want to invest in a dynamic future in Europe, spending on scientific research in the broadest sense is actually one very important part of that. So don't undermine a good instrument you've already got; set that alongside other things that you may want to develop.

There's a lot of competition for the ear of those who develop public policy on higher education matters and on research matters. We in the British Academy – latterly with our sister academies in the European grouping – have had some considerable success in getting our voice heard on European research issues. Whether it is always taken notice of is another question.

### **Am I right in thinking that British-based academics are actually rather successful in securing research funding from the EU?**

Academics based in British institutions have been extremely successful in the past record of funding, both from the main framework programmes and from the new European Research Council. People based in British and German universities level-peg each other a bit – given the strength of Germany as a country with robust science, that is a good place to be. On some statistics, the British-based applicants outperform the German ones. What is interesting from the point of view of the British Academy is that, in particular with funding from the European Research Council, British-based applicants from the social sciences and humanities have been spectacularly successful – even more successful than British-based applicants in the natural sciences. We should be very

2. [www.britishacademy.ac.uk/news/news.cfm/newsid/1198](http://www.britishacademy.ac.uk/news/news.cfm/newsid/1198)

3. Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, 'The future of social sciences and humanities in Horizon 2020', *British Academy Review*, 19 (January 2012), 20–23.

pleased about the ability of high quality work in the humanities and social sciences by scholars based in this country to be judged so successful in what are highly competitive programmes. The statistics on this are very impressive.<sup>4</sup>

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**In the 1970s and 1980s, the British Academy played an important role in facilitating academic exchange with the Soviet Union and China. In September 2014, the British Academy welcomed a delegation from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and in November 2014 it held a workshop on cultural interactions between Britain and Russia. How important are these continuing academic connections with Russia and China?**

British institutions, including the British Academy and Chatham House, where I worked during the 1980s, were important partners in enabling soft contacts to take place with communist countries, and in providing opportunities for academics or quasi-academics to meet each other and discuss matters of common interest. This was in a period when, for those communist countries, the way the gatekeeping worked meant you had to have authorised channels in order for contacts to take place. That is much less true now than it was, so we need to find other ways of working with colleagues in those other countries.

The academy-to-academy relationships continue to be important as a way of channelling some of our contacts – and that is why we have ‘Memoranda of Understanding’ with Chinese opposite numbers. But we know that these should not be understood as the exclusive means of contact, because China is changing and we need to be responsive to that change.

The Russian question is a different one and a good one, and I think it is one we need to give some further thought to. It is hard to see what the trajectory of change in Russia is. It had apparently been becoming more democratic, and it is now apparently becoming more authoritarian. That is beginning to make it quite difficult for Russian scholars, and it makes us have to think quite carefully about how to develop our relationship with Russian counterparts, who are obviously important. Russia is an important country.

What we have done rather more of in the last two or three years is to thicken up some of our relationships with other parts of the world. We cannot do everything equally vigorously, so we sometimes have to make choices about priorities.

**In December 2014 the British Academy held a conference on ‘Emerging Prosperity in Emerging Economies’.<sup>5</sup> What’s the importance of this?**

4. In the 2013 round of European Research Council (ERC) Advanced Grants, UK-based researchers in humanities and social sciences (HSS) subjects won 28% of awards, more than any other country. In the 2014 round of ERC Starting Grants, UK-based researchers in HSS subjects won 25% of awards, again more than any other country.  
5. This event built on a two-day conference held by the British Academy in October 2013 on ‘Emerging Powers Going Global’. Video recordings of the presentations can be found via [www.britishacademy.ac.uk/emerging\\_powers](http://www.britishacademy.ac.uk/emerging_powers)



Dame Helen Wallace FBA, the British Academy's Foreign Secretary, welcomes delegates to the conference on ‘Emerging Prosperity in Emerging Economies’, held at the Academy in December 2014. Photo: Jon Ball.

The term ‘emerging economies’ is a bit of a flavour-of-the-month title, obviously, but the underlying point is important. The shape of the world really has changed and continues to change. It had been so much simpler, apparently, to understand that old bipolar world. All of us have got to re-think the world that we see around us, and we need now not only to have deep understanding of developments within individual countries, but also to get some sense of the patterns that cut across different parts of the world. What we have done in a variety of activities, including that conference on emerging powers, is try to identify some global issues and look at the way they are expressed and addressed in different countries.

I remember at one of our conferences talking to a contributor from Thailand who was a health specialist, who said how much he had enjoyed listening to the Mexican speaker on the same panel. He would never have thought of himself comparing Thailand with Mexico, but actually it had been very interesting to see that there were some of the same dilemmas and different ways of responding to them. To be able to put together these slightly unlikely combinations can turn out to be really quite rewarding.

What we are also in the business of doing is trying to ensure the Academy does what it can to promote, develop, reinforce expertise of a deep kind on some of those other countries which are becoming either much more important in the way that China is, or which are much more troubled in the way that is the case in parts of the Middle East currently. In the British Academy, we have an obligation and an opportunity to show the value of ensuring that we safeguard expertise on these important developments.

**The first awards have just been made under two new British Academy schemes – Newton Advanced Fellowships and Newton Mobility Grants – and these again have something of an ‘emerging economies’ focus, covering countries such as Brazil,**

**Mexico, South Africa, Turkey and Vietnam. How important is the British Academy's role in helping to bring overseas academics to Britain to conduct research and collaboration with UK academics?**

It is important that we are able to do as much as we can in two respects. We help to bring very talented people from other countries to work in Britain and with British colleagues, some of whom will stay and contribute to scientific research and academic strengthening in the United Kingdom, which is very welcome. We are also in the business of helping countries in other parts of the world to strength their own research capacity and capability.

The Newton Fund under which these new schemes are made possible, and which is still in its early phases, provides an opportunity for us to help colleagues in the partner countries become higher-performing in their own fields of research. That is a valuable piece of external activity for us. We get huge rewards if we manage to find good partners, and hopefully the countries concerned will also be able to strengthen their own capacity.

**The Newton International Fellowships provide opportunities for outstanding foreign early-career scholars to come and conduct research in this country. In the current climate of opinion about immigration, how important is it that academic exchange across borders is not impeded?**

Most academics are committed to the view that intellectual endeavour and collaboration should be able to cross borders easily, and that talented scholars from different countries should be able to be in touch with each other and work with each other to get the best they can out of their shared field of work. There are lots of different ways of doing that, but that includes making it possible for scholars from other countries – at whatever stage of their careers – to be able to come to the United Kingdom easily.

We have got into a total panic in Britain about migration. We have got ourselves into a muddle about the role of student and academic migration amongst the rest. British universities are service exporters, in providing education for so many foreign students. But as others have commented – including the very good

piece by Sir James Dyson in the *Guardian*<sup>6</sup> – we should not make it too difficult for those people to stay on and contribute to the British economy.

I have a son who is in the United States at the moment on a postdoctoral project. He cannot currently leave the US and then return to the US because his visa status in the US has to be changed before he is able to do that. So I see this from the point of view of my family in another country, as well. It is horrid.

We in the British Academy and the other UK national academies would say the same thing: that we would prefer to see the questions of academic exchange, whether of established faculty or of students, removed from the conventional migration statistics and understood in a different way.

**In November 2014 the British Academy held an event on 'Contested Approaches to Conflict, Stability and Security: Rethinking State Fragility', and in December there was the meeting on 'The Geography of Poverty'.<sup>7</sup> Do these sorts of topics have strategic significance for the UK, or are they just academically interesting?**

There is obviously a case for saying that scholars should be free to roam across whatever subjects they find interesting, irrespective of whether there's a wider public interest in the topic. You can take that so far, but only so far. To the extent that scholars are dependent on public funding to pay for their posts and to enable them to do their research, I think there's some obligation to show what the 'value added' for society is. It is not unreasonable that the 'so why?' and the 'so what?' questions should be asked of an academic – although I would hate it to be the case that each piece of research had to be justified in terms of its wider public interest.

There is a wonderful story about how the Mayan Code was broken. A Soviet scholar in what was then Leningrad, who had never left Leningrad, was the first person in

6. [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jan/04/theresa-may-foreign-postgraduates-students-qualification-vote-dyson](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jan/04/theresa-may-foreign-postgraduates-students-qualification-vote-dyson)

7. For the October 2014 seminar on 'Social Innovation and Creative Responses to Global Urban Challenges', see in this issue Adam Greenfield, 'Urban challenges: Toward real and lasting social innovation', pp. 24-26. Information about all these events can be found via [www.britishacademy.ac.uk/international](http://www.britishacademy.ac.uk/international)

**The Newton Fund** is a £375 million fund operated by the UK's Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Through the Newton Fund, the UK will use its strength in research and innovation to promote the economic development and social welfare of partner countries. By working together on bi-lateral and multi-lateral programmes with a research and innovation focus, the UK will build strong, sustainable, systemic relationships with partner countries. The Newton Fund is part of the UK's Official Development Assistance (ODA) commitment. The British Academy is one of several UK delivery partners for the Newton Fund and is working with a number of partners overseas to provide fellowship and mobility grant opportunities.

For the first round of its new Newton Fund calls, the British Academy has made over 40 awards to researchers across the social sciences and humanities, committing £1.5 million of funding. These awards will develop the skills and capacity of researchers in Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, and Turkey.



More information about the Newton Fund and future calls can be found via [www.britishacademy.ac.uk/newtonfund](http://www.britishacademy.ac.uk/newtonfund)



effect to decode the Mayan symbols. He would never have been explicitly funded in the 1950s in Leningrad to study the Mayans. What a wacky thing to do. There needs to be room for wacky choices like that, and his story is a great one.

That having been said, quite a lot depends on what you think the position and responsibilities of the United Kingdom are as a country. If we, in the United Kingdom, think that the country has some global aspirations – it certainly has global history, and there are footprints of British presence all around the world – and if we believe that that global character is important, then we have got to equip ourselves to make sense of it. And that includes ensuring that we have in the country expertise and depth of understanding of other countries and other parts of the world, otherwise we are going to make fools of ourselves.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, you could say – and I would say – that had a little more thought been given to a deep understanding of Iraq in 2003, maybe the British government might have taken a different decision and maybe Iraq would be a less stressed place than it now is. If, on the other hand, you take the view that we are just living on a few islands off the north-west coast of Europe, it doesn't matter so much whether we have got deep expertise about the Arab world or China or whatever. We can bumble along more modestly as a country, and pick and choose more casually as to what areas of academic expertise to promote.

**Through its series of British Academy International Forums, the Academy seeks to bring together academics and policy-makers for roundtable discussions about topical issues. What role do those meetings have?**

Policy-makers are always pulled in two different directions – between the pressures of today and whatever today's panics and problems are, and deeper and more long-run features and factors. I live with a member of the Government, and I see how he's pulled, day-by-day between long-term analysis, and panicked responses where one has to do something today, or if not today, tomorrow morning – and he is an academic by background. So we need to have some sympathy for the predicament of the politician and the policy-maker, because it isn't easy.

The invasion of Iraq is maybe a good illustration of that. It is not always easy for the practitioners to know when and how to ask for outside, more academic



Sir Adam Roberts, former President of the British Academy, shares a word with Lord Ashdown at the conference on 'Contested Approaches to Conflict, Stability and Security: Rethinking State Fragility', held at the Academy in November 2014. Photo: Jon Ball.

understanding, or for academics to know when and how to feed it in. Probably once upon a time, when there were much closer connections between some of the policy-makers and Oxford and Cambridge, maybe they had those discussions in their clubs in the evening. Then the world became more segmented and we have all gone into our silos. What those of us who care about the connection have to do is to try and provide ways to get both the academics and the practitioners out of their silos and to have opportunities to converse with each other, and to converse with each other in such a way that you might hope they would occasionally ring up and say, 'Hey, can we talk about such-and-such?'

With our series of British Academy International Forums, we have tried to provide a basis for some of those conversations to take place. We could do a lot more of that.

**What should the British Academy be doing more of?**

In the time I have been more closely involved, I think the British Academy has changed quite a lot. It has become much more involved in explicitly showcasing the strengths of the humanities and social science in the UK, and the importance of the humanities and social sciences in a broader global context. In some sense, we have to be evangelists for our own concerns, and that means using different ways of working from the conventional ways of publishing academic research. We keep having to exploit alternative vehicles for putting our message across, and we have to develop the public relations capability to do that effectively. I think we have made a great deal of progress on that, but there is still more to be done.

8. In March 2014 the British Academy published a report on *The Art of Attraction: Soft Power and the UK's Role in the World* ([www.britishacademy.ac.uk/softpower](http://www.britishacademy.ac.uk/softpower)). This was discussed in Adam Roberts, 'Global power, influence and perception in the 21st century', *British Academy Review*, 24 (Summer 2014), 13-15.