

# Understanding and changing: Care in enquiry and seriousness about values

*Nicholas Stern reflects on his four years as President of the British Academy*



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**In your inaugural speech as incoming President at the British Academy's Annual General Meeting in 2013, you identified that there was a world-wide lack of confidence in institutions and in politics. As a response to that, you concluded your address with a clarion call to the Academy to 'show what our special and vital community of outstanding scholars can contribute to a nation and to a world which is hungry for ideas.' How has that ambition been carried forward during your Presidency?**

That perspective has steered me through those four years. The lack of confidence in institutions and in politics that I pointed to four years ago has manifested itself quite strongly in events since

then. Remember, that was not so very long after the world financial crisis, which intensified such a decline in confidence – including in my own subject, economics. The world slowdown after the crisis, indeed recession in some countries, lasted a lot longer than some had hoped or expected. Of course, if they had understood their economics a bit better, they would have realised that it can take a long time to pull out of a financial crisis. It is not the same thing as a 'cyclical downturn'.

The events of 2016 – including the Brexit vote in the UK, and the election of Donald Trump in

the United States – appear, at least for some, to have embodied a severe and, in my view, worrying reaction to reason, to collaboration and to internationalism. And yet we had the extraordinary international agreements of 2015 – the UN Conference on Financing for Development in Addis Ababa in July, the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals at the UN in New York in September, and the COP21 Climate Agreement in Paris in December 2015. (I was involved in all of them, but particularly closely in the third.) And that continued into 2016 with the very rapid ratification and coming into force of the Paris agreement in October and November 2016, ten and eleven months, respectively, after the agreement. So, as we look hard at the consequences of the decline in confidence in institutions, politics and ideas, perhaps decline in confidence in the values of the Enlightenment, at the same time we should see that, for many, that internationalism lives on. Perhaps some of it is embodied in the election of Emmanuel Macron as the President of France, who spoke explicitly of the Enlightenment in his speech to the nation on the night of his election.

Early in my Presidency, we put out a British Academy publication called *Prospering Wisely*.<sup>1</sup> It was very deliberately titled. We wanted to introduce the idea of prosperity in all its dimensions, with its more classical meaning, and not just a narrowly economic one. The reference to wisdom was intended as a reference to scholarship in the

1. *Prospering Wisely: How the humanities and social sciences enrich our lives* was launched in February 2014. The booklet, together with interviews with Fellows of the British Academy, can be found via [www.britishacademy.ac.uk/prosperingwisely](http://www.britishacademy.ac.uk/prosperingwisely)

humanities and social sciences as a key part of what we understand as wisdom. The collection of insights in that publication has stood the test of time. I reread it every now and again, and am struck by the really creative, thoughtful and sensible contributions from Mary Beard, Onora O'Neill, John Kay, Adam Roberts and many other distinguished Fellows of the British Academy.

I often come back to Adam Roberts' statement in *Prospering Wisely*: 'I do not know of a single major problem that we face ... that does not require attention both from the physical sciences and from social sciences and humanities.'<sup>2</sup> That perspective, which I share very strongly, has been a key motivation of the way in which I have tried to take the British Academy forward and steer it during these last four years. Our collaboration with the other national academies – the Royal Society, the Royal Academy of Engineering, and the Academy of Medical Sciences – has been extremely important, and has been reciprocated by them with enthusiasm

and understanding. The best scientists know the importance of the humanities and social sciences, and the best people in the humanities and social sciences know the importance of science. They know it is not a horse race. They know that the integration and the exchanging of insights, the insights that come from the interweaving of disciplines, are extraordinarily important.

*Prospering Wisely* provided a sense of direction around public engagement. I have always argued that, instead of being defensive,

we should make the case for our subjects by *doing* them. If we are good at showing what they can do, people will see how valuable the insights are from the humanities and social sciences. And that has been the purpose behind the British Academy Debates. We began with two series on 'Ageing' and 'Immigration' in 2014. We followed those with series on 'Well-Being' and 'Energy and the environment' in 2015, and 'Faith' and 'Inequalities' in 2016; and in spring 2017 we have had 'Robotics, AI and Society', which has looked, *inter alia*, at the future nature of work. These British Academy Debates, which we took to all parts of the United Kingdom, have been aimed at the general public, and have featured real intellectual interchange and the fostering and sharing of ideas.<sup>3</sup> Through these events we have shown that, for example, you cannot, or perhaps

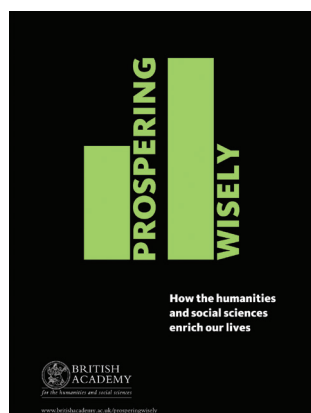
should not, talk about ageing without talking about psychology *and* the medical sciences *and* architecture *and* demography *and* Shakespeare if you want to understand the issues in their full depth and seriousness. And for energy and for robotics, the intersections between science and technology on the one hand, and the humanities and social sciences on the other, are intense. People have been able to see that we have to bring all these disciplines to the table in order to understand these issues of enormous public importance. We have to understand why things are changing so quickly on so many dimensions; why they will continue to change; and what is involved in taking the immense potential opportunities, whilst managing the dislocations and risks.

While the British Academy Debates have been a success, the way in which debate takes place has gone on changing during this period. Indeed, changes in the ways the public and academics interact with each other have accelerated, for example through social media and blogs. I suspect the British Academy may have initially been a little slow in adapting to this, but we are picking up, and that will be a big issue for my successor also.

### In the light of events in the last 12 months, do you think those new modes of communication bring with them risks to reasoned discourse?

This has been a worrying period from the point of view of intellectual discourse. During the American Presidential race, we had so much reference to 'alternative facts', which of course is another way of saying things that are not true. We have also had intense focus on narrow self-interest, and the distrust – indeed, sometimes the hatred – of the 'other'. We should be troubled by those two things: the attack on evidence and reason, suggesting that they can be dismissed or shaped as you wish; and the attack on values, in the sense of the fostering of narrowness, of making a virtue of self-interest, and of hostility to other people. Both those things are attacks on the Enlightenment, and it is the Enlightenment spirit that guides bodies such as the British Academy, the Royal Society, the British Museum,<sup>4</sup> and indeed academic life in general. We must intensify our efforts to bring care in enquiry and seriousness about values to centre stage.

But we also have to learn to put across ideas that are often deep and complex in a simple and succinct way, which at the same time does not do too much violence to their depth and complexity. We can learn something from the Pope. He has



2. *Prospering Wisely*, p. 2.

3. More information about these events can be found at [www.britishacademy.ac.uk/british-academy-debates](http://www.britishacademy.ac.uk/british-academy-debates).

4. As well as being President of the British Academy, Lord Stern is also a Fellow of the Royal Society, and has served as Deputy Chair of the Trustees of the British Museum for most of his period as President of the Academy (his term at the British Museum came to an end in October 2016).



'The Allegory of Good Government', fresco painted by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, Siena town hall, c. 1338-9.

spoken out for values that respect other people very strongly, and values that speak about responsibilities. On the environment and climate, he has said 'If we destroy Creation, Creation will destroy us'; and 'God always forgives, people sometimes forgive, but nature never forgives.' Those are memorable phrases which capture a key part of the argument in a very powerful way. Even if you might worry about some of how they are formulated – I have difficulty with the idea of Creation (and my father would have been very surprised to hear his son praising a Pope) – those are both examples of how deep, important ideas can be explained in ways that can be quite brief. We have to think hard about that, because it is a difficult thing to get right. But if we are to deal with bad arguments that can be expressed very quickly in snappy ways, we have, *inter alia*, to be able to express ourselves with good arguments in snappy, succinct ways. That is a talent which is scarce amongst academics. They can spend 10 or 15 minutes at the beginning of a lecture laying out the foundations – in an intellectual sense, clearing their throat. We have, at least for some purposes and interactions, to learn to do better than that.

**So we keep having to demonstrate the contribution that the humanities and social sciences can bring to contemporary discussions?**

I was a mathematics undergraduate at Cambridge when some of the argument between F.R. Leavis and C.P. Snow about the latter's *Two Cultures* was going on, and we were all very much intrigued by

what was being said. Professor Stefan Collini FBA has shown that, for all his vituperation and nastiness, Leavis comes out as the more subtle of the two.<sup>5</sup> Snow's presentation of a narrow determinism in terms of technology and science was crude and misleading. It is counter to what I have been saying about the importance of seeing science, in the Latin sense, as covering all knowledge.

The essence of what has been achieved across the British Academy's disciplines over the years can be exemplified by the work of some of my predecessors as President. I have already quoted Adam Roberts. Witness the profound work of Onora O'Neill around trust and morality. Her TED talk is a masterpiece of communication. Keith Thomas wrote a beautiful book on *The Ends of Life*. It is about what economists and psychologists might now talk about as well-being, but historians see these things just as deeply and with the wisdom of experience. Tony Wrigley in historical demography and Garry Runciman in historical sociology brought a great breadth and depth across and within disciplines, and in doing so changed our understanding in profound ways.

I have kept in my room over the years what is now a fading reproduction of Lorenzetti's frescoes in Siena, painted in the 14th century, on good governance and bad governance. He has one side of the picture where governance is good, where people are prospering and agriculture is productive, and trade works well; on the other side, he has bad governance, where people are impoverished and all

5. See, for example, Stefan Collini, 'Leavis v Snow: the two-cultures bust-up 50 years on', *Guardian* (16 August 2013).



kinds of backhanders are taking place. If you look at Shakespeare's interpretations of history, so much of them are about leadership and governance, values, choices and dirty deeds, and how badly things go wrong if governance or leadership is weak or people behave in deeply immoral or reprehensible ways. His drama is partly about the human condition, partly morality tale, partly in some sense about political science. *The Merchant of Venice* has strong lessons on the workings of law, finance, uncertainty and misjudgement. For Balzac, too, intrigue and finance were centre-stage. So too, what happens under stress and when values get frayed.

If you look at artists like Lorenzetti, playwrights like Shakespeare, novelists like Balzac, you find insights that are very modern, because they are perennial. Each generation may find different aspects in them. And if we forget or ignore those understandings – as I think we have seen on a major scale in recent times – we take ourselves into dangerous territory. And by keeping such sources under study, the humanities and social sciences deepen and broaden the insights we can gain from them. There is no sense in which everything about them has already been said. There is always so much more, and it gets richer.

I should also emphasise language and internationalism. As English becomes increasingly dominant as the language of international science and business, and of much of the internet, there is a danger that our understanding of the world becomes more narrow or superficial. The British Academy has rightly been active on this issue, an important example being our 2013 publication *Lost for Words*.<sup>6</sup>

**A major aspect of the first half of your Presidency was preparation for the Government's Spending Review, to argue the case for continued public funding for the humanities and social sciences.**

**Were you satisfied with the outcome?**

You have to be careful with the word 'satisfied'. But it was so much better than it might have been.

Sometimes academics think that they have an entitlement, that society should give them plenty of resources and let them do whatever they like with them. That cannot be right. We argue that it is greatly in society's interest to offer us the privilege of study and research, but we should recognise that, whilst it is, in our view, a wise investment, it is a privilege for ourselves. And it also comes with obligations: a budget is not a licence to spend, it is an obligation to deliver. I tried to articulate some of that with my colleagues in the 2016 review of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) which

I chaired. We, as academics, have to make the case that what we are doing is of great value, and that can often depend on being free and resourced to follow ideas where they take us. But our arguments must be sound, structured and evidence-based, although I have insisted on a very broad and deep sense of the meaning of 'great value'.

When we make that case for public funding, we have to recognise that economy in the use of resources is important; so to is an understanding how the UK political system works. I probably have some advantage in being an economist, and having spent three years inside the Treasury, as Second Permanent Secretary and Head of the Government Economic Service. We study institutions in the humanities and social sciences, and it is important that we understand the institutions with which we interact and exchange ideas and arguments.

We made our case together with the other three national academies. Our joint document – *Building a stronger future: Research, innovation and growth* – was of real quality in its argument and very effective. I should pay tribute to Paul Nurse, President of the Royal Society at that time, with whom I worked extremely closely in the run up to the 2015 Spending Review, including in meetings at the Treasury. The case was founded on the contribution of research to productivity and growth. But it was also about the contribution to society more generally, showing the importance of research, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, to understanding what human life is about.

It was extraordinary that during George Osborne's Spending Review, when the hatchet was being wielded right across public expenditure, and we had been asked to prepare scenarios for up to 30 per cent cuts, we got 'flat real' in the jargon. And then, in Philip Hammond's first allocation, we got a major increase for the research budget. So we have established the research side of the budget in the UK in a much stronger way than many anticipated was possible. In these discussions, the Prime Minister's Council on Science and Technology played an important role. The ex officio membership of the Presidents of the national academies is vital.

But you cannot take anything for granted. There is always a risk that circumstances can change. So we constantly have to demonstrate what we do by engaging in the big issues of the day. I am happy to say that the cheerful and productive collaboration with the Royal Society and the other academies continues.

**In 2013, you spoke of us being at 'a historic point of change'. And you have already acknowledged**

6. *Lost for Words: The Need for Languages in UK Diplomacy and Security* (November 2013).

**how eventful the last four years have been. Are you optimistic about the future?**

Yes and no. The extraordinary agreements of 2015 that I referred to earlier give us a global agenda that stands. It is the first global agenda since the days after the Second World War, when we had the creation of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the beginning of the European Community; and we had the Bretton Woods Conference and the institutions founded there – the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization. That was before decolonisation, and involved just 44 countries. And after the experience of the preceding 30 years – two World Wars and a Great Depression – there were powerful emotions and reasons to believe that coming together and trying to do things in a more ordered and collaborative way would be an improvement.

This time around, in 2015, we had nearly 200 nations coming together. It was after decolonisation, and there was no one ‘bossy’ nation (remember how powerful the United States was, relative to everybody else, in the late 1940s). And those 200 nations were not just looking back, they were anticipating problems, looking many decades ahead in the case of climate change. And they were setting development goals around which we could all collaborate, around what kind of societies we want to build, how we would try to tackle poverty, build sustainable cities and ecosystems, and referring strongly to education, health and gender issues. This was a very powerful and encouraging coming together. And in case of the Paris Agreement on climate change, which is now a year and a half old, country after country has come out very strongly, particularly after the Trump election, to say that ‘we carry on’: the transition to the low-carbon and sustainable economy is the only serious growth story, it is the attractive way to grow, gives us cities where we can move and breathe, and ecosystems that can have a chance of survival, be robust and deliver so much. It is also the right thing to do in terms of our collective responsibilities. So that makes me optimistic.

But the signs of narrow nationalism and hostility towards other people, outsiders, are also there. So, too, is the attitude that sees self-interest as license to disregard the future and the rights and well-being of those who follow. One of the reasons these attitudes are present is that we did not think hard enough about the increasing precariousness in our society and about some aspects of inequality. As social scientists, we did know what was going on. There have been many writings about inequality and uncertainty of income, including from my dear

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and longstanding friend Tony Atkinson, who sadly died in January 2017. But as academics as a whole, we probably missed some of the message and did not think hard enough about what the consequences could be, and about what conclusions might be drawn by those who had become more precarious in their living. You cannot blame people who see or experience dislocation and alienation for thinking that something has gone wrong, and objecting.

We did not think hard enough about how to manage change, and about how change would be seen. For example, so much of it has been put down to globalisation, when in fact more of it is about changing technology and the casualisation of work associated with changing technology. That casualisation has brought benefits for people who need flexibility in their work. Uber uses the capital equipment – the car – in a more efficient way, it uses people’s time more flexibly, and brings down cost to

the consumers. And this has been made possible by digitisation and IT, and a bit of creativity in the service sector. But it has consequences: it dislocates taxis, and raises issues around rights of workers. The changing nature of technology and work has been interwoven with globalisation. But a number of studies, whilst recognising the interactions, suggest that technology has been more important than globalisation in generating precariousness for some and very great riches for a few at the top. We are thinking more carefully about these things now. But if we had thought more deeply before, a better shared and more careful understanding could have led to better policies.

**You have been involved in various of the positive global developments we have been talking about – you were at COP21 in Paris. What dimension has the fact that you have been President of the British Academy brought to that?**

Usually I have been at the table as an economist – I am IG Patel Professor of Economics and Government at the London School of Economics (LSE). Or I have been there as somebody who has focused on the economics of climate change – I am Chairman of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment at the LSE. However, it has been important that I also badge myself as the President of the British Academy, because it signals the significance of all the humanities and social sciences in these issues. It is about speaking for the values of the Enlightenment, for reason and evidence, and for that broad view of what ‘science’ means.

It *has* made a difference. It has contributed to an identity and a presence that is more than just an economist with some experience in development and

public policy plying his trade. It has drawn attention to that key principle that you have to bring a full set of ideas to the table if you want to tackle the great problems of our times and the challenges of a rapidly-changing future. And I think it also shows a real commitment to quality as well. It is not just the breadth of our disciplines; it is the insistence on quality in their pursuit as well.

Being President of the British Academy has offered me constant enjoyment in the beauty and power of our subjects: talking to historians, psychologists, philosophers, linguists and other academics right across the whole spectrum, meeting people who are extraordinarily distinguished and listening to them. I would not have had anything like that depth of exposure, and it has been a great richness.

**What will you focus on when you cease being President of the British Academy in July 2017?**

I will continue to be deeply involved in public policy – in the UK, but much more widely too. I will be joining a small international working party (a so-called ‘Eminent Persons Group’), put together at the request of the G20, to look into the functioning and reform of the international economic and financial system and institutions. It will be chaired by Tharman Shanmugaratnam, the Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore, a very distinguished econo-

mist and public servant. That will be an important commitment for the next two years or so.

I will be able to intensify my own research. I hope, probably next year, to publish the third of our books on Palanpur, the village in India on which we have very detailed data on household circumstances going back to the 1950s. (My own work started in 1974 helped by a British Academy grant of £750.) It is through that very close personal observation of one village for more than four decades that a lot of my understanding of the processes of development has come.

At the same time, I will be deeply involved in the issues around climate change and the Sustainable Development Goals for the foreseeable future.

The next 20 years are absolutely critical to the future of this planet and its people over the coming century. We will roughly double the size of the world economy, and more than double infrastructure, in the next two decades. Get it right, and we will have a very different way of development. Get it wrong, and we are doomed to cities where you cannot breathe, you cannot move, and ecosystems that are deeply fragile. There is so much to do that is both fascinating and intensely important. And the humanities and social sciences must be at the core of analysis, understanding and action. ■

Nicholas Stern was interviewed by James Rivington.

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