Address by the President
Sir David Cannadine
to the Annual General Meeting of the British Academy
19 March 2018

Fellows of the British Academy, distinguished guests, ladies and gentleman.

It is a great pleasure to welcome you, for the second time in my tenure as President of the British Academy, to our annual President’s Reception. It is heartwarming to see so many of you here this evening, and I sincerely hope that all are able to hear me.

Looking back on the last year, we have a very good story to tell, and indeed I intend to tell it this evening but sufficiently succinctly so as not to keep you from your wine.

I will start on a less positive note – that of Brexit – but only since it provides a welcome hook to tell you about my recent visit to two eminent and distinguished institutions in Ireland: University College Dublin and our Irish equivalent- the Royal Irish Academy. I was invited to speak about British and Irish History and asked to shed some light on how on earth we ended up where we are. That is a question that is perhaps impossible to answer! But try I did. I also took the opportunity while there, equipped with a bag full of the Academy’s excellent Brexit Briefings, which we have worked closely on with the Royal Irish Academy, to show the contributions we have been trying to make as National Academies to shape the discussions around the border and so on.

While there I was extremely honoured to have had an audience with the President of Ireland, Michael Higgins and we spoke at length about British and Irish relations over history - in particular the Irish rebellion of the late eighteenth century which led to the Act of Union.

What never ceases to baffle me is how very recent our history with Ireland is. Yet, many seem to be suffering a sort of mid-summer nights dream state of amnesia when it comes to the last twenty years – and the risks of doing so are grave indeed.

When I met President Higgins just two months ago, I took the opportunity to remind him of the insatiably wise words that he himself had spoken, some months before, at the launch of the new Cambridge History of Ireland. President Higgins observed on that occasion that ‘A Knowledge and understanding of history is intrinsic to our shared citizenship. To be without such knowledge, is to be burdened with a lack of perspective, empathy and wisdom’. And, he continued, ‘to be without historical training, the careful and necessary capability to filter and critically interpret a variety of sources, is to leave citizens desperately ill-equipped to confront a world in which information is increasingly disseminated without historical perspective or even regard for truth.’

In these wise words, he points to exactly why we need the humanities and social sciences but I’m sorry to say that the Government seems, despite our best efforts, to continue to favor
science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects (STEM) and indeed it is beginning to feel they consider it to be synonymous with academia. That said, we were delighted that the Minister – the third since I have been in office – is himself a historian, and proudly declared in one of his first speeches that he was also the Minister for the Arts and the Humanities as well as the Sciences. I have had the pleasure of meeting with him several times, most recently yesterday, and I know in him we have a champion for the subjects at least.

This being so, perhaps it is time to consider a ‘re-branding’ for the governments most senior academic advisory body which is called, simply, the Council for Science and Technology, and its Chair entitled the ‘Chief Scientific Advisor’, of which there is at present no humanities and social sciences equivalent. For assurance, I am offered a seat at the table on this forum alongside our three other National Academy Presidents and we have an increasingly close relationship with the Council’s Chairs, Sir Patrick Vallance and Dame Nancy Rothwell, holding events and breakfast briefings with both over the last twelve months.

You may have seen the Academy’s Chief Executive Alun Evans in The Times recently calling on government to appoint a Chief Historical Advisor, to cement the Academy’s belief that it is only by understanding our past that we can plan for future. If government chooses to hear us, then we will more than happy to offer support in whatever way we are permitted to bring this to fruition. I must stress that this is a move to encourage united and cross-disciplinary advice. It is not either or, but both if we are to ensure the health and wellbeing of society.

With Philip Augar’s review of post-18 education looming and worrying predictions from higher education institutions over its suggestions – I fear that UK HE policy is under threat over more than just Brexit. Controversy has been sparked over suggestions to put variant financial values on courses according to their costliness to the university, which will purport to make the sciences more expensive, and - by definition more elitist - whilst devaluing the worth of the humanities and social sciences. It has been suggested time and time again that the costs of science degrees would be offset by the job waiting at the end, which would offer more financially than jobs in any other sector – yet who are making these presumptions? Economists, lawyers, philosophers and experts in political sciences! This feels beyond the all-too British tendency to self-deprecate, and simply to forget immediately from whence you came. Rest assured we are in close and regular contact with Philip Augar, who is himself an historian, and have been placing regular commentary in the media including a letter from me last week to The Times making this very point. I hope you will also have read the Guardian’s leader last week which I circulated to you all.

We have also been ‘speaking up’ in the media for languages which have been an area of the Academy’s utmost concern in recent years. The BBC’s recent report shows that learning foreign languages at school has hit an 18-year low across the UK; and so, we are reminded that our Fellows, who have been raising concerns over this for years, once again provide important insight that could save the country plenty of time if listened to in the first instance.

To coincide with the launch of the BBC’s report, the British Academy has produced a statement, backed by all three other National Academies, to call on Government to lead a ‘national strategy for languages’, aimed to help make the UK’s citizens global citizens. We were thrilled to see this
was widely covered by the media and publicly backed by the APPG on Modern Languages, as well as several MPs and Peers. We all-too often rest on the assumption that English is the only language you need to know to get by in the world. The rise of the East as a superpower in business shows that languages remain intrinsic to business, as well as conserving culture and identities.

We have also been using our insights to shape business too – with our Future of the Corporation Programme, led by Fellow of the British Academy and Professor of Management at the Saïd Business School, Professor Colin Mayer, aimed at examining the purpose of modern business and its role in society. The programme published its first phase of research in last November and is now looking at how business and government can make the shift set out in its findings. Supported by a collection of 30 proposals from senior business leaders to sit alongside the 2018 research to inform the next phase. By the end of the year, the project will we publish 8 recommendations targeting businesses, investors and policy makers, made within They will be within four themes: law and regulation, ownership and governance, finance and investment, and measurement.

These are just two of the major achievements of the Academy in the past year, despite such worrying and challenging external circumstances. It has been an exceptionally good, productive and creative year for the Academy itself.

Among the tremendous amount of work going has been:

- A new partnership with Government to examine the histories of policy-making; beginning first with the Industrial Strategy
- More regional events than ever before, with new partnerships with Buxton, British Science Festival and Jaipur, and Institutions such as the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Museum, National Gallery.
- We have welcomed over 7000 members of the public to our in-house events and have made great strides in diversifying our audiences, particularly with reaching under35s.
- We are securing more national media coverage for our work as an advocate for our subjects in notable outlets such as: the Financial Times, The Guardian and the BBC with no less than five Today Programme interviews slots for Fellows representing the Academy this year.
- We have made almost 800 awards of research funding in the UK and internationally including 10 global professorships – and had more than double the number of applications received by the ESRC and AHRC combined.
- For the fifth year in a row, the Academy made more awards to women – 55% more than men.
- We have informed the debate on a series of issues related to the UK’s withdrawal from the EU as I have just mentioned including acting as a leading voice in promoting the importance of the humanities and social sciences in future EU Framework Programmes,
- We have worked with partners in the US, India and South Africa on a growing series of early career researcher symposia that are strengthening UK collaborative links internationally at this critical stage of academic’s careers.
And we have ambitious plans for the future as articulated in our new strategic plan – please do pick up a copy outside – which will be partly enabled by an exceedingly generous grant from the Wolfson Foundation of £10m, and by an equally generous one-off-grant from BEIS to extend our lease here at Carlton House Terrace.

Our vision is that the Academy, with this building as our home, is seen as the forum for world-class thinking – an ideas hub where anyone an interest in knowledge and in enlightenment can come to engage with others on the premises and across the world through state of the art technology.

We want to transform 10-11 into a new space where pioneering thinkers, policy makers and the public can come together to share and progress world-changing ideas about the past, present and future of humanity.

The generous gifts I just mentioned get us some way towards securing that vision, but we do need to raise more funds and that is a big focus for me and the wider team here. If you can help us make connections with organisations and individuals who share our ambitions and our values do let us know. We are exceedingly grateful for the support our Fellows already give to the Academy – both monetary and time – and thank you for anything further you can do to support us to achieve these exciting plans.

There is, as it were, no pain without gain and anyone who has undertaken renovations either at their home or office space will know that there will be a great deal of organisation to make this work. I recently reported to Council our commitment to finding accommodation for the British International Research Institutes, both during and after the building work, and I would like to pledge my allegiance once again publicly - I am delighted to see some of our colleagues in BILI here this evening. We be looking at creative ways of using our space, which starts with a thorough review of our space and creative thought about how we can use it more effectively.

All things considered, it has been a wonderful year for the Academy and we are determined to continue to grow and increase our reach in the coming months and years, whatever the outcome in government. Some great things to look out for will be this year’s Summer Showcase, which will be a free two-day festival of ideas for curious minds. Featuring 15 interactive exhibits alongside pop-up talks, workshops and performances, designed to educate and inspire – from what our ancestors’ tools tell us about early human evolution to how 3D printing is changing lives. We hope to see many of you here over the festival, but you will no-doubt be receiving more information on this in due course.

There is, then, much still to do, but I hope this account of our recent efforts provides necessary and ample reassurance that we are working hard, fully seized of the importance of our task, and are deeply grateful to Fellows, Post-Doctoral Fellows and close friends of the Academy for their invaluable advice, engagement and encouragement, which we will no doubt continue to call on in future.