

ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY

November 2010

Presidential Letter

FACING THE CURRENT CRISIS

Most of us have had the eerie experience in the last few weeks of feeling the tectonic plates which have undergirded Britain's system of higher education for decades shifting beneath our feet.

Witness the Browne report, set to be implemented in a way which increases student fees three times above their current level; a government Spending Review that has imposed a massive cut in the teaching budget; the downgrading of arts and humanities degrees; caps on visas for foreign student numbers; the AHRC informing HEIs that it may not have sufficient funds to fulfil its part of the Block Grant Partnership; and, in the schools, a promised return to 'our island story' as a basis for history teaching.

In France, the streets have been full of rioters and protesters over the single issue of pensionable age. Here, conversely, the reaction to this package of measures has been surprisingly muted.

The contrast owes something to political culture, no doubt, but something also to careful political management, with the Conservative government, unlike President Sarkozy, having shown considerable adeptness in driving through its programme. So dire were the prognostications about the scale of cuts in the week between the Browne report and the Spending Review, that many of us in the HE sector breathed a sigh of relief when the cuts, swingeing as they are, were announced. (And indeed, the protection of the science budget does show a degree of success for the arguments that the research community has been making over the summer.)

In addition, the relative lack of protest over major impending change within HE owes something to issues of process. The UK research councils, most institutions, and almost all

individuals, do not really yet know how the cuts will pan out for them. That will only become apparent as a string of decisions at national and institutional levels are taken.

In this context, where there is still much to play for, it is critical that we as a group continue to work purposively to influence decision-making at all the different levels, so as to ensure:

- a) that our arguments are heard about the public value, both cultural and economic, of arts degrees generally and of history degrees in particular;
- b) that cuts, when they come, are introduced humanely, with the best interests of the long-term health and intellectual diversity of the discipline as a whole at heart and with an eye to preserving Britain's international research prestige;
- c) that a watchful eye is kept over postgraduate studies and early career postdoctoral opportunities, which risk becoming two major losers from the changes;
- d) that the access to higher education becomes not less but more socially inclusive.

This will be a tough agenda. But few would dispute the importance of the issues at stake. The Society will be working with partners such as History UK (FE) – David Willets will be attending their annual meeting on 20 November – and the cross-disciplinary group in the arts and humanities (A-HUG); seeking to influence key players such as the British Academy and the AHRC; and acting on our own behalf to make our voice heard.

We call on all colleagues to contribute to our common cause. There is still a lot to fight for.

SPEAKERS 2012

Fellows and Members will have seen the Society's 2011 Card of Session, which was distributed with our recent Newsletter. I hope that you will agree that it is an excellent programme. We are now setting about planning our list of speakers for 2012. If Fellows and Members wish to put forward suggestions for speakers, they will be considered at our meetings over the next few months. Suggestions should be sent now, with accompanying justification, to our Executive Secretary, Sue Carr, at s.carr@ucl.ac.uk

BOOK PRIZES

The Society is currently starting to organise the judging of Book Prizes for works published in 2010. Full details of the prizes are given on the Society website: <http://www.royalhistoricalsociety.org/prizes.htm>. For most prizes, nominations must come from the publishers rather than authors. In addition, the authors of many first books are not yet Fellows of the Society. In these circumstances, it would be helpful if established academics worked with early career colleagues to ensure that publishers supply a good and wide cross-section of books for each competition.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES ISSUE

Your attention is drawn to advertisements for appointments to the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Council on National Records and Archives and the Lord Chancellor's Forum on Historical Manuscripts and Academic Research.

These new bodies are of importance in securing and developing national archives policy. It is important that our research community should have representation on this, and any Fellows considering applying are encouraged to keep the Society informed.

Further details about the posts may be found at: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/jobs/default.htm>

The Council's website provides fuller information about the work of both bodies: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/advisorycouncil/default.htm>

The closing date for applications is noon on 26 November, with interviews scheduled for 20 and 21 December.

Finally, I draw to your attention the Society's up-coming lectures, below. Venez nombreux! You will be most welcome.

Colin Jones (c.d.h.jones@qmul.ac.uk)

Forthcoming Events

Thursday 11 November 2010 at 6.30 p.m.

Venue: Cruciform Lecture Theatre 1, UCL

The Colin Matthew Memorial Lecture for the Public Understanding of History

in co-operation with Gresham College, London

"What Did Eighteenth-Century Men Want?"

Professor Amanda Vickery

Friday 26 November 2010 at 5.45 p.m.

Venue: Gustave Tuck Lecture Theatre, UCL

"French Crossings. II: Laughing over Boundaries"

Professor Colin Jones