

Review of the Government's Official History Programme

1. The British Academy, the national academy for the humanities and social sciences, is pleased to respond to the review of the Government's Official History programme, currently being undertaken by Sir Joseph Pilling. The Academy is aware of the part played in the programme over the years by its Fellows, not least the contribution of Sir Keith Hancock in the 1940s and 50s. The Academy's submission has been drawn up following consultation with Fellows of the Academy, including those with experience of the UK programme and of similar programmes overseas.

2. In summary, the British Academy believes that the Official History programme makes an important contribution to public life and should certainly continue. There is a strong public interest in ensuring excellent work from the programme. We suggest that a new framework of oversight and governance is needed, involving greater involvement from the academic community. The British Academy would be happy to discuss ways in which it could contribute to the development of such a framework.

Review remit

3. The review is considering the following questions:

- whether the programme should continue;
- whether it should be run from the Cabinet Office or by, for example, the National Archives or Ministry of Justice;
- whether responsibility for the work should be more widely dispersed amongst interested Departments with a reduced burden on the lead organisation;
- whether the present oversight arrangements, for the programme as a whole and for individual histories, should be continued or changed.

4. If it is recommended that the programme should continue, the review is to consider, without jeopardising the professional status of the programme or the confidence placed in it by the security community,

- how new subjects for histories should be proposed, taking account of interests outside government amongst specialists and the general public, and how decisions should be reached about what should be commissioned;
- how people should be chosen to research and write the histories;
- whether there is scope for some or all histories to be sponsored jointly with organisations outside government;
- whether the programme could be run more cheaply, at no cost or profitably;
- what more could be done to increase the value of the programme and improve accessibility to the output for policy makers, academics and the wider public, taking account of current and future technologies as well as other considerations.

5. The review is to consider further

- the impact, if any, of the programme on FOI requests;
- the impact, if any, on the programme of a change in the 30 year rule;

- how to establish closer and more effective links between the programme and individual departmental histories.

Response from the British Academy

Continuation of the Programme

6. The Academy is very strongly of the view that the programme should continue. It is intrinsically important, making a unique contribution to the historical record, and it has included many valuable studies that would not otherwise have appeared. The programme provides an important way of illuminating the history of the country and the inner workings of Government. In areas where there may be some difficulty in releasing files it provides a way of making available essential information, without compromising either national security or individual confidentiality. Nowhere else can one find the detail as well as the context and perspective, and nowhere else such a keen appreciation of the work of civil servants. Even in areas where material may be available through the 30 year rule or freedom of information, the value of a full history is that it provides context to decisions and events.

7. It is vital that the research is conducted by individual historians, with the freedom to comment and criticise where appropriate, as this gives the histories integrity and credibility. At the same time governmental backing is essential, as this ensures that the histories have a thoroughness and comprehensiveness that might be difficult to ensure for projects that had to be justified commercially or as part of normal academic research. In addition individual departments are obliged to help the historians in seeking out material to an extent that would not be the case if they were not “official”.

Departmental responsibility

8. We also believe that it is right to retain the Official History programme in the Cabinet Office. This will provide for continuity, and build on the experience gained to date. More importantly, the association with the central point represented by the Cabinet Office is essential if all Government departments are to cooperate fully, something that could not be guaranteed if a particular programme was associated with one department. While there might be some practical advantages associated with the National Archives, we do not believe that it would be able to support the need to work closely with the whole of Whitehall in order to ensure that historians get the cooperation they need. We can see no advantages at all in handing over responsibility to the Ministry of Justice.

9. It is important that individual departments remain aware of the need to support the Official History Programme, for there are certain materials and contacts about which the Cabinet Office may not be aware. This argues, however, for cooperative working arrangements between the Cabinet Office and departments, and a clear understanding of departmental obligations, rather than any need for a devolved management structure.

Oversight arrangements

10. Oversight arrangements to date have been light touch, and it would not be appropriate to construct an unwieldy bureaucracy. But we believe that a better

balance is needed between officialdom and the outside world. This is not to say that there is too much that is "Official" in the current arrangements. The title "Official" may have unfortunate implications (which the review may wish to consider), but it is not our point that there has been interference: to the contrary, we are aware of cases where historians' work has been encouraged, even when producing results that were uncomfortable. Nevertheless we believe that more structured engagement with the academic community would both demonstrate openness and provide for policy decisions to be effectively informed by expert advice. In particular, there needs to be much greater involvement with active and distinguished academics in the governance of the programme. Such involvement should include, inter alia, the choice of topics, the choice of authors, and the general oversight of the programme.

11. The first official histories were written at a time when the climate of secrecy was much more intense, without a thirty year rule, let alone FOI. The histories were the only way that material could be released and the stories of important decisions and events properly told. With more information in the public domain this aspect of the programme, while still very important, is less significant than in the past. Nowadays it is often the quality of the interpretation of the archival material that makes the difference. This requires the best professional historians, and selection needs to take informed advice on who has worked in particular areas and their academic reputations. External advice could be usefully sought on obvious gaps in the literature and areas where there had already been substantial research. It could also contribute to effective quality control.

12. There may be lessons to be learned from arrangements in other countries. In the USA, for example, the State Department's documentary series, *The Foreign Relations of the United States*, which has established a strong reputation for the thoroughness and accuracy of its coverage of that nation's foreign policy, is subject to the oversight of a Historical Advisory Committee, independently chaired by a distinguished academic. The Committee oversees and assesses the production and quality of the series. Until December 2008 the Committee was chaired by a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy.

13. The circumstances of the UK may require a solution tailored to its specific needs. But in any event we believe that serious consideration should be given to the development of a new framework of oversight and governance for the programme, involving greater involvement from the academic community. In our view the aim should be to define a role for academic input that is genuinely influential and does not leave academics as mere handmaidens to official decision-making, yet leaves Government with a sufficient sense of ownership of the programme and confidence in it. The British Academy would be happy to discuss ways in which it could contribute to the development of such a framework.

Other issues

14. We do not think that the current costs of the programme are disproportionate, and believe that the importance of the programme makes the investment of public funds value for money. We do not see how the programme can be run at "no cost", which would require a degree of external sponsorship that could cast doubt on the integrity of the programme. But there may be possibilities for some savings, by

working closely with learned societies or the research councils, who might be able to support particular projects that require official support but not be the first priorities for official histories.

15. The review should consider the impact on its various intended audiences of the works produced by the programme. We are aware of concerns about low public (and indeed scholarly) awareness (with exceptions in particular cases). The programme has a responsibility for comprehensiveness, and not all topics are headline-grabbing or attractive to commercial publishers. But there is a strong case for examination of the profile of programme and its outputs. This should include a review of the arrangements for publishing – including quality control, marketing and promotion.

16. We also suggest that consideration be given to whether other outputs besides books are appropriate, including journal articles, public talks, radio and TV, broadsheet articles and features. Moreover, there are ways now that major projects can be backed up using web-based materials, which could be an effective way of bringing the research associated with the Official Histories to a wider audience and be of value for teachers at secondary schools as well as in higher education.

Summary

17. The Academy believes that the Official History programme makes an important contribution to public life and should certainly continue. There is a strong public interest in ensuring excellent work from the programme. We suggest that a new framework of oversight and governance is needed, involving greater involvement from the academic community. The British Academy would be happy to discuss ways in which it could contribute to the development of such a framework.