



Science and Technology Committee

Oral evidence: [Pre-appointment hearing for Chair of the Arts and Humanities Research Council \(AHRC\)](#), HC 989

Monday 27 January 2014

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Members present: Andrew Miller (Chair); Stephen Metcalfe; Stephen Mosley; Graham Stringer

Questions 1-36

Witness: **Professor Sir Drummond Bone**, Chair-elect of the Arts and Humanities Research Council, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Professor Bone, welcome to this hearing. Some of my colleagues are scattered around and may be joining us later, but we are quorate so we decided to carry on rather than keep you hanging around.

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: Thank you.

Q2 Chair: Clearly, this is not an interview as such. This is us pursuing our right to look closely at the recommended appointment to this post. What, first of all, interested you in applying to be chair of the AHRC?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: It goes back maybe about 18 months, if my memory serves me correctly. There was a small group of us—by “us” I mean former and current vice-chancellors—who got interested in seeing if we could meet to discuss a way in which the arts and humanities could present themselves to the public in a better, more productive kind of way. I suppose it was that little group that got the idea into my head that there might be some kind of role one could play in the arts and humanities community as such. Then the head-hunter phoned me and I started to think about it. Then two or three of my colleagues involved in the process phoned me and I thought maybe this is the thing to do.

Q3 Chair: Do I take it from the first part of your answer that there is some fresh thinking that you are bringing in?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: I think a number of us are worried about the tension between some parts of the arts and humanities community who, if they are caricatured, do not seem to want to have anything to do with money at all and then some other parts of the community, who if they are caricatured, think about nothing except resource, and that there was some bridge building, as it were, that was required. One could get involved in trying to bridge the gap between, if you like, a very blue-skies way of looking at arts and humanities work and a more practical ends-oriented way of looking at it. That was what was in our minds. That was what was in my mind anyway.

Q4 Chair: What, in your opinion, makes you the best person for the job?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: In my opinion? That is always a slightly difficult question. Obviously, I am a professor of English literature—at least, originally—so I have a professional interest in the arts and humanities. I have chaired, in my time, quite a lot of difficult areas to do with the arts and humanities, not least, as I think you are well aware, Chair, the Capital of Culture company that helped Liverpool during its 2008 European year. Of course that was quite a difficult group to chair, because there were many sorts of communities or interest groups involved in it. Obviously there were a lot of arts and humanities people, but there were private sector funders, local councillors and the Government, who had a certain interest in the success of it operationally. So I kind of thought, “I can chair this sort of mixed group,” and I suppose maybe other people think that too.

Q5 Stephen Metcalfe: Good afternoon. Obviously in your role as chairman you will be the custodian of the council’s charter.

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: Yes.

Q6 Stephen Metcalfe: Earlier you touched upon the presentation of the Arts and Humanities Research Council—public engagement and awareness, etc. Do you think there is widespread knowledge of what AHRC does, and does it matter that there is not? If it does matter, how do you intend to improve that?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: Just to unpick that a little bit, I do not think there is wide knowledge in the general public of what the AHRC do and I do not necessarily think that matters. What the arts and humanities community does matters in general public awareness, and there may well be a role to talk about that. The understanding of the community that the AHRC is supposed to serve of the AHRC’s work could be better. There is certainly a role that one imagines a chairman, obviously in close consultation with the chief executive—working with the chief executive—might play in a slightly more neutral way than a chief executive who is involved in the day-to-day run-of-the-mill activities. There is something for the chairman to do there. Equally, there is work possibly for the chairman to do with Government, again in explaining the arts and humanities community’s view of national policy to Government. So, yes, I think there is a role there. More generally, in terms of public awareness, as it were, I would say that is public

awareness of arts and humanities research rather than of the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Q7 Stephen Metcalfe: Do you think that is a failure of the past? Maybe “failure” is too strong a word. Has it not been a focus in the past and you think it should now be a focus?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: Yes, I think “failure” is too strong a word, and we perhaps need to give it a bit more attention, if I can put it that way. There has been a natural tendency—not just in the arts and humanities but in the sciences as well—for the dialogue around research to split into blue skies on the one hand and practice on the other. Practice and outcome-driven get associated with Government policy, and blue skies somehow or other with the purity of the academic regime. It seems to me, as I said before, that both of these characterisations are wrong and the two sides need to speak to each other.

Q8 Stephen Metcalfe: Hopefully, you will be able to bring those two sides together.

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: That would be the idea.

Q9 Stephen Metcalfe: You touched on your relationship with the chief executive. As custodian of the council’s charter, will you be using that as a sort of bedrock, or a touchstone, to define your relationship with the chief executive?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: One has to do that, doesn’t one? It is the chair’s job to make sure that the chief executive is actually carrying out the charter’s objectives, and I think one does that through—it is the usual thing, isn’t it, I suppose, and it sounds a bit motherhood and apple pie, the critical friend stuff?—working with him but occasionally saying, “Think twice about this.” Again, it is forming a bridge between the Government on the one hand, as the funders, and the community on the other and helping the chief executive in that middle role.

Q10 Stephen Mosley: Within the person specification it says that they are looking for “an outstanding individual,” of course, and someone “who can guide the development of the AHRC’s economic as well as research and policy impacts.” I want to focus on the economic bit. What sort of impact do you think the research council can have in the economic sphere, and how would you get there?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: We have seen a number of studies recently, and one done by the AHRC itself, which talk about quite a healthy multiplier in terms of money actually put into arts and humanities research; I think it is 10:1, and they are even saying, longer term, that it may be 15:1, so there is economic impact there. A recent study has been done at my own university, the university of Oxford, which suggests that arts and humanities graduates are contributing about £60 billion to the economy at the moment. There is the heritage industry and the tourism industry, and, very important too, there is arts and

humanities work in the third sector—I understand about half of arts and humanities academics have links to the third sector—as well as the obvious thing, the creative industries, which I suppose is the immediate thing. We have seen again in another recent study—the Brighton Fuse study—run by the AHRC just how important AHRC work is to the creative industries in one particular region.

Q11 Stephen Mosley: Within the job description it says a key responsibility is to “engage senior users such as those in businesses.”

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: Sure.

Stephen Mosley: How are your contacts within the businesses that you are going to be—

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: I think they are reasonable. Again, obviously, there was Liverpool, with the Capital of Culture, but I also chaired the Foundation for Art and Creative Technology in Liverpool for quite a few years. That is one of the major national sources both of kit and of expertise for people working in the creative industries, so I have a bit of understanding of that.

In terms of links with businesses in general, obviously when you run or are chief executive of a big university you deal with a lot of businesses. I was actually on the CBI regional council—invited on to the regional council of the north-west—and on one of the CBI’s central committees for a while too, so I think I have an understanding of how one might relate to business. I still chair a private sector business at the moment, the i-graduate group, which was taken over by Tribal Group plc this year, but they have kept me on as chair.

Q12 Stephen Mosley: It was that link with private business that I was going to move on to next. Your CV has a lot of experience within the public sector and I want to know what sort of experience you have in the private sector.

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: That side of it started when I was made vice-principal for external affairs, as it was called in those days, at the university of Glasgow and we founded Glasgow university’s holding company for its spin-outs, etc. I decided that the only way to understand this, because I did not have any experience at that time, was to get my hands dirty. So I got involved in a number of spin-out set-ups, helping negotiations with the banks, with Nomura on the one hand and 3i on the other, I remember. At Liverpool, I have worked with, obviously, Unilever. Unilever set up a high throughput new materials set-up in Liverpool that is actually planted inside the university, and I was part of the negotiations for doing that. I have worked with Pfizer as well, for that matter, and British Aerospace, so I have had quite a lot of contacts with industry one way and another.

Q13 Chair: You may be interested that on Friday I was in Liverpool university, and the fruits of your labours were there to be seen, because the new—previously owned by Unilever—very good chemistry lab has now just fully opened.

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: Yes.

Q14 Chair: Going back to your comments about the Capital of Culture, that went through a very difficult phase at the beginning—

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: The colour of my hair, Chair, has a lot to do with that.

Chair: In the end it was an extraordinary success. What role did you play in turning around that shambles at the beginning?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: I do not think it was a shambles. There were a lot of conflicting interests—that is the way I would put it—and somehow or another we had to draw these conflicting interests together and get them all pointing in roughly the right direction. We also had quite a difficult time, I think, persuading the people of Liverpool that this was actually going to be a success and it would do the city a lot of good. That required a bit of work as well. It was a job of tact, diplomacy and a certain firmness, I think. We had a Labour Government in Westminster, we had a very—how shall I put it?—distinctive Lib Dem council in Liverpool, and there were real tensions there. We had an original artistic director, who left us, as you may remember, some time after I took over the chair. It was a very difficult period, but these things are a bit like the Olympics, aren't they? "It is all going to be horribly wrong," until it actually happens and then miraculously enough it seems to be all right.

Q15 Graham Stringer: How has the Arts and Humanities Research Council made the world a better place in the last 10 years?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: You cannot expect the arts and humanities to cure disease—it is not the MRC, if I can put it that way; but let me just go back to that link to the third sector, with more than half of academics, apparently, having a link to the third sector. One of the things the Arts and Humanities Research Council can do is make sure that the spending on arts and humanities, and indeed on heritage issues, is properly targeted and that it does have an effect, to make the world a better place. You can have various possibilities, as it were, for, let us say, funding museums and galleries, but you can also then have a research contribution that says, "No, this bit is working and this bit is not working."

Q16 Graham Stringer: Let us move away from the generalities to specifics. What problems in the arts and humanities world has the research council helped to solve in the last 10 years, and what problems will it help to solve in the next three or four years?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: Again, I am not at the moment close enough to the individual grants, if you want to highlight three or four individual projects, but—I do not know whether I am still being too general for you—on the attributions of works of art, attributions of literary works, these are problems or issues, if you like, which have been solved by AHRC-funded researchers. In the next few years, one of the things I hope the AHRC will move more towards, and it seems to be moving more in that direction, is working with the other research councils, and through working with the other research councils, making interdisciplinary research more effective—for more of it, but also for it to be made more effective.

If we look at some of the thematic projects—the translational one, for example, or the science cultural one—one could hope that AHRC funding will help the public understanding of science, for example, which is a real problem, because if the public do not understand the issues of climate change, just to take that one obvious headline, we are never going to get policy development. In so far as a lot of people—if I can put it this way—speak the language of the AHRC, if the AHRC is able itself to translate the language of science into languages that a lot of other people can understand, it is helping to solve real problems.

Q17 Graham Stringer: Let me ask the question in a slightly different way. From time to time, we have the chairs or chief executives of the research councils—from memory, there are seven of them, I think—come and talk to us. When you see them physically, it sometimes looks as though there are too many. Why should arts and humanities have their own research council?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: I hoped I was maybe moving towards an answer to that. In society at large, as well as inside academia, people do speak different languages; they prefer to work in different kinds of areas. The key thing is, if you like, to represent that kind of community but not to represent it in a way which cuts it off from science and technology, the environmental debate, the NERC and the MRC's work, but rather actually integrates it. I suppose it is the multidisciplinary argument again: do you start from a multidisciplinary position or do you start from a disciplinary position and then move to a multidisciplinary-oriented position? I take the latter view.

Graham Stringer: Thank you.

Q18 Stephen Metcalfe: I would like to move on to funding. You talked about the Government's relationship as a funder. We are obviously getting close to the next spending review. How much of an involvement with those negotiations would you expect to have?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: I would expect to be fully involved by the chief executive in his or her plans for what the submission would look like. Again, I have been there before. I was heavily involved as president of Universities UK—in other words, chair of Universities UK—in the submission we made to the Comprehensive Spending Review between 2005 and 2007. So I have some understanding at least—I know times have moved on—of how that process works, and I would very much expect to be involved, yes.

Q19 Stephen Metcalfe: In the last funding settlement, budgets were ring-fenced for the research council, so you have had a flat cash settlement over the last four years. Do you think if the AHRC had not existed that funding would have been ring-fenced, just following on from Graham's point?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: I personally doubt it. One of the points about the AHRC is that it is part of RCUK and, therefore, the shared services arrangements. I know they do not always work absolutely perfectly, but they do make things more economical. When I ran a university, I remember that, if I looked at a loss-making department, one of the questions I always asked was, "How are you integrated in the rest of the university?" If the answer was, "No, we are not," I got very, very suspicious. If the answer was, "Yes, we have five or six different kinds of relationships with other faculties and other departments," I would think, okay, they are losing money but they are a good thing. I think the involvement with the research councils is not only an economically sensible thing but intellectually it is almost necessary.

Q20 Stephen Metcalfe: Would you hope for a similar settlement from a future spending review—of maintaining your funding?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: Obviously, I would hope for that.

Q21 Stephen Metcalfe: That is what you will be negotiating.

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: Yes, I think so. The economic case is becoming more and more acceptable, and I think one has to make the more general case as well, that no successful civilisation has not had a thriving—what we now call—arts and humanities sector.

Q22 Stephen Metcalfe: But going back to how you were describing the benefit of arts and humanities, it will be harder to demonstrate, perhaps, than some of the other research councils, where they can point to more tangible results.

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: No question, yes. That goes back to Graham Stringer's question. Exactly, yes, it is not always easy and it is sometimes long term. But again I think that one should not be too frightened of some kind of quantitative defence. I do not necessarily think that everything that is good has to be measurable in a naive and simplistic sense, but there is some truth in that: if you cannot do some kind of quantitative measurement, you probably have a problem.

Q23 Stephen Metcalfe: I also noticed that you do not have any capital requirements whatsoever in the budget. Is that true, and do you think that acts as a disadvantage in that there is not something tangible?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: I think it is a disadvantage, apart from the fact that capital is sometimes easier to get, which is an issue. It is not true in the sense that, even if I look at my own work, which is in literary formal analysis, if I was still heavily involved in that I would not only need a computer but I would need a research assistant, etc., and the quicker the computer, the better the results. So there are capital requirements.

Q24 Stephen Metcalfe: How are those being funded at the moment? Out of general income?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: Yes, effectively out of the P and L of the institutions.

Q25 Stephen Metcalfe: On the breakdown of the way the budget is drawn up, would you think of computers and research assistants as capital investment or are those projects—

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: Research assistants would not be, but—

Q26 Stephen Metcalfe: Computers then: are they now actually a consumable given the fact that they do not last that long?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: Probably.

Q27 Stephen Metcalfe: Do you need something larger and more tangible?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: Again, some of the people working in linguistics work closely with neurology departments and so far, by and large, the big capital has been supplied by the neurology side of things rather than the arts side of things. There is an interesting question there, I think, but at the moment the actual revenue funding is so constrained that it would be bold of me to say—today anyway—that I would put a capital chunk aside if that was seen as a substitute for revenue funding.

Stephen Metcalfe: Thank you.

Q28 Chair: In terms of things like some of the media training and that discipline generally, presumably there are significant capital expenditures by universities in that sector.

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: Yes, absolutely.

Q29 Chair: Does it not follow that the research council ought to be controlling some of that?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: I think the research council should be looking very carefully at the way in which the arts and humanities community has access to such

equipment. That really was the gist of my answer; yes, there is no question about that. Again, that goes back to my response about the benefits of the integration of the Arts and Humanities Research Council and Research Councils UK. We need to be talking very carefully to the other research councils. It would be very difficult if some of the research councils turned round and said, “We are no longer interested in giving access to arts and humanities academics to some of our equipment,” or “We are not interested in interdisciplinary study in that kind of way.”

Q30 Stephen Mosley: The job description indicates that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport would probably be your main contact, or the main Department for you to contact within Government. Would you agree with that, and are there any other Departments that you would want to cultivate relationships with?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: BIS is pretty obviously a Department one would work with very closely indeed, because it has responsibility for general funding of not only universities but of the other research councils, including, of course, the science and technology area which your Committee represents, so certainly BIS. But I think universities are very used to functioning with multiple Government Departments, and, while I suppose BIS and DCMS would be where one would be initially, I do not think I would be frightened, if I can put it that way, of thinking of working with other Government Departments if the need arose, if there were opportunities to do so or if they wanted us to do so.

Q31 Stephen Mosley: This Committee has been quite a strong champion of the chief scientific advisers. You will probably be aware that DCMS is one Department that does not have a chief scientific adviser. Do you think they would benefit from one?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: Yes, of course they would. I am very pleased that the Home Office chief scientific adviser, Bernard Silverman, is on the AHRC. I need representation from your side, and you need representation, I hope, from mine too.

Q32 Graham Stringer: I have never met an academic who does not have a particular gripe about the funding council that deals with their work. You recognise it, clearly.

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: I have never met an academic who does not have a gripe—full stop.

Q33 Graham Stringer: What is your gripe about the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and will you change it because of that gripe?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: It is not for me alone, obviously, to change it, but my gripe is the fact that, somehow or other, the community at large does not understand that nearly 75% of the Arts and Humanities Research Council’s funding is actually in response mode, and seems fixated with the fact that the Arts and Humanities Research Council is

running a sort of agenda based on themes and projects. I think something has happened to the communication there. Not everybody thinks that, but it is a very difficult message to get across; by far the largest majority is actually response-mode funding and that causes waves in the sector.

Q34 Chair: Those waves need calming down. In terms of your experience, do you think you will work in a collegiate manner with the other research council heads and, at the same time, be able to get a better deal for arts and humanities?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: I certainly very much hope so. Again, as I say, one of the reasons why I think I might be good at the job is that I can maybe do that. But who knows? Life is never easy, but, yes, I do think it is necessary for the intellectual health of all research that is funded by the various research councils that we speak to each other, and that our communities understand what we are doing and why we have to speak to each other.

Q35 Chair: Do I imply from that that there are relationships you have come across where one part does not understand the other?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: Jealousy is a terrible problem, isn't? Yes, a lot of people in the arts and humanities, I suspect, do not realise that mathematicians have almost exactly the same gripe about their research council as some arts and humanities people have about their own, namely, that it is too immediate-output focused.

Q36 Chair: Do you think enough people in the arts and humanities community fully understand the role of the more science-led research councils? There are plenty of people in the sector. You mentioned media and you could go on to the chemistry of art or ceramics or anything like that, or modern sculpture; you cross over into extraordinarily wide disciplines. Do you think there is a good enough understanding in the arts community about the role that those other bodies play?

Professor Sir Drummond Bone: There are many, many people in the arts and humanities community who do understand it, but it could always be better. Again, in the public at large, that understanding could be a lot better. The interdependency of various intellectual disciplines, I think, is not, in the general public's terms, very well understood. That is a real issue. There are some parts of the arts and humanities community who probably could do a bit more to understand the science community, but I am sure the same is true the other way on as well.

Chair: Professor Bone, thank you very much for coming this afternoon. The Committee will now go into private session. Thank you.