

SEMPER REFORMANDA? **THE IDEA OF THE LEARNED SOCIETY**

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In 2002, the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences published a collection of reflections with the provocative title „The Ideal Academy. The past future of the past ¹ (a continuation of the past?) or a specific utopia?“ This is not an inappropriate question even for our Learned Society, which has been deliberating ideas about its purpose for some time. This internal debate also has an important external aspect in connection with the accession of the Czech Republic to the European Union.

Most Learned Societies, whether called Academies or otherwise, were established in the past centuries. The world of science has changed fundamentally since that time and, especially in the past ten years, has expanded beyond the framework of these honourable but far too exclusive institutions with limited potential. Just consider how the number of fields of research and science has expanded in the last half compared to the first half of the twentieth century.

Because research in entire areas of science is increasingly becoming a matter of business and commerce, its driving force emanates from the administrative boards of shareholders and not only from the initiatives of Learned Societies. I would like to recall – although it will sound funny – some scientific competitions announced by the Royal Bohemian Learned Society (RBLs). In 1784, the subject matter was termed: „What has been written so far about the natural science of the Czech Lands and what is still missing?“ No answer was received, as happened again two years later in a competition on the subject: „Where did Czechs get their kitchen salt in ancient times?“ Even an increased prize of 300 guilders didn't attract anyone. The competition in 1803 had greater success and a total of ten entries were received on the subject „What means can be used to prevent or at least reduce the extensive falsification of various kinds of foods, except for legal investigation?“

In the first half of the 20th century, a lecture at the RBLs or a document issued in Discussions of the Czech Academy of the Sciences and the Arts guaranteed a high level of professionalism. Fifty years later, quite different criteria were applied at an international or even global level to a great many fields of science, especially in chemistry, physics and biomedicine. While Nobel Prizes and other awards can be bestowed for extraordinary contributions to science in regard to only a very few discoveries, citation indices encompass a far greater range of

¹ „Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.“ George Orwell (1903-1950).

scientists that, as in tennis, have the right to better positions in grant and other tournaments.

Nonetheless, the vast majority of Learned Societies and Academies have insisted on the traditional number of members and sections. Even countries as large as France have not changed the number of members of its five Academies. This is true, amongst other things, because, over time, these prestigious units of human existence – and it would be hypocritical not to state that scientists, like writers, musicians, actors or sports competitors, have their own quite justifiable ambitions – began to be replaced by other associated learned societies, whose address lists form entire books. Nonetheless, wherever the old Academies and Learned Societies continue to enjoy state and other support, regular and other membership in these societies remains a mark of exceptional individual satisfaction. It is apparent from a survey of older Academies that, of institutions in this country, the Royal Bohemian Society of Learning in particular was one of the oldest, continuously existing academies in Central Europe ². Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the British Academy as a humanist form of the much older Royal Society, celebrated one hundred years of existence only last year. If I ignore the late establishment of the Australian Academy of Sciences, I cannot do so for the two German academies, established in the third quarter of the 20th century. Two others, those at Berlin and Saxony, were substantially transformed after the GDR ceased to exist. The importance that the federal governments attribute to the traditional academies certainly does not suggest that they would become unnecessary relics of previous centuries.

They have various relationships to the state. Although some academies and learned societies were created on the basis of private initiatives, they are now mostly institutions under public law, as in Germany and Austria, amongst others. Seven German academies associated in the *Union der deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften* enjoy substantial state assistance. Half of their budget is paid from the federal and half from the regional budgets.

The goals of most academies and learned societies are practically identical. It is symptomatic that they are identical with the purpose of our Learned Society: they almost always entail support for scientific activities and research (as stated specifically by the Bavarian Academy of Sciences), while elsewhere we can read, e.g., in the statute of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, of which the primary purpose is to support basic research. A common task also consists in representation of research in the framework of the state and abroad (e.g., the British Academy). Finally, practically all academies and learned societies award annual prizes and other honours. Their external manifestations take the form especially of publications, lectures and conferences. However, a number of academies have small scientific institutions connected with the commissions responsible for the series

² See Annex I.

of editions and various kinds of projects. This is not yet possible in our case, as these tasks are carried out by the institutes of the Academy of Sciences and also by research departments of the Universities.

All academies and learned societies differentiate between regular and other membership. The latter corresponds to extraordinary, honorary, corresponding or foreign membership categories. In Germany, regular membership is available only for the relevant state, with the exception of the Berlin-Brandenburg and Mainz Academies, which elect members from all the federal states. In the vast majority of states, membership is not connected with any financial remuneration. This is purely an honorary position (*ehrende Verpflichtung*) in Germany and only travel expenses are paid. Academies modified according to the Soviet model bound the academicians or corresponding members by regular monthly honoraria. However, there is probably no equivalent to our Learned Society anywhere in the world; here, the members contribute to the basic operations in the amount of one percent of their salaries and pensioners pay one half of one percent. Nonetheless, there is considerable interest in membership.

Transit gloria mundi. Honours are transient, an obituary announcement with a list of honorary domestic and foreign nominations usually ends up in the archives of legacies. What is worse is that the *numerus clausus* of the vast majority of academies a priori excludes membership of other, no less worthy personages. In France, they traditionally say “*titulaires du 41^e Fauteuil*” - *titularies* of the 41st seat. Amongst others, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Diderot, Balzac, Maupassant, Proust and Zola did not manage to be amongst the proverbial forty French academicians. For the same reason, i.e., ruling on a limited number of members, our predecessor also closed its doors to suitable candidates. Literary personages and artists were especially affected. In one of his columns, the affronted poet J. S. Machar reproached the Academy that its membership and annual awards had corrupted and compromised Czech literature in a shocking manner. For similar reasons, Karel Čapek and Fráňa Šrámek refused to be nominated as candidates. From time to time, it is useful to examine painful moments, but there is no need to pour ashes on our heads. If we look at the matter from another point of view, it can be seen that the members of the Royal Bohemian Society of Learning included the most noteworthy scientists in this country, beginning with Josef Dobrovský, through František Palacký and Jan Evangelista Purkyně, to Jaroslav Heyrovský. While our Learned Society has not yet become the target of cartoonists, some time ago one of my colleagues considered the idea of establishing an „Unlearned“ society.

It is similarly significant that the vast majority of comparable Central European and other Academies are divided into professional sections, as is apparent from the second tabular survey. The days when the social sciences kept pace with the natural sciences and technical fields are past. Even though, e.g., the Austrian and Bavarian Academies remained with two sections, others have substantially

increased their number. The Swedish Royal Academy has progressed the farthest in this respect. Of its ten sections, only two consist in the humanities, and this is symptomatic, although it need not form an example.

The universality of our renewed Learned Society is reminiscent of its very beginnings at the time of surviving poly-historicism. The scientific knowledge of the present-day academy has its basis both in sections and in specialised commissions, which are also open to non-members. This is connected to the sensitive aspect of the statutory limitation on the number of members. As is apparent from Annex II, our Learned Society is the most closed of all the academies with comparable territorial bases. This is caused, amongst other things, by the fact that it has not yet accepted the category of extraordinary or corresponding members. Although this means membership-for-life for some members, there is usually room for younger candidates who cannot quite meet the requirements for regular membership. Thus, the academy remains viable through the influx of fresh young minds.

What is rationale of recalling facts and circumstances of which we are all more or less aware? Simply because the post-February (1948) period shook up history and destroyed the work of our forefathers in a very few years. It is symptomatic that less than half the regular and extraordinary members of the Royal Bohemian Society of Learning and the Czech Academy of the Sciences and the Arts were selected for the newly established Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in 1952. While the founders of the Learned Society of the Czech Republic in May 1994 had not more than tarnished glory and an empty cashbox at the beginning, we are not much better off just before the end of the first decade of our renewed existence. In contrast to the Viennese and other ancient academies, whose representatives need not pose the question of the sense of their own existence – they were, are and will be in the same, ever older palaces – our Learned Society is still a “child” that will have to learn to shave and stand on its own two feet in the near future. And because the average age of the members of our Society is about seventy years, this will not be possible without younger colleagues.

It is a credit to our Learned Society that it respects its Articles. Let us recall its third point, in which the founders express the idea of the future Society:

The goal of the Learned Society of CR is to encourage free practice of science, to awaken the thirst for knowledge and delight in knowledge, to disseminate scientific knowledge to society, and to promote an improvement in the level of education and creative, rational and human responsibility for the climate in the Czech Republic. The Society will promote thinking and actions exceeding the boundaries of the respective fields. It wishes to encourage an approach in which scientific knowledge contributes to effective and qualified viewpoints and decisions in the public life of this country in accordance with the important position of learned societies in all the developed countries.

This idea has been proven by time and need not be modified a decade later; however, it has been possible to achieve these demanding goals only within the Learned Society itself. Initial attempts to create a memorandum on serious matters have floundered on the obstacles surrounding the domestic media³. Lectures intended for the general public, which the Learned Society has held twice annually since 1998, are very popular, but this is, in itself, not enough. As lectures at plenary meetings are usually conceived for an audience with various sorts of professional erudition, Vladimír Dvořák proposed in 1997 that they be opened to the public⁴. For the same reason, František Vyskočil recommended that interested persons be invited to LS lectures through the media, that promotional activities be connected with the relevant commissions of the Academy of Sciences of CR and, in relation to the diversity of the members, to add the phrase „for the development of the natural and social sciences“ to the name of LS.⁵

The Learned Society has become known more for its annual awards than for its lectures, at least in professional circles. The Learned Society preceded other organisations in its interest in young scientists in presenting awards for secondary school students who have excelled in their first research projects. The suggestion submitted in September of 1997 by Pavel Hobza and Vladimír Dvořák was concerned with a substantial change in the statute of the awards presented; although it was not adopted in its full scope, it has remained topical to the present day. From a different point of view, it was concerned with the annual Jaroslav Kurzweil awards which, in respect to characteristics important for evaluating proposals, emphasized the aspect of „discovery“, work in a field of science and, last but not least, the moral aspect.⁶ Of the proposals made from time to time by

³ I would like to refer to the recent views expressed by Pavel Kratochvíl, Jaroslav Smítal and Rudolf Zahradník on the subject „The condition of the Czech educational system, especially at the university level, and science at the end of 2001 and beginning of 2002 from the point of view of the Learned Society of CR“, on which a discussion was held at the plenary meeting on February 19, 2002. Unfortunately, insufficient attention was paid to the considerations of Jaroslav Koutecký on science and education in contemporary society, whose written form bears the date October 12, 2001. All the documents or their copies, which I refer to or give in the Annexes with the permission of their authors, are part of my archives. This is only a selection of reform and other subjects, which makes no attempt at completeness.

⁴ The suggestion consisted in division of regular meetings into a public part (lecture with discussion) and a closed part. Here, I would like to refer to the letter of Vladimír Dvořák to the chair of LS of May 11, 1997.

⁵ In a letter to the chair of LS of May 20, 1997, František Vyskočil suggested, amongst other things, that outstanding pedagogues and managers also be elected as members of the LS.

⁶ In his undated submission of May or June 1997 to the chair of Learned Society, Rudolf Zahradník, Jaroslav Kurzweil also mentioned a number of organizational aspects that were important at that time.

Pavel Kratochvíl, I have selected the still pertinent suggestion related to prolonging the period in office of the Chair and Council of LS from two to three years.⁷

However, each individual modification of the Articles and organizational structure should be examined from a number of points of view. This was also apparent to Oldřich Nečas and Emil Paleček, who jointly submitted a still-topical set of six points in May 1998, as a foundation for a discussion of the position and purpose of the Learned Society of CR. Although there was no broad support from the members of LS for the idea of bringing in professional groups⁸ and the institution of extraordinary membership, a group of members from the humanities concluded at their meeting on January 15, 2002 that further discussion would be useful in this area and also briefly drew attention to aspects of an organizational nature that would be connected with extraordinary membership⁹. I would like to add two observations that have followed from my several years of membership in LS to this incomplete selection of proposals for reform that have been preserved in writing.

It is understandable that the founding members of a recently established society are unwilling to make minor and especially substantial changes in the Articles. Similarly, it is natural to attempt to overlook weaknesses in the functioning of our Society. A number of them, especially those that reflect contradictions between the demanding goals and the inadequate means of fulfilling them, follow from the fact that LS is only a civic association.

It was the „in“ thing after the fall of Communism to see the Academy of Sciences as a hindrance to any form of progress. After the Academy was reorganized from its foundations and the universities justifiably came into prominence, a search again began for new means of cooperation. Hopefully the Learned Society also made a contribution in this respect as, of its 88 members, 61 are professors and 12 assistant professors at universities throughout the country. This makes it even more significant that the Learned Society almost always tends towards greater proximity with the Academy, when it was not possible to achieve its anchoring in a separate law. This is also significant historically as, pursuant to Act No. 52/1952 Coll., the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences was created through „reconstruction of the Royal Bohemian Society of Learning and the Czech Academy of the Sciences and the Arts“. Part of this creative activity also consisted in incorporating the library of the Royal Bohemian Society of Learning into the new library of Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. In any case, it is a good thing that this happened, but it is useful to recall it from time to time.

⁷ This is stated in the letter to chair R. Zahradník of July 21, 1997.

⁸ Four informal professional groups, meeting two or three time annually as required, are a starting point for this idea.

⁹ On the basis of authorization from the group, Slavomil Vencl formulated these suggestions in a communication to R. Zahradník, J. Koutecký, and others, of January 21, 2002.

Similar to my honoured predecessors, Rudolf Zahradník and Josef Koutecký, I was of the opinion that it is not necessary to provide long explanations to reasonable people as to why it is necessary to re-establish the Learned Society through a law. So far, we have not managed to even introduce a minimal program that, in accordance with the standpoint of the plenum of the LS, consisted in three points of the proposed amendment to the Articles of the Academy of Sciences:

- (1) The Learned Society of the Czech Republic is associated with the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic as a self-administrative association of the most important scientists who, through their activities, contribute to the free promotion and development of science in the Czech Republic and represent it in contact with foreign societies with the same purpose.
- (2) The internal organization of the Learned Society of the Czech Republic associated with the Academy of Sciences shall be defined in its Articles.
- (3) The budget of the Learned Society shall be covered by the state through the Academy of Sciences of CR, which shall provide the necessary service for the Learned Society of CR in the scope of bilateral contract obligations.

At its 166th meeting, the Government Council for Science and Development rejected this proposal, as it did not see any reason why „just the Learned Society of CR should be founded by law“.¹⁰ I can't see this simply as a reflection of the fact that this Council contains only one member of the Learned Society, who was absent at this meeting because of a trip abroad. Even if he had been present, there was little he could do, because half a century had been sufficient time for the idea of a Learned Society to completely disappear from the general consciousness. A prophet has little honour in his own country. In contrast, as seen by the recently deceased patron, Mr. B. J. Horáček, one of the few Czechs who followed the path of Josef Hlávka, even the modern-day Learned Society had sufficient prestige to be entrusted, together with Charles University and the Academy of Sciences, with the procedure for choosing winners of the *Premium Bohemiae* award. The annual senior and junior prizes, awarded by the Learned Society through sponsor-donations, are of lower financial value, but not insignificant. If we look back, then, without any embarrassment, we can say that the works or discoveries receiving awards from the Learned Society were and are of truly exceptional quality. I have no doubt that the knowledge and publications of talented students receiving awards every year from the Learned Society will be equally renowned.

Even if the appeal of this chairman's address is forgotten, it is necessary to consistently remind the representatives of this state of the ridiculously small amount

¹⁰ The Premier of CR, PhDr. Vladimír Špidla referred to this standpoint in his communication of December 30, 2003, addressed to the President of the Academy of Sciences of CR, Assis. Prof. RNDr. H. Illnerová, DrSc., who requested assistance in establishing the Learned Society of CR through a law, at a dinner on November 27, 2003.

that was set aside to provide for an institution that, in its two predecessors, created a bright light in the scientific and spiritual culture of the Czech lands and that will be required even more in the European Communities. Works and founding acts of which we need not be ashamed can be discovered in Czech science. Werich's pendulum of history reached extreme positions too frequently in our lands; on the other hand, our history is not formed only by excesses.

At this stage, we cannot permit either splendid isolation of individuals or broader conviviality. Consequently, European and global criteria must apply in the sciences, including the social sciences without, on the other hand, submitting to excessive globalization and modern trends. German universities have abolished caps and gowns and ancient rituals and now their ceremonies are a grim sort of meeting. The ancient academies, particularly the French, hang on to tradition with all their strength and the Bavarian Academy has returned to caps and gowns. Our Learned Society is a civilian institution, as were its predecessors. Let's remain inconspicuous; in any case, we can't compete with sportsmen, actors and pop musicians.

If there is to be an over abundance of intellectual potential, then there should also be in the Learned Society. I know that this is truly the case and thus I have no fears that our Learned Society will be unable to manage the necessary changes in its Articles in the near future. In contrast, it is already apparent that we must continue to endeavour to achieve an official state recognition as the legitimate successor to the superseded RBSL as we cannot achieve our basic goals without external assistance.

From time to time, Napoleon's command before a battle, „asses and learned men into the middle of the army“, is still recalled, from which it can be concluded that, even today, scientists should be in the middle of social events. Asses frequently are and there is little to be done about this; however, I cannot imagine that scientists should direct the running of the state. This is an ancient illusion of learned persons and intellectuals, who always knew how the world should look. All these old and new utopias look promising from a distance, whether they take place in cities having a circular or square shape. Fortunately, the world is more complex. Scientists should devote themselves to their research. Obviously, it is not necessary to so advise those who have this in themselves. I am not calling for science to be enclosed in an ivory tower. This has not been possible for a long time – with only a few exceptions. I would like scientists to perceive the world of politics with real eyes and for politicians to realize that they don't know everything. And, when they discover this, for them to know to whom they should turn, amongst others to the Learned Society of the Czech Republic. Let's hope that this happens soon.

Annex I.

THE OLDEST ACADEMIES AND LEARNED SOCIETIES

- 1657 Accadèmia del Cimento, Florence: *Saggi di naturali esperienze* (1667)
1660 The Royal Society, London: *Philosophical Transactions* (1665)
1666 Académie Royale des Sciences, Paris: *Mémoires de l'Academie...* (1666)
1662 Deutsche Akademie der Naturforscher LEOPOLDINA: *Miscellanea* (1670)
1700 Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin: *Histoire de l'Académie...* (1710)
1725 Imperatorskaya Akademia nauk, Petrograd: *Commentarii*(1728)
1739 The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences: *Handlingar*
1746 Societas incognitorum, Olomouc: *Monatliche Auszüge*
1751 Göttingen Akademie der Wissenschaften
1759 Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften
1763 Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften
1769 Academie royale des Sciences, des Lettres et des Beaux Arts, Brussels
1784 Královská česká společnost nauk (Royal Bohemian Society of Learning), Prague: *Abhandlungen* (1775)
1784 Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta: *Transactions of the Society* (1788)
1825 Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Pest
1836 Southern Slavonic Academy of Sciences, Zagreb
1846 Sächsische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Leipzig
1847 Kaiserliche Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vienna: *Almanach der K. Akademie...*
1863 National Academy of Sciences, USA: *Proceedings (PNAS)*
1891 Česká akademie věd a umění (Czech Academy of the Sciences and the Arts), Prague: *Rozpravy / Almanach / Věstník* (*Transactions, Almanac, Bulletin*)
1891 Die Gesellschaft zur Förderung deutscher Wissenschaft, Kunst und Literatur in Böhmen
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- 1902 The British Academy, London: *Proceedings of the British Academy*
1949 Mainzer Akademie der Wissenschaften
1954 Australian Academy of Sciences
1970 Nordrhein-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Düsseldorf

Note:

The founding dates tend to vary; e.g., 1645 is sometimes given for the Royal Bohemian Society of Learning. Most Academies have changed their names and some temporarily interrupted their activities for various reasons. The abbreviated titles of the basic periodicals are given in italics.

Annex II.

NUMBER OF GROUPS AND MEMBERS OF SELECTED ACADEMIES AND LEARNED SOCIETIES

<i>Academy/ Learned Societies</i>	<i>Groups</i>	<i>Regular</i>	<i>Extraordinary</i>	<i>Foreign¹¹</i>	<i>Honorary</i>	<i>Correspondents</i>	<i>Total</i>
Berlin-Brandenburg AW	5	143 ¹²	62		30		235
Göttingen AdW	2	2×40				2×100	280
München BadW	2	2×45 ¹³			x	2×80	250
Leipzig SAW	3	115				72	187
Heidelberg HAW	2	2×40 ¹⁴	x ¹⁵				80 + ?
Mainz AWL	3	3×30				3×50	240
Düsseldorf NAW	3	182 ¹⁶	150		10		342
Wien ÖadW	2	2×45		2×70	16	2×55	340/600
Stockholm KVA	10	350 ¹⁷		164			328/514
Prague RBSL 1938	2	28	151	105	1	107	392
philosophy - hist.- philology	(I.)	13	84	54	1	66	218
mathematics-natural sciences	(II.)	15	67	51	-	41	174
RBSL 1952 (I.+II.)		30	112	-	-	-	142
Prague CAS 1952	4	54	64	-	-	-	118
philosophy-law-history	(I.)	16	18	-	-	-	34
natural sciences	(II.)	21	23	-	-	-	44
linguistics	(III.)	17	23	-	-	-	40
the arts	(IV)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Prague US 2002	-	70 ¹⁸		29			99

¹¹ called „non-resident“ for the Royal Bohemian Society of Learning

¹² in 2002, according to the Articles, each group may have up to 40 regular members

¹³ to 70 years of age

¹⁴ to 65 years of age

¹⁵ number not regulated, lists of names available

¹⁶ actual number in 2002, of which at least 32 above 68 years of age

¹⁷ in 2002, of which only 164 under 65 years of age

¹⁸ of which only 20 under 65 years of age.