

Editorial: Stewart Sutherland (1941–2018): A True Friend of the Royal Institute of Philosophy

It is with regret and sadness that we have to record that Stewart Sutherland, our President and former Chair, died on January 29th 2018, after a long illness.

Lord Sutherland of Houndwood in the Scottish Borders, to give Stewart his full title, was born in Aberdeen on February 25th, 1941. After school in Aberdeen, he studied philosophy at the university there, and also at Cambridge, before taking up academic posts in philosophy at the Universities of Bangor and Stirling. At Stirling he established Religious Studies as a discipline. From 1977–85, he was professor of the History and Philosophy of Religion at King's College London, and during this period he published three books which reflected his knowledge of and interest in both religion and literature, as well as his philosophical expertise.

At King's he was Vice-Principal from 1981–5 and Principal from 1985–90. From 1990–4 he took on the Vice-Chancellorship of London University as a whole. His eminence as an educator and also his skill as a canny and able administrator was clearly recognised when, in 1992 he was appointed Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools and the first Head of the newly formed school inspectorate for England, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, as it now universally known). In 1994 he left London and returned to his native land to be Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Edinburgh, a post he held until 2002. In that year he became Provost of the 400 year old Gresham College, a body devoted to giving free public lectures on important topics in the sciences and the humanities, and he also served as President of the Royal Society of Edinburgh from 2002–5.

Amid all these academic positions, in 1997 Stewart was nominated by the British Government to be the Chair of the Royal Commission on the Long Term Care of Older People, which turned out to be the last time a Royal Commission was set up in Britain. His judicious proposal, that the government should be responsible for providing or funding this care even in cases of chronic mental frailty, was taken up in Scotland, but unfortunately not so far in England and Wales. Stewart was knighted in 1995 and raised to the peerage in

Editorial

2001. In 2002 he was made a Knight of the Thistle, an ancient Scottish order of chivalry, limited to sixteen members at any one time.

Amid all the onerous duties and commitments marking so distinguished a career, Stewart found time to support the Royal Institute of Philosophy. As with Gresham's College, the Institute was very much to his liking in being seriously rigorous and academic, but also committed to speaking to and serving the wider public. He joined our Council in 1983, and served as Chair from 1988–2005; he became our President in 2009 until his death this year. Stewart's commitment to the Institute and its well-being is amply demonstrated by the fact that he missed hardly a meeting of the Council or the Executive Committee during the seventeen years that he was Chair. Those who were present at these meetings will remember the courteous and efficient way they were conducted under his direction; some will also cherish the way in which those meetings had a strong propensity to endorse policies and proposals favoured by the Chair, perhaps especially when the Chair had not revealed where it actually stood on an issue. We also recall that, in line with the Institute's nature and its wide membership and aims, Stewart was wary of attempts to corral the Institute into commenting on matters which were of interest and concern only to academic philosophers in their university employment; the Institute could not be seen to be acting in the manner of an academic or even a philosophical trade union.

As President Stewart continued to offer his assistance and wise advice as the role demanded, right up to the time of his death. Those who knew him even slightly will also remember with affection his modesty, his humour, and his common sense, at times gentle, but sharp too when the occasion required.

As already suggested, Stewart saw the Royal Institute of Philosophy and this journal as having a very special role, as indeed our founders did back in 1925. It was to lie in the interface between the academic philosophical world and a wider public, which could of course include academics in other fields. In its activities the Institute would draw on academic philosophy, indeed on the best academic philosophy, and without talking down or simplifying the complex, but it would always seek to make that philosophy's importance evident to the wider educated public. It should never sacrifice philosophical rigour in doing this, but equally it should never allow its activities or publications to drown in unnecessary or virtuosic technicality. Nor should we engage in epicyclical gyrations around themes whose significance is unclear to any but those already

whirling in mental flight. At the moment the academic world, including the academic philosophical world, is subject to ever increasing pressure in the direction of narrow specialisation and technicism, a process exacerbated by many of the institutional structures academics are increasingly subject to in careers and in publishing. On the other hand, public discourse these days is both coarse and increasingly divisive. Avoiding all these tendencies, the Institute strives to sustain a broad educated public in philosophy, as well as persuading the best philosophers to speak to that public. Stewart saw the Institute in these terms, which is why he committed himself to it so whole-heartedly in the midst of all else that he was involved in. We are deeply grateful to him for his commitment and support over so many years, and we shall miss him greatly.