At the British Psychological Society’s Annual Conference in Brighton in May, Peter Kinderman delivered his Presidential Address

Fifty years ago, on 1 September 1967, the Nobel Prize-winning civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr delivered a speech entitled ‘The role of the behavioral scientist in the civil rights movement’ to the American Psychological Association. Speaking at the height of the civil rights struggle, King stressed how behavioural scientists could and should support those citizens fighting for their fundamental rights. King’s speech is still relevant today – a call to arms.

In 1967 Martin Luther King Jr spoke to the American Psychological Association about links between racism, unemployment and living conditions. Now, in 2017, we can see continuing economic crisis and the impact of policies of austerity, right-wing populism and – most likely as a consequence – Brexit. And these are not just economic or political matters; they are crucial psychological issues too. Quite literally, these are matters of life and death. Between 2008 and 2010, immediately following the most recent economic crisis – not yet the self-inflicted economic wounds of Brexit – there were 1000 more suicides in England and Wales than would be expected on purely historical trends, and many of those deaths can be attributed to rising unemployment.

Psychologists, whose professional role is the promotion of wellbeing and the prevention of distress, have a duty to speak out about those social, economic and political circumstances that impact on our clients and the general public, and to bring such evidence to politicians and policy makers.

For example, it’s clear that unemployment and exploitative employment practices – zero-hours contracts, insecure jobs, the ‘gig economy’ – are damaging to our wellbeing regardless of our age, gender, level of education, ethnicity or the part of the country in which we live. The longer someone remains unemployed, the worse the effect, and people do not adapt to unemployment. Their wellbeing is permanently reduced. In contrast, re-employment – finding a decent job if you are unemployed – leads to higher wellbeing.

Martin Luther King said: ‘There are some things in our society, some things in our world, to which we should never be adjusted.’ Another Nobel Prize winner, Albert Camus (distinctive in that he occupied himself during the Nazi occupation of France editing the clandestine newspaper of the Resistance) wrote in his private notebook in May 1937: ‘Psychology is action, not thinking about oneself.’

Psychologists study why people behave as they do.
We are therefore uniquely placed to help understand and address some of the most pressing problems facing humankind. Our expertise brings with it an ethical duty to follow the lead of Camus and King and speak out about those issues that demand a voice. We should be clear that human beings are products of our society. We should explore and explain, using our distinctive science, the mechanisms by which the events and circumstances of people’s lives can lead to psychological problems. And we should offer solutions.

Psychology is a discipline and profession that spans the whole range of human experience. We, members of the British Psychological Society, are experts in things that really matter to people: relationships, education and learning, health, mental health, politics, sport, crime, work, how organisations function, prejudice and intercultural understanding, and more. Our obligation is, therefore, to keep psychology always relevant to our fellow citizens and to the real world.

Over the past 12 months, we have seen tumultuous political events. In the fallout from the Brexit vote, the resignation of the Prime Minister was only the second item on the BBC news. We’ve seen the release of the Chilcot Inquiry report into the Gulf War, and the catalogue of misinformation, hubris and spin surrounding that depressing but defining debacle.

We need radical change in how we think about mental health and psychological wellbeing.

The idea that our more distressing emotions are nothing more than the symptoms of physical illnesses – which can then be treated like any other medical disease – is pervasive and seductive. But it is also profoundly flawed, and our present approach to helping people in acute emotional distress is severely hampered by old-fashioned and incorrect ideas about the nature and origins of mental health problems. We must move away from the ‘disease model’, which assumes that emotional distress is merely a symptom of biological illness, and instead embrace a psychological and social approach to mental health and wellbeing.

At a public lecture before the Society’s Annual Conference in Brighton, I argued that mental health problems are fundamentally social and psychological issues. We should therefore replace ‘diagnoses’ with straightforward descriptions of our problems, radically reduce use of medication, and use it pragmatically rather than presenting it as a ‘cure’.

Because this approach celebrates our shared humanity and psychology rather than relying on expert treatment of illnesses, I think that the best chance for real change lies in members of the public joining my professional psychology colleagues in actively campaigning for better services to promote psychological wellbeing, for choice and for a choice which reflects a more appropriate understanding of our problems and, most importantly, demanding our rights.

You can read more on The Psychologist website: search ‘our turbulent minds’.

Professor Kinderman will also appear as part of ‘The Psychologist presents...’ at Latitude Festival
There has been an attempted military coup in Turkey, continuing military conflicts against ISIS, an unfolding migrant crisis in the Mediterranean and, to round off the year, the election of President Donald Trump.

With that in mind, and despite the campaign rhetoric of some politicians, our objective expertise is needed now more than ever. We in the British Psychological Society, along with our colleagues in the Academy of Social Sciences, the medical Royal Colleges, the Royal Academy of Arts, the Royal Institution, the British Academy and all our other partners, have a responsibility to offer our scientific expertise, professional perspective and values-based commentary to these vital public debates.

As academics, we are required to speak truth to power, to use – and defend – our academic freedom to give voice to sometimes unpalatable truths. As professionals, we have a duty to act in the best interests of our clients and to protect and promote their fundamental rights. Perhaps most importantly – speaking as President and as Chair of the Board of Trustees – the British Psychological Society is a charity, and therefore it does not primarily exist to serve itself or even its members, but the public.

**Growth and a vision of psychology**

Perhaps precisely because we are living through such interesting times, perhaps because our skills are needed more than ever, and perhaps because many of us have decided to embrace these responsibilities, the British Psychological Society continues to grow, both in membership and in relevance.

Together we have a strong and effective voice. We now have over 70,000 members – compared with just over 60,000 a year ago. That represents a 16 per cent increase and over £1 million in additional subscriptions… not that we should pay too much attention to that, but it does mean that we have more resources to do the things we believe in.

But this highlights that our Society is a large organisation: we have a £14m turnover, and employ 100 staff. Last year a surplus of over £820,000 was put to reserves for the undoubtedly stormy days ahead. We also take corporate and social responsibility seriously; we are a values-based organisation, with an ethical investment portfolio reviewed regularly by the Board of Trustees.

We have made appointments of highly skilled, senior, new colleagues to take forward our Strategic Aims, for example our Director of Policy and Communications, Kathryn Scott, and our Director of Qualifications and Standards, Andrea Finkel-Gates. We have, perhaps most visibly, implemented a new website – our front window to the world. We have made good progress on structural reform of the Society itself. There are significant challenges, most notably finding new ways of resourcing certain activities in the wake of recent legal changes, which have led to disruption and frustration, and about which I’ll say more in a minute.

People learn to make sense of the world because of what happens to us

But I am hopeful that we can rise to these challenges and agree a way forward.

Today, unlike 50 years ago, psychologists regularly feature on flagship media outlets, and broadcasters no longer need to explain our profession to the listeners. The public are accessing our own media outlets (The Psychologist, the Research Digest, our website and our Facebook, Twitter and YouTube accounts) in very large numbers.

Over the past year, we have received 1321 calls from the media (that’s 25 a week), and 2384 media articles have mentioned the British Psychological Society (that’s 46 a week). The fact that the second figure is larger than the first means that our proactive work – actively using press releases etc. – is effective.

Our website – now re-designed – had 9.6 million website page views in 2016, with 64 per cent of them from new users. We have 250,000 Facebook ‘friends’ and 45,000 Twitter followers. And, importantly, we have over 43,000 subscribers to our free, weekly, Research Digest email, with 4.3 million page views for the Research Digest blog.

We have forged new collaborative arrangements, not only with psychology associations in other nations, but also with organisations such as the Mental Health Foundation and the Faculty of Public Health. We have maintained and reinvigorated our relationships with organisations such as the British Medical Association, the Royal College of Psychiatrists, the Royal Society, British Academy and Royal Institution. We have new relationships with Parliament, through All Party Parliamentary Groups and via our professional partners, contracted to work for the Society in Whitehall.

During this presidential year we have assertively promoted the Society’s charitable obligation to make psychology relevant to citizens and the real world. We have led on a long list of what might be
called campaigning issues – too long for this brief presentation. From repudiation of ‘gay conversion’ therapies, support for people struggling to withdraw from powerfully addictive psychiatric medication, and a moratorium on the use of psychiatric drugs for people with intellectual disabilities, to – of course – lobbying for greater investment in preventative healthcare and mental health and social care, the Society has promoted the psychological perspective. We’ve continued to press the Department of Health and Department of Work and Pensions on the failings of the Work Capability Assessment and the injustice and harmful impact of benefits conditionality. We’ve spoken out on issues as broad as human rights, child abuse, funding of health and social care, social justice and Brexit.

On which point, we should be very concerned that one of the legislative consequences of Brexit is likely to be the repeal of the Human Rights Act (a consequence of the political fallout of Brexit as a phenomenon, not a technical necessity). There will be much to be done over the next few years.

Our vision of psychology emphasises the existential value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively, and affirms their ability to improve their lives through the use of reason and ingenuity. Running through our work has been an unwavering commitment to the scientific method and evidence-based policies. But we also have a responsibility to apply what we know; to use those insights and our ingenuity to improve the lives of our fellow human beings.

Psychology is fundamentally about the things that really matter – relationships, optimism, a sense of meaning and purpose, personal agency. These are of course the core of what is now thought of as wellbeing: a key element of government policy. Similarly, philosophical concepts – fairness, respect, identity, equity, dignity and autonomy – underpin our fundamental human rights and have clear links to psychology.

Indeed, we have to avoid the trap of ‘psychologising’ issues – focusing all our attention on individual psychology, on what happens inside, rather than outside, people’s heads. I am and remain a proud clinical psychologist. I am very proud of the work that my colleagues – including nurses, psychiatrists and others – do to address the psychological wellbeing of individuals. And I know, partly from my own work, that how people learn to make sense of the world is vitally important – and something that we can influence.

But people learn to make sense of the world because of what happens to us. We grow up influenced by our social circumstances, our peers at school, our position in the world. If we grow up in circumstances of abuse, poverty, racism, discrimination, neo-liberal exploitation and the denial of our rights, we will grow up devoid of that sense of meaning and purpose, that sense of agency and optimism that is so vital to psychological wellbeing.

That’s why we need to keep talking to our political leaders about the psychology of mental health and wellbeing. It’s also why it’s vital to remember that the fundamental building blocks of society are indeed, fundamental. All human beings need our fundamental rights, we need a sound economy and an equitable economy. We need protection and a secure start in life. We need education and decent employment, and we need protection and care when things are difficult and when we grow old. These fundamentals aren’t additional to or alternative to psychology – they shape our psychology [see box].

A very personal example. When my brother received a letter from Job Centre Plus telling him that he was to lose £120 a month in benefits, he was understandably very worried. His anxiety meant his sleep suffered, and he began to experience more distressing paranoia and hallucinations. Those are quintessentially psychological issues, but triggered by the impact of political decisions on vulnerable people.

Psychology is action. And as Martin Luther King said: ‘...there are some things in our society, some things in our world, to which we… must always be maladjusted if we are to be people of good will. We must never adjust ourselves to racial discrimination and racial segregation. We must never adjust ourselves to religious bigotry. We must never adjust ourselves to economic conditions that take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. We must never adjust ourselves to the madness of militarism, and the self-defeating effects of physical violence. … There comes a time when one must take a stand that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular. But one must take it because it is right.’

**Pride and frustration**

The role of President of the British Psychological Society is explicitly a position of leadership. Not a personal platform, but a responsibility to promote psychology ‘pure and applied’.

Members of the Society are well placed to help protect the most vulnerable of our fellow citizens – children; migrants; survivors of hate crimes, abuse and bullying; people with disabilities and people in receipt of state benefits; people living with dementia and people experiencing challenges to their mental health and psychological wellbeing. And, yes, this
means going beyond the comfort zone of individual psychology and embracing the political agenda.

I am proud of the campaigning work that British Psychological Society has undertaken on these issues so close to my heart. But it’s also been frustrating.

To be entirely candid, the past year has been characterised by a shattering workload – leading a major professional body and holding down a twin career as a working university academic and a practising clinical psychologist is a difficult juggling act. It can become almost impossible when, as in my case, the Society is unable to offer employers any recompense for the time dedicated to BPS activities. I am lucky that my employer has been understanding. Sadly not all employers are able to be so generous, and a number of my colleagues have unfortunately had to step down from significant BPS roles where recompense arrangements had been in place but were changed following recent changes to charity law. I have to say, also, that I am left with profound emotions of anger, disappointment and frustration.

I, like many colleagues, have been angered and infuriated by the apparent ineptitude of the British Psychological Society. Some of this frustration is technical. The Society is bound, not only by charity law, but also by its Rules, some of which date from 1901. We also need to remember our policy stance towards the ‘gig economy’, as well the fact that legal rulings on zero-hours contracts, for organisations such as Uber and JD Sports – rightly – mean that, if we pay people in return for the services that they offer the Society, especially if they are also members and subscribers, we must follow the proper – and, in fact, desirable – requirements of employment and charity law.

The inevitable tensions that have followed these developments have been distressing. I dislike conflict and this year has been a very painful one for me personally. However, I remain hopeful that we can overcome the current problems and find a way forward.

In my opinion, the Society will need to make some significant changes, not only procedurally but in our whole approach to undertaking activities. I think we still rely too much on an amateur ethos best suited to 1901 (the date of the Society’s foundation) than to 2017. With over 70,000 members and a significant public interest mandate, we need a professional and modern approach. That doesn’t mean forgetting that we are an academic learned society, but it means leaving behind the idea that our work can best be conducted on a voluntary basis by semi-retired university professors on weekends and evenings. In my opinion – and I have argued for this within the Society – we need to move much faster and more confidently towards a 21st-century approach to resourcing the vital activities undertaken by members on behalf of the Society, and the employment of skilled psychological professionals. I am disappointed that I have been unable to advance this approach as assertively as I would have wished, and I apologise to the members for that failure.

**A discipline whose time has come**

But these are internal issues of ‘office politics’. We need to sort them out, but we also need to focus on the wider perspective. And in that respect, my principal regret is that I should have been bolder. I look to my colleagues in ‘Psychologists for Social Change’ as a model for what I (and the BPS) could have been. I – we – should have done more to condemn xenophobia and falsehoods, hate-filled political rhetoric, increasing inequality, threats to social inclusion and humanitarian principles. We should have done more to encourage the engagement of scientists, social scientists and psychologists with political discussions, we should have engaged more assertively with threats to welfare and public services, the Prevent agenda, with austerity politics, and with the every-day violation of fundamental human rights in mental health care…

And there is a huge hunger in the public for new approaches – in my own area of mental health and psychological wellbeing, but also in the arenas of physical health, work and unemployment, in our benefits system, austerity policies – even Universal Basic Income – and how we approach crime and justice. I am frustrated that the British Psychological Society so seldom seems able to take the initiative.

All too often, I am afraid, we have been hamstrung by diffidence… until after the event, and by a risk-averse approach to our work… forgetting, in my opinion that our primary obligation as a charity is to serve the public.

To return to where I started: psychology is a discipline whose time has come. Not only as an academic subject, but also as a force for social change. The world needs psychology more than ever, to help understand our current political developments and social challenges. And to offer practical, useful, tested, solutions. People want to hear what we have to say, and the British Psychological Society is – or should be – an organisation through which people can join together, capitalising on our passion and sense of vocation, to harness the huge reserves of passion, energy, knowledge, skill and commitment among members in order to do good in the world, and make a difference.
Chair of the Education & Public Engagement Board

Nominations are required for the Chair of the Education & Public Engagement Board to serve in office from 2016 to 2019. The person will be appointed a Trustee of the Society and have a seat on the Board of Trustees.

Nominations

Nominations should reach the Society’s office no later than 5pm, 1 June 2017. To ensure validity of nomination you should use a standard nomination form, which give details of the information and signatories required. A short personal statement will also be required. Nomination forms and further information is available from the Chief Executive’s Office, please email: ce@bps.org.uk

The candidates will be considered by an Appointments Panel of the Board of Trustees. For more information about the Board, its full terms of reference, a job description with indication of time commitments, please contact Lisa Morrison Coulthard, (Lead Policy Advisor); lisa.morrisoncoulthard@bps.org.uk, 0116 2529510

Postgraduate Award

The Award provides an opportunity for a postgraduate psychologist to be seconded to the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST), to assist in providing objective briefing material for MPs and Peers on a psychological topic. POST is an office of the two Houses of Parliament (Commons and Lords), charged with providing balanced and objective analysis of science and technology based issues relevant to Parliament.

Award: Three-month secondment to POST. An allowance of £6,000 will be provided to fund the secondment.

Eligibility: Open to postgraduate students registered for a doctoral degree in a psychology-related subject e.g. PhD/MPhil or taught practitioner doctorates [DClinPsy etc] at a UK Higher Education Institute. Applicants must be in their penultimate or final year of part- or full-time study at the time of the start of their placement at POST in 2017/2018. Applicants must be a Member of the British Psychological Society.

How to apply: Produce a concise (no more than two sides A4, typed) summary of any aspect of psychological research that the applicant considers and shows to be relevant to public policy, including an explanation of why parliamentarians should be interested in this topic.

For further details and an application form please contact Liz Beech, at liz.beech@bps.org.uk.

Closing date for applications: 31 August 2017