

PERSPECTIVE

Reflections on the Academic Policy Analysis Process and the UK Identity Cards Scheme

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There is an increasing rhetoric from politicians for universities to become more involved in policy analysis and policy research. In this article, we reflect on our experiences of the analysis we conducted into the legislation to introduce biometric identity cards in the United Kingdom. We highlight how our work had direct consequences for the ongoing policy deliberation around this controversial piece of legislation. In particular, we highlight our role in the debate surrounding the government's figures for identity fraud and the concerns about the likely cost of the scheme to the government and taxpayer. We end the article by discussing some of the practical realities of such a foray into *real politik*.

Keywords academic integrity, identity cards, identity fraud, interventions, policy analysis

The increasing rhetoric from politicians is for universities to become more involved in policy analysis and policy research. The European Commission has called on social scientists to be “more daring when addressing public policies in contemporary issues” (Potočnik, 2005), while government departments and ministries are major sources of funding for academic research. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Home Office spends around £20 million on independent research papers each year (Barrett, 2006),

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The LSE Identity Project's work is ongoing. See <http://identity-project.lse.ac.uk> for updates and analysis, including a critique of the Government's first report to Parliament on the likely costs of the scheme which includes, for the first time, set up as well as running costs.

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and in the past 3 years alone, our institution has conducted research and analyzed policies in over 70 different projects commissioned and funded by a variety of UK government departments and agencies amounting to more than £11 m (LSE Identity Project, 2006). Academics are frequently called on to comment on policies, and are ever-present at policy workshops, conferences, and summits.

Policy research and analysis tend to involve researching an issue with the expectation of generating political interest and influencing legislation. For example, medical and scientific research is often drawn upon in legislative activity, for example, introducing laws on passive smoking. Political groups often conduct policy research to show the flaws of existing regulatory regimes alongside making calls for further research, for example, measuring the extent of global warming. Torgerson (1986) thus describes policy analysis as “those activities aimed at developing knowledge relevant to the formulation and implementation of public policy” (p. 33). Clearly such research is not without controversy, as, in recent months, there have been stories of failures to publish reports on global warming for fear of influencing the 2004 U.S. presidential elections (Revkin, 2006), and of the reshaping of criminological research findings to suit the UK government's law enforcement agenda (Walters, 2006).

Research and analysis can play the essential role of both understanding and informing policy deliberations. Majone (1989) argues that there are many different ways in which academic contributions might influence the policy process, for example, by providing standards of argument and an intellectual structure for public discourse. A major goal, therefore, is to ensure that all the main issues are clarified before the legislative process proceeds. However, this type of policy research may encounter resistance and interference, when findings do not fit with prevailing political agendas.

In this article, we reflect on our experiences of the analysis we conducted around a specific major piece of legislation in the United Kingdom. We highlight two particular ways in which these activities had direct consequences of the ongoing policy deliberation, and also discuss the practical realities of such a foray into *real politik*.

The analysis described in this article was focused on the UK government's decision to implement a national, computerized identity register. This national identity register would contain a record on every individual in the United Kingdom, with each individual subject's unique entry guaranteed by biometric data via an identity card. The register is, in essence, a single reference point to other databases that are to contain significant amounts of personal information on every individual in the United Kingdom.

This is a highly complex policy, being introduced in a highly complex environment. However, much awareness of this complexity was lost in the popular perception, with the universally accepted shorthand for this scheme, particularly in the media and government itself, being the "introduction of national identity cards."

BACKGROUND

In 2002, the UK government undertook a public consultation around the principle of issuing "entitlement cards" (Home Office, 2002). Following this consultation, on 29 November 2004 the government introduced and published its *Identity Cards Bill*. This legislation was debated in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords, after which the bill was suspended (and effectively fell) pending the 2005 general election. (For an explanation of the process by which a bill becomes Law see House of Lords (2005)). The Identity Cards Scheme was part of the Labour Party's manifesto for its campaign in the 2005 General Election (5 May 2005), and a slightly revised version of the bill was presented to the House of Commons on 25 May 2005 following the party's successful reelection, and it eventually became law on 30 March 2006.

A group of researchers based at the London School of Economics and Political Science issued a series of reports and all-party briefings about the bill throughout the long drawn-out process of Parliamentary debate. An interim report was issued in March 2005, and the main report was published in June 2005, shortly before the second reading of the bill in the House of Commons. A further report was published in January 2006 as the bill reached the report stage in the House of Lords. Another analysis was published in March 2006 in the midst of a near-constitutional crisis as the bill was sent back and forth between the elected House of Commons and the unelected House of Lords.

Perhaps naively, it was our intention to inform public debate and policy deliberations on the proposed scheme

with comments and analysis on the framing of arguments being used, so as to clarify and thus help set out the field for debate. Of course, the initial position of academics is to consider the situation from as many angles as possible. However, there is a real danger that such honest attempts at objectivity can easily be interpreted by impartial observers as adding confusion to the debate, and by those with a particular political agenda as deliberately obfuscating the issue in furtherance of a particular agenda. In this case we were accused of being "privacy advocates" who were introducing a "privacy agenda" by the back door under the cloak of academic research.

As with any modern policy that hinges on technology, many complex issues arise. Policy analysis is expected to study policy goals and objectives and their likelihood of being met, the feasibility of the solutions being proffered as well as alternative solutions, and the nature of the problems that are being solved through the introduction of new initiatives alongside any unintended consequences. In some cases, academics also investigate the likely costs and perceived benefits of the proposals. We had set out to look at as many of these aspects as we could, building on our academic and professional expertise and inviting other experts to contribute their own ideas. We compiled hundreds of pages of analyses but we restrict ourselves here to two key aspects of the policy, before describing two different ways in which academic contributions shaped the resulting debate and, to a limited extent, the legislation. The first aspect describes the ways in which arguments about preventing identity fraud, seized on by government as persuasive in promoting the scheme, were challenged by the LSE research and analyses; the second highlights the pivotal role of a public meeting organized by the researchers that helped clarify an important question concerning the costs of the scheme.

IDENTITY FRAUD

Over the course of the bill, ID card technology was presented as a form of magic "pixie dust" to be sprinkled over, and thereby solve, problems as varied as health service delivery and "health care tourism," illegal immigration, terrorism, organised crime, social security fraud, and identity fraud. We only consider the latter here.

When the bill was first presented to Parliament in late 2004, the discussion of identity fraud among the general population was marginal. There were a few mentions of the topic made on the various sides of the ID card debate, but it was always peripheral to the discussion. On the few occasions when identity fraud was raised, it was always in the context of an estimate given by the government's Cabinet Office, published in 2002, that identity fraud cost the UK economy around £1.3 billion per year (Cabinet Office, 2002). Identity theft was not yet a public policy

concern, despite the occasional newsworthy case such as the traumatic experience of Derek Bond from Bristol, who in February 2003 was arrested in Durban for crimes committed by a Las Vegas criminal who had stolen Bond's identity. Bond spent 3 weeks in jail before the truth was uncovered. However, higher profile cases in America, of notables like Oprah Winfrey, Will Smith, Tiger Woods and Steven Spielberg, finally raised public interest, along with the mounting cases of credit card fraud that could no longer be ignored. Gradually, identity fraud became more noteworthy, and over time it took on a much more central role in the ID Card Bill's passage through Parliament. Indeed, in the bill's later stages, combating identity theft was often cited as one of the key arguments in support of the scheme. As the then Home Secretary Charles Clarke said in Parliament:

ID cards will make it more difficult to perpetrate identity theft and the high-quality verification service will reduce the time that it takes to deal with the damage. The British Bankers Association has stated that general banking losses due to identity fraud amount to £50 million. Those are substantial issues and show that the card will be of benefit to the individual. (Hansard 28 June 2005 Column 1166)

The then Minister for passports, Andy Burnham later said at a conference:

ID cards will help tackling identity fraud and will save tens of millions of pounds of taxpayers money. . . . It's not only public services that suffer the cost of identity fraud. Work carried out by the telecommunications industry in 2003 indicated that identity related fraud cost the industry around £200 million a year. (Speaking notes, issued to delegates attending the CityForum Identity Cards Round Table, 15 November 2005)

Such assertions about dealing with identity fraud were being made without proof, and indeed introduced confusion by ignoring the broader picture. With the issue becoming a key element of the government's argument for identity cards, the LSE main report included a chapter on identity fraud (LSE Identity Project, 2005, pp. 97–111). This report provided a detailed review of the government's previously published material on identity theft, pointing out that the debate about identity theft is not without controversy, not least because identities cannot be stolen, even if they can be used fraudulently. In addition, we were aware of a strong and growing undercurrent of opinion that believed the identity card scheme could actually make matters worse. Writing in the *Scotsman* newspaper, Microsoft National Technology Officer Jerry Fishenden said the UK identity card scheme could "trigger massive identity fraud on a scale beyond anything we have seen before" (Peev, 2005).

In some cases the use of unique identifiers for citizens has itself become the key enabler of identity fraud. We

noted that despite all the legislative activity in the United States on combating identity fraud, no government agency has proposed identity cards as the solution. In fact, the dominant argument is that a national identity card in the United States would make identity fraud more of a problem because of the centralization of personal information it would entail (LSE Identity Project, 2005).

In the United States, the Social Security number (SSN) has become an identity hub, and a central reference point to index identity and link it to further databases. A person's SSN provides a single interface with that person's dealings with a vast number of private and public bodies. It is arguable that the existence and ease of obtaining the SSN, and its importance across private and public databases, are the reasons why the level of identity fraud in the United States is extremely high. This situation applies equally in Australia, where the introduction of an extensive Tax File Number has also increased the incidence of identity fraud beyond the levels experienced in the United Kingdom (LSE Identity Project, 2005).

Furthermore, the use of identification documents has presented a key opportunity for forgery, especially if the documents are not routinely checked properly. Also, a regular checking of identity documents, for example against the card holder's biometrics, could lead to unacceptable costs, inconvenience, not to mention technological challenges.¹

Given the increasing use of the official figures about identity fraud in justifying the Identity Cards scheme, the LSE main report highlighted some concerns with the Home Office's methodology for "measuring" identity fraud. With no clear definition of identity fraud, rigor in calculating the figures is sacrificed. To study the extent of identity fraud would then involve asking various government departments to report back offering their own figures on the nature of the problem. The situation was made more complex because there is no evidence that the responding organizations all used the same definition of identity fraud as each other; nor were we told what criteria they did use. Without such information, the figures do not bear serious scrutiny, as comparison is meaningless when respondents are basing their argument on different premises. On the face of the information that was given, it is far from clear that all the losses detailed can be attributed to identity fraud, as it is officially defined. Even where losses are due to identity fraud, there is no indication of exactly how identity cards could remedy the situation.

Similar points were made during the Parliamentary debate; for example, Labour Member of Parliament (MP) Robert Marshall-Andrews said:

Things got worse when I finally found the document on which this figure is based—a Cabinet Office document called "Identity Fraud: A Study." It deals with various aspects of crime that, it is said, cost £1.3 billion. The overwhelming

majority of that figure is said to come from the following types of crime: VAT fraud, which accounts for £215 million; credit card theft—of course, that cannot be affected by this legislation—which accounts for £215 million; and money laundering, which accounts for some £400 million. (Hansard 28 June 2005: Column 1242)

These are all points that we had previously discussed with Mr. Marshall-Andrews at Parliamentary briefings. We had shared our ideas on this matter, and his particular concerns in turn fueled our analyses, which was then fed back in later briefings. In the coming months, as the bill moved through committee stages and the public debate ensued, we continued to brief MPs and Lords on the problems of measurement and the Home Office continually repeated its £1.3bn figure.

As the bill approached its next great test in Parliament, in its third reading in the House of Lords in February 2006, the government issued an updated report on identity fraud—in fact, only 4 days before the third reading debate. This updated report, now coming from the Home Office itself and not from the Cabinet Office, used the same (problematic) methodology as the earlier study, and suggested that the headline figure for identity fraud had risen from £1.3 billion to £1.7 billion, with part of this difference arising from the inclusion of approximately £400 million from sources “not included in the 2002 study” (Home Office, 2006).

The press reporting of this updated report nicely illustrated the way in which “knowledge relevant to the formulation and implementation of public policy” can have a direct impact on the discourse surrounding the policy. Rather than presenting the government’s figures uncritically as on previous occasions, key sections of the press began to investigate the basis for these new figures. They discovered numerous flaws in the reasoning behind the figures. For instance, one media organization investigated the Home Office’s claim that losses from fraudulent use of plastic payment cards, or using a fictitious identity to obtain such a card, was £504.8 million per year. The Home Office had attributed that figure to the UK Payments Association, APACS. However, when approached by the media, APACS reported that this form of identity fraud had totaled only £36.9 million in 2004, and in the first 6 months of 2005 they had already experienced a 16% drop in fraud, principally as a result of the introduction of chip and PIN technology for point-of-sale verification (replacing signatures). (APACS spokesman Mark Bowerman, quoted in McCue, 2006).

The mood had changed. Now the media and Parliament were unwilling to accept new figures without scrutiny. Often they applied an analytical approach to the government’s claims similar to that offered in our reports and briefings. Therefore, it is not straightforward to say that one side “won” and the other “lost,” for although the government

managed to get its bill through Parliament, it also managed to sound unconvincing and often generated laughter across the benches in Parliament at the mere mention of identity theft. Hence, it was no surprise that on the first occasion that the LSE work was mentioned during the debate on the Lords amendments on 13 February 2006, the government’s front benches jeered.²

Nevertheless, our analyses and research were able to open the black box of identity fraud, questioning the measurements used and the definitions considered. Even if we were to leave the problems of definition aside, and presume that technology could go some way to dealing with identity fraud, problems appreciating the scale of identity fraud still remain, and further research and analysis is warranted.

COSTING THE SCHEME

Much of the press coverage of the LSE report focused on one aspect of our policy analysis, namely, an alternative estimation of the government’s own costings. Building from the stated objectives and policy goals, including combating identity theft and social security benefit fraud, we outlined a number of assumptions on how the scheme would be likely to function, and using a number of the government’s own figures and data from Home Office commissioned studies, we provided an alternate costing scheme. In the report we presented low, medium and high estimates for the likely “costs” of the scheme, of £10.6 billion, £14.5 billion and £19.2 billion over 10 years. The government’s costings, in contrast, were significantly lower. In the regulatory impact assessment accompanying the bill the government stated:

The current best estimate is that the total average annual running costs for issuing passports and ID cards to UK nationals is estimated at £584m. Some set-up costs will be incurred after the first ID cards/biometric passports are issued as it will be more cost effective to build parts of the infrastructure incrementally (Home Office, 2005)

Thus, over a 10-year period this amounts to £5.84 billion at 2005/2006 prices.

When the media first learned of our costings, they emerged as front-page stories in all the major newspapers in the United Kingdom. Public concern grew as people, who were once willing to accept an identity card resented the fact that it could cost so much more than the government had claimed. What followed was an intense difference of opinion as the government publicly lambasted our work.

This difference of opinion between the Home Office figures and those from LSE was frequently commented on in the Parliamentary debate, for example, by Labour MP David Winnick, who said:

Even if we dismiss the figures of the London School of Economics, which may have exaggerated the costs, it is pretty certain that the costs now ventured by the Government are unlikely to be the final costs. Who really believes otherwise? (Hansard 28 June 2005, Column 1185)

Another Labour MP, Austin Mitchell, said:

The costs will be enormous. The Government estimates keep going up and will go up again. The current estimates are going up even before anything has happened, and they are bound to increase further. The LSE estimate of the costs, which varies between £10.6 billion and £19.2 billion, with a median of £14.5 billion, seems to me to be far more accurate. (Hansard 28 June 2005, Column 1215)

What both of these quotations illustrate is that, while the basis for the LSE figures was considered controversial (despite presenting detailed cost assumptions and line items, themselves gleaned mostly from Home Office documents; LSE Identity Project, 2005, chapters 16 and 17 and Appendix 2), the Home Office figure of £584 million per year, because of government insistence, was generally accepted at face value; what is more, what was being paid for, and what was not, barely merited a mention.

Eventually the topic became so controversial that the Home Office felt it had to bring in an external organization to review its costings and to give them a stamp of approval. The Home Office did not want to share the details of its costs with Parliament because it deemed the figures to be “commercially confidential.” That is, by disclosing the details of the costings model, the Home Office may prejudice the future contract bidding process. While it was willing to attack our costings, it was unwilling to disclose its own. Instead the Home Office hired an accounting firm, KPMG, to review 60% of its costs model, and then to release, on November 7 2005, a small excerpt of KPMG’s final report (KPMG, 2005).

The KPMG excerpt began with a clear endorsement of the government’s model as being robust. While the rest of the report made a number of substantive criticisms of the Home Office’s costings model, ministers were able to repeat time and again that “KPMG has found the cost claims to be robust.” The Parliamentary debate on costs was being reframed as *LSE vs. Home Office and KPMG*.

However, at a public meeting organized by the LSE Identity Project at the House of Lords on 9 November 2005, this was to unravel. In organizing the event, the LSE group invited representatives from academia, including one of the authors of this article (SD), representatives from industry, and the minister responsible for the bill, Andy Burnham.

The minister and the LSE representative had taken part in public debates about identity cards on a number of previous occasions, including one the previous day, so no one was expecting any major revelations. On this occasion,

however, the minister diverted from his normally carefully chosen words and revealed a narrower definition of costs for the Home Office estimate than had previously been given. That is, he clarified that the £584m per year was only the cost to be incurred by the Home Office itself for the administration of the system, and not the cost to the Home Office as a whole (e.g., immigration services), let alone the government as a whole (e.g., costs to implementing biometric readers and changing systems at welfare and benefits offices).

Immediately following the meeting, surprised by his candor, we wrote to the minister seeking confirmation of what he had said (Angell, 2005). He replied, posting his response on the identity cards web site (Burnham, 2005). In this letter he stated:

Decisions on whether, when and how particular public services will make use of the ID cards scheme will be made by those services—individually or collectively as appropriate depending on how services are managed. (Burnham, 2005)

He continued:

There is therefore no “one size fits all” ready-reckoner to estimate the costs across all public services as each case is different. (Burnham, 2005)

For some government departments, he suggested, integration costs can be designed into new systems, but for others:

Integration costs will be absorbed in the usual cycle of system upgrades and technology refresh. Rather than having to incur the costs of a specific project to “ID-enable” their system they will wait and plan it into their upgrade and maintenance cycles.

Where costs of using the ID cards scheme have been identified, they are included in the business case of calculating the net present value of the scheme. It would not be appropriate to include these costs as part of the issuing costs of the scheme. (Burnham, 2005)

This answer revealed two important aspects of the way the government had presented its own “cost” estimates. First, it made clear that setup costs were not included in the figure of £584 per annum. Second, the government costings also did not include any costs that were likely to be incurred by other government departments that might (choose to) make use of the scheme. The cost to the taxpayer, rather than the Home Office, was therefore likely to be much higher than had previously been presented. An essential difference between our two costings was becoming quite clear: While we included the costs of the larger scheme, such as the costs to implementing biometric readers at benefits offices and in police cars etc., the Home Office was only calculating the costs to itself, and even then only the costs of operating the scheme.

This important distinction was immediately picked up in the next Parliamentary debate, in the House of Lords on 15 November 2005, where Lord Waddington asked:

I should like to put some very straightforward questions to the Government. When they put forward a figure of £5.8 billion, are they talking purely about the launching costs for the Home Office? Are they excluding all the other costs involved for the scheme to have any use at all? Those other costs will clearly involve adapting the computer systems in other government departments so that they may have access to the Home Office computer and to the information on the register. What will be the cost of adapting all those computer systems so that others may use the information kept on the National Identity Register? Am I right in saying that those costs are not included in the figure of £5.8 billion put forward by the Government? If I am, what is the total figure?

Nobody has begun to answer, on behalf of the Government, these crucial questions, and I hope that if the Minister cannot answer us today she will give a firm undertaking to give a detailed statement of these costs as soon as possible and before we proceed very much further with the bill. I agree entirely with the noble Lord, Lord Barnett, that it is very difficult to debate any of these matters when the costs may be so astronomical as not to equate with any benefits that will accrue from the scheme. (Hansard 15 November 2005, Column 973).

In responding to this question, the government's representative in the House of Lords, Baroness Scotland, replied:

I gave those costs at Second Reading but I am very happy to reiterate the comments that I made then for my noble friend Lord Barnett, and I shall indicate how the costs are made up. We have estimated that the annual running cost is £584 million per year. A number of commentators have aggregated those sums and given a 10-year estimate, and they say that over 10 years the cost would be £5.8 billion. But that is a 10-year figure, not an annual figure. We have produced the annual figure. I hope that I indicated it clearly at Second Reading. (Hansard 15 November 2005, Column 983)

She continued:

So the figures that we are giving are those that we have estimated as the annual cost of issuing identity cards and passports. (Hansard 15 November 2005, Column 984)

In the remainder of this debate, the government struggled to convince the peers that it was appropriate for them to approve the legislation on the basis of the costs to the Home Office of running up the scheme, rather than the costs to government as a whole. In direct response to the different costings, on 16 January 2006 the House of Lords (where the Labour party has no overall majority) approved an amendment to delay implementation of most parts of the Identity Cards Bill until the full costs of the scheme were laid before, and approved by, Parliament.

This placed the government in an uncomfortable position. It could try to remove the Lords' amendment when the bill returned to the Commons for final consideration, but that would be tantamount to requiring all the government's Members of Parliament to vote against the principle of getting more information about a costly scheme before they approve it, that is, signing a blank check and rejecting demands for more information. Instead, the government overturned the Lords amendment by replacing it with a government-supported amendment that imposed a requirement on government to report every 6 months to the House on the latest estimated cost of the scheme. With their majority in the House of Commons, this compromise amendment was passed. It was not overturned by the House of Lords and forms a part of the final act.

As an aside, at the previously mentioned public meeting at the House of Lords, the LSE representative stated, in a conciliatory manner, that based on the new information released by the Home Office clarifying their previously ambiguous statements on some components of the scheme, the LSE team was reconsidering some of the line items in its costings. This fact was seized on by the Home Office, and was repeated a number of times in media engagements, including one where another minister claimed that the LSE had "admitted" that we had made a "gross miscalculation". We were subsequently attacked amid claims of a "climbdown", but this story line quickly died as the government failed to make that claim stick.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ACADEMIC POLICY ANALYSIS

Despite its importance, academic policy analysis is often seen as something for backroom "policy wonks," rather than as something that influences mainstream, high-profile activities. The two illustrations presented in this article demonstrate that academic interventions to inform policy deliberation can have direct, observable consequences on important pieces of legislative activity.

In the case of the issue of identity fraud, it is clear that the analysis of the government figures undertaken by the LSE identity project had a direct influence both on the Parliamentary debate and on those parts of the media who were following the legislation as it unfolded. Although it had little impact on the end result, it did lead to closer scrutiny of the process, and the concerns raised mean that the ongoing implementation of the scheme will be microscopically investigated. In particular, the way that journalists investigated the basis for the government's figures led one parliamentarian to describe the Home Office's "updated" identity fraud estimates of £1.7 billion per annum as a "fatuous report" that had been "pulled apart by experts on both sides of the argument" (Conservative MP Ben Wallace, 13 February 2006, column 1204).

The case of the clarification of the costs of the scheme reveals that policy analysis needn't, and indeed shouldn't, be based solely on the production of texts. In some cases, policy analysis needs to be combined with action, in this case organizing public meetings and taking part in public debate. Such action, however, is not without its downsides, as it moves the researchers from simply being the authors of texts, to being individuals whose personal integrity can be challenged (see LSE Identity Project, 2006), with direct consequences for their personal and professional integrities. It carries considerable reputational risk both for the individuals and organizations concerned (Scott & Walsham, 2005).

The Emperor resents being told he has no clothes. No less than the then Home Secretary, Charles Clarke, went on the BBC to accuse us of "spinning," and leaking material to the press for maximum exposure. Our figures were "simply mad," and we were "technologically inept." He was followed by other ministers taking the same line. A lead researcher (SD) on the report was singled out and "smeared" (in the words of a leading tabloid newspaper) on the BBC's flagship *Today Programme*. The team's integrity was even questioned by the Prime Minister on the floor of the House of Commons (Hansard, 18 January 2006, column 833). Sir Howard Davies, the director of the LSE, with the backing of the school's governors, felt it necessary to rebuke the Prime Minister and Home Secretary first in a letter to *The Times* newspaper, claiming that the government was attacking intellectual freedom (Davies, 2005), and second in a letter to the Prime Minister copied to the leaders of all major political parties (Davies, 2006), after the Prime Minister had alleged that "although the report was put out under the LSE's name, it was actually written by the leading campaigner against ID cards on the ground of civil liberties" (Hansard, 18 January 2006, column 833) and claimed that it was not "an entirely objective assessment" (Hansard, 18 January 2006, column 833).

All this arose because our group took on itself the task of informing public debate. As information systems academics we were all fully aware that the discussion would become political, and that the rationality used would be more than just technological. However, we were unprepared for the scale of government intransigence and its unwillingness to diverge even slightly from its polarized position. Our warnings all fell on deaf ears: the unpredictable nonlinear nature of computer systems; the inevitable paradoxes that arise in all large-scale data gathering, but particularly so when involving something as philosophically complex as "identity"; the dangers implicit in variable/inconsistent aims; and many, many more.

Although successful in informing the media, and subsequently the public (demonstrable by the column inches we received in the nation's serious newspapers), and gaining the support of the other political parties (the Conservatives

have already declared that they will repeal the act if they regain power, although that will not be easy if large numbers of contracts have been signed by the present government), we failed to convince the government that it needed to take greater care if it was to avoid yet another very expensive information technology (IT) failure. As for the team, we found the work in itself intellectually fulfilling, though at times it left some of us quite concerned about our career prospects. On the practical side, being able to say "I told you so" a decade down the line is ultimately not satisfying.

A moral of this story is that universities should only contemplate undertaking such policy research if their governing body is willing to stand full-square behind its academics, and to resist all forms of political pressure. We are lucky enough to work in an institution where we received such unwavering support, but are left wondering, how many other like-minded universities are out there? What would have happened to us if our institution had not stood by us? Though some may disagree with our findings, few would doubt the importance of having conducted the research and presented the analyses as effectively as possible. We would very much like to finish this article with a call for more research of this type, but must warn that such a call could be a poisoned chalice: After seeing what we have gone through, who is willing to raise their heads up above the parapet, and test the strength of their institutional support?

More worrying, however, is the concern that if government's standard response to critical analyses is to "shoot the messenger" (LSE Identity Project, 2006), then *any* analysis supportive to the government position will be automatically devalued as the work of lackeys. Whenever governments pollute coinage, the currency becomes debased. Will we see a "Gresham's Law"³ of Policy Analysis where "bad analysis drives out good"?

NOTES

1. In a Parliamentary written answer, Mr Burnham said: "Other forms of authentication, such as PIN numbers and passwords can be stolen along with a card so are much weaker at linking a person to an identity" (4167).
2. Hansard reports this as an "interruption."
3. Gresham's Law, "Bad money drives out good," is the observation of Sir Thomas Gresham, who around 1560 A.D. was purchasing Spanish coinage in Antwerp on behalf of the English Crown.

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