

## Book Review

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Edgar A. Whitley and Gus Hosein. *Global Challenges for Identity Policies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-230-54223-5

This main focus of this book is the United Kingdom's controversial identity card scheme, framed under the Identity Cards Act 2006, which is now abolished. The authors were heavily involved on the side of the opponents of the legislation and played leading parts in the LSE Identity Project, which provided critical reports about the identity scheme that were of major importance in the policy process, and that incurred the ire of the Labour Government. Their book tells the story of how this Act developed, dissects the arguments and rhetoric, and steps back to consider what lessons should be learned from this episode. It is just as well that they put larger frames around the story, because the abolition of the scheme between the completion of the manuscript and its publication has made some of this account read like a trip down memory lane, as well as a present and future tense description of what was planned and what might have been. The book is to some extent rescued by its wider casting of the episode in terms of a study of policy-making, although not entirely.

For those who are new to the subject, and also for those who have lived through the events described by Whitley and Hosein and have read the LSE reports, this book has the merit of highlighting significant points in the story and analysing the ambiguities of Ministerial and other statements, as well as explaining how the scheme was supposed to work in terms of its technology and implementation. There is also a rapid tour around the world to look at other countries' identity cards and schemes (maybe justifying the 'Global' of the title), making the point that there is no single model for a card or a scheme. Those who say they favour or oppose 'ID cards' should be made to clarify which ones they like or dislike of the dozens of varieties available round the world. Moreover, the point is made that it is not so much the cards themselves that should be the focus of policy analysis or criticism, but governments' identification policies more broadly, and how they are made.

The authors are on less certain grounds when they apply conceptual approaches from the field of public policy. These applications are very thin and perfunctory, and seem to be made in order to establish the book's claim to be a contribution to the academic policy studies literature. These attempts are not well integrated into the case study, and are detachable from the latter without much loss. In addition, it is puzzling why deliberation in the policy process is referred to in terms of 'due process' (Chapters 5 and 6) – a term customarily referred to in legal or constitutional discourse – when the illustrative points being made, about the short-circuiting of debate and policy-laundering through the misrepresentation of international obligations, could stand on their own as relevant critiques of the UK identity card policy process. Then, too, there is no consideration of whether such knavish tricks are unique to this case or this country, which a comparative policy-analysis approach would address. But it is nonetheless important as a lesson to would-be external participants to be alert to strategies and tactics of governments and parliaments bent on getting their way and brooking no opposition. Given that the book has its roots more in policy activism than in the academic study of public policy, this is a relevant message.

Perhaps the most important theme is the way in which policies with a heavy scientific or technological content are piloted through to the statute book on the basis of restricted parliamentary and governmental understanding or knowledge, and yet with a dogmatic certainty and faith in technology that requires

to be challenged. Whitley and Hosein quote an interesting remark, drawn from the literature, that 'science cannot deliver truth at the speed politics requires', thus inducing impatient politicians to seize prematurely upon scientific knowledge to support their policy preferences. This seems to reverse the conventional wisdom, that the pace of science or technology outstrips our capacity to govern it. The discussion of all this in Chapter 6, however, gets off to a rather obscure start with reference to Latour and to 'perplexities' about the National Identity Register and biometrics in the identification system. Table 6.1 is quite opaque and the surrounding text gives little clear explanation. The jargon is irrelevant to the points being made, which draw upon fruitful insights in science and technology studies. The theme concerning technology usefully persists beyond the very skimpy Chapter 6 which, however, concludes interestingly on the valuable 'skill set', or role, of the 'informed advocate' in the policy process, as exemplified in the LSE Project case. This is taken up again at the end of the book.

Chapter 7 deals with the language of policy discourse in the case of identity cards, showing how there were misunderstandings and intentional ambiguity surrounding the vital question whether the cards were compulsory or voluntary, and how they would relate to the passport. The exploration of theories of language and meaning, speech acts, hermeneutics and 'translation' is interesting but not really necessary for an appreciation of what went on in the parliamentary exchanges over the identity scheme. These pages, including references to around fifty different sources in this genre of literature, are an academic indulgence that casts little light on the case narrative, including the debate over cost estimates, after which a discussion of only nine lines merely emphasises the extraneous nature of the preliminary theorisation. There is a somewhat similar effect in Chapter 8, on the relationship between technological expertise and decision-making. It is prefaced by an account of academic perspectives that looks like it migrated from some other book or article to serve as a preface to the story of how the government debated and defended its policy on grounds of technological certainty. It is unnecessarily pretentious and unilluminating to say that the Home Office acted 'polimorphically' rather than 'mimeomorphically'. Moreover, the insights gained by the authors from MacKenzie's uncertainty principle – that those who are closest to the production of knowledge have greater uncertainty than the (more remote) users of knowledge – cannot be adequately tested in the present case through a few quotations from parliamentary proceedings or government reports. The chapter concludes by calling for 'a fundamental reassessment of the internal organisational culture that sees technological confidence rather than certainty as a strategy that will be appreciated by the organisation's decision-makers'. This is fine, but would have been more effective had the book conveyed an in-depth and direct account of the Home Office's organisational culture as a guide to what needs changing, and to how it might be changed.

The abolition of the identity cards scheme has left the next chapter in a kind of limbo, as it deals with the years since the passage of the Act, including the implementation strategy, how the scheme is supposed to work, its financing, and the question of a population register. This is good description and critique that remains worthwhile despite the political events that have consigned these plans to history. This leads to Chapter 10, which raises the level of discussion onto important and wider issues of substance and process that go beyond the question of identification policy-making from which they spring. How a parliamentary democracy inhabited by non-specialists can perform the necessary scrutiny of policies with a large technological component is a serious problem requiring urgent attention and reform of current practices, as has been pointed out by other sources, not least in parliamentary enquiries themselves. Here the authors make a number of recommendations regarding a better, and less enchanted appreciation of the nature of technological knowledge; regarding secrecy about plans; regarding the mitigation of the dangers of policy laundering; regarding ambiguity; and several others. Whitley and Hosein provide a useful inventory of fifteen criteria for an effective identity policy, to make it more citizen-focused, less

insecure, more trusted, and less prone to discriminatory effects. Their discussion of these and other points is worth heeding because, 'ID cards' or not, verifying the identity of persons and authenticating their claims to services will remain perennial requirements of the modern state, requiring sound policies, systems and schemes. The chapter concludes with a discussion of academic policy engagement which upholds the importance of such input, although there is much more that could be debated concerning the relationship between academic work and advocacy work – exemplified by the authors – and concerning the claims of 'information system academics' to pride of place in policy making, setting aside those of other specialisms. In this respect, the self-regarding closing paragraphs cannot be the final word.

To sum up: this book demonstrates an impressive understanding of identification policies and systems, but it does not hang together as an academically-grounded book on public policy, despite its ambition in this vein. Nevertheless, it is certainly worth reading for its account of the UK's identity card fiasco, the insights gained through the authors' participation in the policy process, and their thoughtful consideration of the gross deficiencies of that process and of how it could be reformed. It therefore contributes something to the study of the information polity, of the UK as a polity in need of improved ways of making technologically related policies, and of ways to learn from the mistakes of the past.

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