Scrapping costly and controversial proposals for identity cards

Dr Edgar Whitley helped persuade the UK coalition government to scrap the controversial identity card scheme soon after taking office.

What was the problem?

In 2004 the UK government proposed a national scheme of identity cards linked to a central database. No such scheme then existed anywhere in the world. The proposed database would hold a broad range of information on citizens, including confidential personal data and face, eye and fingerprint scans. Concerns about privacy, human rights, data security and overall cost dominated the debate about this highly controversial proposal.

What did we do?

In January 2005 LSE initiated its Identity Project in response to the government's proposals. LSE's work on identity cards drew on more than 15 years of research into the complexities that arise when technology drives policy instead of responding to it. To be effective, policies must reflect how stakeholders engage with the proposed technology, and they must take into account the complex interplay between technology, business and society at large.

For sensitive issues such as identity cards, public perceptions of privacy are a particular concern. This was amply borne out by two earlier LSE studies, one on stakeholders' views of electronic medical records and the other on legislation regulating the powers of public bodies to intercept communications for national security purposes. LSE researchers also questioned whether using fingerprint recognition in such an ambitious national scheme would be workable, given the UK Government's poor record of implementing large-scale IT projects.

Their specific concerns included the risk of unauthorized access, hacking, the reluctance of businesses to invest in the necessary smartcard technology and the serious consequences of computer malfunction in such a centralized scheme. They also judged the scheme's costs to be vastly underestimated. In contrast to government estimates of some £5.86 billion spread over ten years, LSE researchers estimated costs to range between £10.6 billion and £19.2 billion over the same period.

Co-ordinating the work was Dr Edgar Whitley, Reader in Information Systems, together with Simon Davies and Gus Hosein, both Visiting Senior Fellows until 2011. An advisory committee of 16 LSE professors oversaw the project, to which many LSE staff and an international team of more than 60 researchers contributed, offering expertise in information systems, government, law, media, economics and social policy and reflecting practical concerns expressed by industry and regulators.

What happened?

The LSE Identity Project played a prominent role in shaping parliamentary debates on the Identity

Cards Bill, highlighting the scheme's many shortcomings. During 56 days of debates in Parliament in 2005-6, LSE reports were mentioned explicitly more than 200 times. Dr Whitley gave oral evidence to two parliamentary Select Committees (on Science and Technology and Public Administration) and the team submitted written evidence to a number of parliamentary inquiries.

LSE researchers also influenced public and media perceptions of the proposed scheme, and were much in demand to comment on identity cards in national print and broadcast media. The scheme's unpopularity can be judged from the low take-up of voluntary identity cards – just 14,670 in the first seven months of their availability. Most significant of all was the LSE's direct influence on political thinking and on government policy. The project team's concerns about identity cards were reflected in the election manifestos of two major political parties, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, who scrapped identity cards in their first bill as the incoming coalition government in 2010. This was estimated to save the Exchequer up to £20 billion, a cost equivalent to the hosting of two Olympic Games.

LSE researchers continue to work closely with the Cabinet Office on its identity assurance programme, in particular helping to develop ways in which people, business and devices can verify their identities in online transactions with public services. As a key member of the Cabinet Office's Privacy and Consumer Group, Dr Whitley has helped to develop privacy principles that will put the citizen in charge, not the state, a key component of the Government's digital strategy.

The LSE's influence on the issue of identity cards stretches further afield – to India, as it deliberates proposals for an identity scheme, and to governments in Latin America and the Caribbean, whose representatives attended a series of high-level policy seminars arranged by the InterAmerican Development Bank, advised by Dr Whitley.

Note:

- *This article was initially published as an Impact Case Study and re-published on our blog with the author's permission.*

Dr Edgar Whitley is a Reader in the Department of Management specialising in the area of Information Systems in and Innovation. He is the co–editor of Information Technology and People and has served as conference chair for the European Conference on Information Systems, track chair for the International Conference on Information Systems and was an associate editor for the European Journal of Information Systems and MIS Quarterly.

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