

## **Edgar A. Whitley & Ian Hosein: Global challenges for identity policies**

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There is hardly a more important case regarding policies and politics of individual identities than the adoption of the British Identity Cards Act, which in time will lead to both a compulsory national identity card for well over 50 million British citizens and the incorporation of their personal information into a centralized, digital national register. It reflects a dramatic reversal for a nation that is often portrayed as the cradle of individual liberty and freedom, and which was among the first to subject the absolute power of the Monarch to limitations. It is a remarkable case because of the size of the logistical challenge (and likely cost), and because of the high hopes the government has pinned on the cards' and register's existence. Equally thought provoking (to put it mildly) is the decision by the British government, contrary to a global trend, to choose a centralized identity infrastructure. But grasping the meaning of British Identity Cards Act only in terms of a public management issue or a technical infrastructure challenge would fail to do it justice.

The case of the British Identity Cards Act is much richer, as well as more important. It is a perfect example to reflect upon not only how liberal democracies ought to approach the question of individual identity in our times, but — on a meta-level — how liberal democracies ought to conduct the public deliberations about such an important matter.

“Global Challenges for Identity Policies” offers a very rich, in-depth study of this most important case. This in itself is more than sufficient reason to applaud the authors for their efforts, and to read their work. But the authors are not your average commentator on the politics and policies of identity and privacy (like this humble reviewer). Edgar A. Whitley and Ian Hosein are the two LSE academics responsible for much of the substance that fueled the public

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opposition against the Identity Cards Act. Their LSE Identity Project issued a number of reports and comments during the prolonged phase of the legislative process that unraveled most of the shiny but unfounded government rhetoric. They were the targets of government spin, much of which it turned out unfair and inaccurate, meant to undermine their authority as objective academics. This is potentially both a blessing and a curse. A blessing because they know more about the issues as well as how the debate unfolded inside parliament and in the public discourse than pretty much anybody else, which gives them all the ingredients for a tell-all gripping tale. A curse because as they have taken sides in the debate, they may have become susceptible to bias. The result would still be most useful and impressive: telling their side of the story.

True to their academic calling, in their book Whitley and Hosein chose a different path — more honorable, as well as frustrating. The book tells how the Identity Cards Act became law despite its substantive and conceptual flaws, dubious cost and questionable outcome, powerful parliamentary opposition — vocal but not sufficient in numbers in the House of Commons, but quite overwhelming in the House of Lords —, sustained public debate, and repeated government public relations blunders. Make no mistake: theirs is a gripping, and sobering tale. As experts of information systems they do a great job in framing the identity issue. They detail the various phases of the legislative and public debates, and tease out the implications of the various legislative proposals, objections and compromises. As they describe the dynamics between the House of Commons and the House of Lords, the reader begins to grasp how fundamental and important much beyond identity policies the Identity Cards Act case is, and why the authors place the emphasis of their analysis correctly on the process of deliberation, rather than the outcome. I found fascinating the similarly more general discussion of the role of academic inputs into the policy-making process.

Their tale is also somewhat frustrating, because despite having been in the first row witnessing the unfolding they painstakingly distance themselves from the events, retelling them with the dispassionate zeal of a forensic scientist. Some of the theoretical superstructure they bring to bear (and that is my only real criticism) is more distracting (especially the dense literature reviews), too limited in size and scope (a full Actor Network Theory analysis of the Identity Cards Act would itself require a book or two), and sometimes feels not sufficiently connected to the main narrative (especially chapter 6, which as the authors acknowledge was published separately before — it still feels that way). This is not to say that Science and Technology Studies analysis would not have to offer intriguing insights into the dynamics of the debate and the unfolding of events. In fact, the authors repeatedly point out such insights (although I would have wanted to read more about these) and I found them very powerful. I wonder, though, whether this analysis could perhaps have been made more powerful by dedicating a separate volume to it, or combining it in a concise chapter or two. Due to my background in public policy analysis and political science I wondered whether theories from my fields could not help explain some of the dynamics of the Identity Cards Act. But this is little more than nitpicking.

The bottom line is much simpler: This is a very valuable work about arguably the most significant case of national identity policies and politics of our time, and the

authors with their extensive knowledge not just of the subject matter, but of how the process unfolded have done a truly admirable job in presenting this impressively objective and mightily important study.

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