

Hang together - or we will hang separately

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Simon Davies and Gus Hosein lament the feeble support they got from academe when the Government attacked their work on IDcards

It is time to admit an uncomfortable truth: academe is painfully inward looking and almost incapable of speaking its mind in public. Free expression within universities is largely theoretical. Many academics seem to be too terrified to engage in controversial issues for fear of repercussions. Either that or they simply no longer give a damn about academic freedom.

This week, a piece of rigorous academic research was booed by every member of the Government front bench when it was merely mentioned in Parliament. This astonishing outburst was no isolated incident. Since the publication of our assessment of the Government's identity card proposals eight months ago, we have suffered unrelenting bullying and vilification.

In the face of this very public campaign of misrepresentation, distortion and downright lies, our fellow academics should have instinctively closed ranks to defend academic freedom. Yet even when it became known that the Government had attempted to intimidate the London School of Economics into delaying publication until after the parliamentary vote on the ID cards Bill, not one other academic institution came to our defence.

The attacks we have endured are unprecedented, particularly given the scale and depth of our work. The LSE's "Identity Project" involved more than 60 academics and 40 external experts working under the supervision of an advisory group of 16 LSE professors. The research analysed every claim made by the Government, provided realistic costings and presented an alternative ID card model.

As it happened, our findings disagreed with the Government's view. It responded with a torrent of high-profile attacks that started in June last year when Charles Clarke, the Home Secretary, accused our first report and one of its authors, Simon Davies, of fabrication and incompetence. Of course, no evidence has ever been produced to back these slurs. Ministers have taken turns to vilify the research and the researchers. In one week alone last December, three Home Office ministers attacked the report's authors on three consecutive days, accusing us of bias and distortion.

The response of the LSE's director, Sir Howard Davies, and council has been vigorous and unequivocal. They have maintained absolute support for both our work and the principle of academic freedom. But the silence from the rest of the higher education sector has been deafening. Why? We fear that academe in the UK has become so obsessed with research criteria and funding relationships that it has lost sight of one of the great principles on which it rests. As academics we have the right, and furthermore the responsibility, to engage and inform the dynamic world of public policy.

We could have done what most other academics do - wait until the policy is implemented and then study it after the event. Retrospective reflection is of value to academe and may inform future conduct. But all too often such work is merely

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"academic", feeding into nothing other than our lists of publications for the research assessment exercise. For us to focus solely on retrospective policy research is either self-serving or cowardly.

We happened to stumble on one of the more controversial policy areas where parliamentarians lacked alternative sources of information, where industry representatives were reluctant to express their concerns for fear of harming their relationship with the state, where civil society groups were sidelined and where the media found that nothing appeared controversial or questionable. But ID card policies are not the only arena where these dynamics are at play. Considering the lack of support we have received from beyond the LSE, we worry that other researchers will feel it not worth the risk to inform debate in future.

To this end, the LSE this week established the political engagement research group to champion academe's responsibility to engage government.

As academic researchers, we have nothing to lose by engaging. Indeed, academic institutions were designed with firewalls to protect themselves from Government vitriol. Yet we have been shocked that, although so many believe that it is our duty to conduct such research, so few have stepped forward to defend the principle when it really matters.

What is academic freedom worth if no one is interested in practising it? Why develop and nurture critical minds if we use them only retrospectively? Why bother with academic institutions if we do not live up to our responsibilities?

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