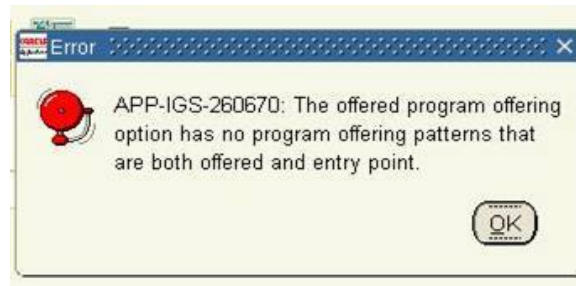


On Bureaucracy, Scrutiny and Democracy

Speech to Congregation, November 1st 2005.¹



Mr Vice Chancellor

I am an engineer by temperament. I'm going to approach governance by way of two concrete examples of technical project failure. They could as easily have been Academic project failures. Their relevance will become apparent.

Let me read to you an error message from the Isidore software passed to me by one of our admissions support staff recently.

The offered program offering option has no program offering patterns that are both offered and entry point.

At the top of the Project ISIDORE Web page we read:

There is no doubt that today Oxford is one of the small group of truly world-class universities. But we are in a highly competitive environment [...] This means that the systems and processes which support our academic endeavours must themselves be of the same excellent standards as our research and teaching.

This text is written in your name, Sir. And who could disagree with it? Indeed I urge you to read it. You continue:

To my mind, the activities being carried out within Project ISIDORE are a key step in enabling this University to meet and overcome the challenges of the future, from wherever these come.

Academics who read it after coming across ISIDORE this last year may have felt a degree of queasiness at this point.

¹Dedicated to the professionals who support us in our academic work. The OSIRIS and ISIDORE fiascos have made their lives extraordinarily difficult. The University owes them better.

Later you write:

Shared access to information within the administrative processes will inevitably cut the time that staff spend on this activity; they will also allow students who come into contact with [...] the collegiate University to relate to [it] more simply.

By *this* point the Secretaries and Administrators who were forced to use ISIDORE last year will be throwing up — their hands: in dismay at the gulf between your ideals and their actual experience. For they know that it has doubled workloads and tripled levels of anxiety.

So will the hundreds of graduate students who less than a month before the start of this term didn't know which College they'd be joining.

So will the College and Departmental IT professionals who tried hard to collaborate with the ISIDORE team to bring the project vision to fruition, but found their legitimate concerns over vital matters dismissed or discounted by the project management.

In short, everybody who has ever had anything to do with the ISIDORE software knows that it's worse than useless. They know that it's not even as good as a bad joke!

BUT it seems that there are still decision-makers in high places in this University who don't. At least in mid September there were. For to the utter astonishment of nearly everybody else, the Admissions Executive decided that ISIDORE would be used "live" during the Undergraduate Admissions round this year and that no fallback system would be run.

This decision was made at a time when some of the necessary software had not even been completed. In light of the enormous risks to our functioning and our reputation it was gobsmackingly ill-advised. Surely nobody could have taken the decision who was adequately informed about admissions data handling, or properly aware of the ISIDORE saga.

AND what has happened as a result? The first phase of the undergraduate admissions process has been set back by a week or more! Letters that would normally have arrived more than a week ago could only be dispatched yesterday.

And some of our entrance tests take place in schools tomorrow!

And who knows what else will go wrong before January?

LET me turn to OSIRIS, our ill-fated University Finance system. The story of OSIRIS will be instructive — if it's ever told in full. Much of the work on it was done after the publication, in 2001, of the detailed and damning report by Finklestein & Shattock² on the £8m. disaster that the Cambridge University accounting system project had become.

²<http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/2001-02/weekly/5861/1.html>

But it seems Oxford thought it wasn't necessary to learn from Cambridge's mistakes. Oxford used the same consultants and the same underlying database system. And just as in Cambridge Oxford decided that OSIRIS had to "go live" without running a fallback. In doing so they ignored the unanimous advice of senior administrators in the Departments and Divisions.

But by then they were used to ignoring their clientele. Carefully negotiated designs had been ditched unilaterally shortly after the appointment of the database supplier.

Does this all sound familiar? It's called "the arrogance of ignorance!"

OSIRIS alone knows how many tens of millions these IT fiascos have wasted so far. And is OSIRIS telling? Just try asking!

AN administration that can deliver such disasters needs to be made more responsive and accountable to the University it serves. But the governance structures proposed by the working party would not add one whit of accountability or responsiveness to Wellington Square.

The route by which informed questions will reach the Board of Trustees (now to be known as Council) is unclear. *And its answers to them are not to be heard by Congregation.* So Congregation's understanding of supremely important matters will be incomplete, and its ability to make informed decisions to exercise the powers it has been left with will be compromised. This is dangerous for us all.

And how is Congregation to ensure that the new Council gives educated and critical attention to the matters before it?

Instead of being able to elect freely chosen independent-minded members to Council, we are to be permitted only to "approve" people who are vetted for suitability by a Nominating Committee that is dominated by the executive. This is simply not open enough: there is enormous *potential* for abuse and error.

A younger colleague told me recently that our democratic structures are old-fashioned and cumbersome and that we should just appoint wise and sensible people and let them get on with it.

But even the wisest and most sensible people are likely to make mistakes if concerns from the workplace cannot readily be brought to their attention. The danger is much greater if they work within a small charmed circle that is protected by an iron wall of patronage and which does not have to explain itself to anyone.

THE OSIRIS and ISIDORE fiascos seem to have started off just as cockups. But cockups turn into cover-ups when ranks close against scrutiny; and cover ups can easily turn into catastrophes.

In the late 1990s a series of damning reports of the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office showed decisively that Governing bodies of external members had proved disastrously ineffective at protecting the financial interests of at least half a dozen Universities.

Last year we managed to stop ISIDORE going live for undergraduate admissions only by determinedly raising concerns in the highest circles using routes we had to invent for ourselves.

It must not be so difficult in future to get problems noticed before they become disasters. It must not be so difficult in future for us to learn the lessons of disasters before they spawn new ones.

Did an audit committee stop the Marconi fiasco or the Enron larceny?

Do you really think that an Oxford audit committee could have stopped these huge IT disasters unfolding?

I don't. I think Oxford needs a Board of Scrutiny.

COLLEAGUES! The structures proposed by the working party show that this "Senior Management Team" does not trust Congregation to act as responsible monitors of the University.

They don't even trust us to elect candidates for Council from our own ranks.

Well, if this "Senior Management Team" no longer trusts this Congregation to act responsibly, then perhaps they should should elect themselves a new Congregation!

**B.A. Sufrin
Fellow and Tutor in Computation
Worcester College
October 31st 2005**