

market-based approach may very well further bias things in favour of the interests of large business and government.

Another area which the authors skirt around is the nature of technology itself. Is the smart card inherently neutral so that it can be put to both good use and bad, or is it designed with certain political features in-built? Will consumers develop dependencies on the technology that will affect their ability to make free choices some time in the future? Into what sort of technological or social system do smart cards fit?

To be fair, answers to these fundamental issues are perhaps the subject of another type of book, certainly not an advocacy book. However, one must be cautious in accepting what appears to be an attractive solution based on a less than explicit account of 'information society'. Despite this, *On the Cards* is an accessible text covering some very complex issues. It provides a good introduction to issues involved in law and technology and advocates a course of action that could well be attractive to many governments in the near future. Whether or not the 'light-handed' regulatory approach furthers the principles on which it is based remains to be seen. This review has been reprinted with permission from the Spring 1996 issue of *Policy* (Center for Independent Studies, Sydney).

Richard Joseph  
University of Wollongong  
Australia

### **Evaluation of Commonwealth Support for MFP Australia**

Bureau of Industry Economics

*Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1996, xv + 150 pp., ISBN 0-644-36222-7*

This is one of the latest of a long series of reports, articles and books on the ill-fated Multifunction Polis (MFP) since the concept was suggested to the Australian government by the Japanese government in 1987. The Bureau of Industry Economics (BIE) was asked by the Department of Industry, Science and Tourism to review the Commonwealth's support for this South Australian based project. Following its terms of reference, the BIE's focus was on both the impact of the project on Australian industry and its international linkages, as well as on the effectiveness and need for further Commonwealth support.

In carrying out their review, the BIE relied both on qualitative data arising from submissions and consultations with stakeholders, and on more formal, quantitative cost-benefit analyses. The latter suggested costs of about \$59 million since 1994/95, while discounted net social benefits were in a range between minus \$94 million and plus \$6 million. Given the uncertainties associated with a highly complex, long-term project as the MFP, the BIE, quite correctly, did not base their final judgement solely on these figures.

While the report acknowledges that the MFP has made a contribution to the achievement of environmental and industry development objectives in South Australia, in terms of its national and international impacts, the project has not been effective in dealing with business and other interests outside South Australia. Thus the BIE concludes that 'MFP Australia has not so far had any positive impact on Australia as a whole nor its international linkages' (pp. 60–61). Quite a damning conclusion, really, for something that in its heyday was meant to be a grand city of the future/fifth sphere/technopolis/Japan–Australia 21st-century project.

To its credit, the MFP during the feasibility study in the late 1980s did manage to

get Australian industry, the Australian government, the State governments, the Japanese government, and Japanese industry to focus together on important national issues like 'what is Australia's future in regards to the 21st century information society?' and 'where is Australia going in terms of its future linkages with Asia?' There were efforts to save the MFP by suggesting that the concept be transformed from a city into a network.<sup>1</sup> But in the end, nothing could save it because no one involved directly with the feasibility process were able to formulate a concrete concept that stakeholders, investors and the community could relate to. What the MFP has become, though, as the BIE point out, is basically a state-based project whose benefits are likely to be concentrated in South Australia. Thus the BIE recommended that the Commonwealth phase out financial support, which it has subsequently done. We will all miss the BIE and their excellent, well-reasoned reports, of which this is one.

### Reference

1. T. D. Mandeville & D. M. Lamberton, *The Multifunction Polis: Inventing an Institution*, Report to Queensland Premier's Department, May 1988.

*Thomas Mandeville*  
*University of Queensland and Queensland University of Technology*  
*Brisbane, Australia*