

*Analysing public policy in the UK:*

*Seeing through the secrecy, obfuscation and obstruction of the FOIA by the Home Office*

John R Campbell

Department of Anthropology and Sociology

School of Oriental and African Studies, London

*Abstract*

*In this paper I address problems confronted by researchers who attempt to exercise their right to request information under the United Kingdom's Freedom of Information Act (2000), namely the struggle to obtain information from obstructive government departments coupled with the difficulty of using the information that governments care to disclose. I examine two cases which, in different ways, illustrate the nature of these problems. The first case arises out of my research into the policy of 'language analysis' used by the UK Home Office; this policy adopts the language of rationality and science as a way of masking political decisions to refuse protection to asylum applicants. The second case examines an attempt to use the FOI Act to force the UK government to disclose information about secret meetings between the Home Office and the government of Eritrea. Following the work of Wedel et al (2005) I attempt to see through/unmask the policy claims of the British Home Office, a powerful bureaucracy, to understand what officials actually do. Both cases illustrate how institutions withhold, block, stymie and deny access to information about their activities and what research is capable of revealing about their actions and the impact of government policy.*