Published on *Adam Smith Institute* (http://www.adamsmith.org)

Genome genie [1]

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Same old problems got you down in this new year? Budget deficits, euro crisis, immigration? Ed Milliband?s promise of fairness in tough times doesn?t stir the soul? Thirty minutes quicker by train to Birmingham on HS2 a big yawn? Well, here?s something brand new to start worrying about.

Life Technologies of San Francisco [3] unveiled on Tuesday its new benchtop Ion Proton Sequencer that is designed to sequence the human genome in a day for $1,000. That?s quicker (and maybe cheaper) than your average NHS cholesterol test. The gadget costs only $149,000 compared with current sequencers costing $500,000 to $750,000 but which take several weeks to complete the sequencing at a cost of up to $10,000.

As is the way of these things, costs will come down quickly and soon the whole process will be cheap enough to install at your local Tesco pharmacy. Before then, of course, the trendy will be getting these genome sequences on their way to a breast or hair implant clinic. No doubt, the Americans will be way ahead on this as UK and European politicians wrangle about its morality, regulation and accessibility.

This is going to be big, very big - far bigger than the current kerfuffle about removing faulty breast implants - and for good reason. Insurance companies and employers would love to get their hands on such information. Governments, too, will be keen to either suppress genomic information so as not to interfere with equality agendas or to demand such information in the pursuit of any number of other objectives.

In effect, the genome sequence is a scientific crystal ball, significantly enhancing the ability to predict the likely course of an individual?s life: predisposition to disease, physical characteristics and mental aptitude. That?s what will make the issue so big - and scary or hopeful, depending on your point of view.

But the inevitable is hurtling towards us. Once the genie is out of the bottle, there?s no putting it back. As with the first mainframe computers, then the PC, then the internet, then social media and smartphones, the more that information is rapidly and transparently disseminated, the better. It?ll be noisy, perplexing and disturbing so get ready ? widespread genome sequencing is upon us.

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