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An escalating burden [1]

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The UK's new 'Department of Business and Regulatory Reform' isn't exactly living up to its name. New figures from the British Chambers of Commerce show that the cost of regulation on Britain's businesses has risen more than £10 billion (yes, *billion*) from last year, to a staggering £65.99 billion.

The Chambers have produced another of their annual 'Burdens Barometer' wallcharts, showing where all the costs mount up. There's data production, groundworks regulation, working time regulations, student loan rules, part-time worker initiatives and flexible working shemes, the stakeholder and occupational pensions rules, disability law, buildings regulations, use of animal by-products, water use and environmental regulation, new financial accounting, corporate responsibility requirements, working at height codes, and innumerable others.

It's not really a burdens barometer, it's a burdens escalator, because the Chambers' bar-chart shows a steadily increasing burden, up from a 'mere' £10 billion in 2001 to more than six times that today.

Often, there is only one way to 'reform' things. That is to pick your target and focus on achieving that. With the whole emerging world eager to compete with us, we need to make sure that we don't regulate (and add cost to our business base) unless we really need to. Sure, we should lead the world in having high production standards. But you can do that without smothering yourself in red tape. Department of Business and Regulatory Reform's target, for the second half of its name and mission at least, should be to focus on the damage that over-regulation does and commit to cut the cost of regulation on business. It's about time the barometer started to fall.

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