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You may not have heard of UKAS (United Kingdom Accreditation Service), the quango that approves the standards of certification bodies. For example, the certifying body for radiologists acquires accreditation from UKAS by demonstrating that it is doing its job to an adequate standard. Most of UKAS's customers are in healthcare, i.e. largely the NHS, and almost all of them are in the public sector. So we can regard the annual turnover of UKAS, about £15M, as a cost to the taxpayer.

As a quango, UKAS is nominally independent but is de facto part of BIS. The Chief Executive, Paul Stennett, is worried about the Treasury axe and, rightly, has written (13th August) to thought leaders to increase awareness of UKAS and the benefits it brings.

The case for checking the competence and standards of certifying bodies is sound enough and even if it were not, the EU is about to make it a requirement. The questions therefore are the size and cost of such a quango, whether participation by certifying organisations, e.g. the Food Standards Agency, should be optional or mandatory and how widely the UKAS net should be thrown.

Unsurprisingly, the UKAS website, Annual Report and Mr Stennett's letter all make plain that the main objective is for UKAS to be as large as possible. Growth is the key performance indicator. All the 11 current certifiers under the UKAS aegis are other parts of government. How many public sector workers should be certifying other public sector workers in addition to their own managements, the National Audit Office and Parliamentary committees? Pelion is being heaped upon Ossa and this is before, as UKAS hopes, the whole of the private sector is required to come into its orbit. By then we would be looking at an additional burden of £100M to the economy.

Mr Stennett claims 'Accreditation delivers confidence to the market in a proportionate way that reduces unnecessarily invasive and expensive bureaucracy' and that UKAS supports the delivery of 'effective regulation'. These claims are excessive. The government has better ways to deliver effective regulation and UKAS is itself the unnecessarily expensive bureaucracy it claims to be reducing.

A more tightly focused and less growth-happy UKAS should not cost us more than £5M per annum.

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