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Say no to ID cards in Britain

Anarcho

July 12, 2005

The end of June saw the Blair government's flagship ID Cards Bill get through its parliamentary stages with its majority cut from 67 to 31. Only twenty Labour rebels lined up with Tory and Liberal Democrat MPs to vote against the bill's second reading.

The government is at pains to paint opposition purely in terms of cost, arguing that it will not be as expensive as critics claim and that the technology is viable and accurate. As we all know how well government IT schemes work and how they consistently come in well under budget, we have some cause for concern! In its defence, the government says that this is a manifesto commitment and they must proceed. Strange that this did not stop them introducing top-up tuition fees when the 2001 manifesto said the opposite.

As far as the civil liberties issue does, this is the key (although many people may sadly be more worried about the cost in price rather than the cost in freedom). The information commissioner, appointed by the government to report to parliament on privacy issues, described the scheme as part of Britain's growing "surveillance society." He stressed that the information about individuals went far beyond the needs set out in the ID card legislation itself. *"There can be little justification for retention of all such details in a*

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central national identity register,” he said. *“The extensive personal information retained on the proposed national identity register and the requirement on individuals to keep notifying changes is excessive and disproportionate.”*

He argued that the government was planning to create an unnecessary data trail of when a card is checked against the national identity register. This would show who checked it and when, so building up a picture of an individual’s card use and a detailed picture from this of how they live their lives. He stressed that the *“creation of this detailed data trail of individuals’ activities is particularly worrying and cannot be viewed in isolation of other initiatives which serve to build a detailed picture of people’s lives, such as CCTV surveillance (with automatic facial recognition), use of automatic number plate recognition recording vehicle movements for law enforcement and congestion charging, and the proposals to introduce satellite tracking of vehicles for road use charging.”*

Not only do they impinge on the liberties of the individual. They would not solve the problems they purport to (e.g., terrorism, ID cards did not stop the Madrid bomb). They would introduce whole new types of fraud. They would be costly to introduce and maintain. The claims that the system will be foolproof are utter nonsense. Errors will creep in. Given how annoying it is when there is an error in (say) your credit rating, imagine what will happen if your ID data is wrong or corrupted and you are stopped by the police. Who will they believe? Your insistence that the data is wrong, or the database? The creation of a national identity database makes us accountable to the state rather than the other way around as claimed in democratic and liberal theory.

The assumption behind support for ID cards seems to be that ***“If you are innocent you have nothing to fear.”*** That has been applied to most forms of surveillance schemes, particularly CCTV cameras. The logic of this slogan is deeply flawed and, unsurprisingly, always used by authoritarian governments when they introduce legislation to reduce our freedoms. It is easy to see why. Few,

at the current moment, would use this argument to justify turning your TV screens into CCTV cameras. Why not, if the innocent have nothing to fear? Hence the intuitive flaw in the logic.

This intuitive flaw points to the real issue, namely that it is the state which determines which is unlawful and what is not. By giving the state more and more information, it presents it with more and more power to track and analyse its subjects. Any information held by the state places boundaries on the future actions of people. If you wish to protest against a future law or state policy, the fact that the state has your details on file may make some afraid of protesting. If a proposed law makes some previous legal act illegal, the ID card can be used to track down and arrest those who previously had “nothing to fear.” Giving the state this power is like giving matches to an arsonist and making him promise to be a good little boy.

The rationales for ID cards have been plentiful — fighting terrorism, benefit fraud, identity theft, illegal immigration, whatever. A bit like the invasion of Iraq, then, when excuse after excuse was used to justify the war. This suggests that their introduction is favoured by important sections of the ruling elite. The need is felt and the facts are being fixed (to coin a phrase) appropriately.

Some may accuse New Labour of being opportunistic and inconsistent. They are wrong. There is a pattern to New Labour — they support and introduce in government that which they opposed when out of it. The last time ID cards were seriously debated in parliament, Labour MPs opposed them. Blair himself opposed ID cards when the Tories proposed them in the early 1990s, writing that *“Instead of wasting hundreds of millions of pounds on compulsory ID cards as the Tory right demand, let that money provide thousands more police officers on the beat.”* (**New Britain: My vision of a young country**, p. 68) How things have changed — and on some many other issues too.

The obvious thing to note is that most of the flip-flopping has resulted in New Labour implementing the same kind of programmes

as the Tories did. It cannot be a coincidence that a different set of politicians presiding over the same state bureaucracy and corporate structure have implemented similar programmes (admittedly, the rhetoric has changed – slightly). As predicted by anarchist theory, the government may be in office but it is not in power. Real power lies in big business and the upper reaches of the state machine, not in parliament, and, consequently, New Labour has adjusted to the realities of the situation. What is significant is how much the party apparatchiks have embraced the perspective of the real masters and their current neo-liberal position.

As always, we cannot rely on politicians to act for us. For example, after the vote, the leftwing Campaign group of Labour MPs said it would work with ministers to produce “*a scheme which is acceptable to all.*” In order to stop ID cards we must rely on ourselves and our own power. We need to organise a mass protest movement which convinces our rulers that the costs of introducing them will outweigh the benefits. That means direct action, not just symbolic protests and marches. It means direct action, the organising a mass refusal to provide information or pay for the cards. If this can be done, then ID cards could really be Blair’s poll tax.