

# Britain: Labour government seeks introduction of identity cards

Julie Hyland  
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The Blair government has taken the first steps towards the introduction of identity cards, publishing a “consultation document” on the subject last week. The term consultation is something of a misnomer, as is the document’s description of the cards as “entitlement cards”, rather than identity cards.

In his foreword to the document, Home Secretary David Blunkett, stipulates that “Whether we go ahead with the scheme will be dependent on the assessed will of the people of the United Kingdom,” hence the six-month consultation period. But there is no indication of how public opinion will be judged, or by whom. In any case, priced at £18, the document can hardly be said to be freely available for study by the mass of the population.

The consultation paper is very vague on its preferred options. It suggests several scenarios, including a compulsory scheme for all British citizens, a voluntary scheme or one targeted at particular groups or services.

The main objective of the scheme it claims is to provide those who are “lawfully resident” in Britain with a way of confirming their identity, to help people gain access to public services and confirm their identity to private firms and eligibility to work in Britain.

The reason why people are suddenly in need of additional means of confirming their identities, and precisely to whom, is again not spelt out.

Identity cards have only been issued twice in Britain in the last 100 years—both times under conditions of world war and the threat of enemy invasion, and withdrawn soon after. The Blair government has thus sought to draw a parallel between world war and the threat of terror attacks in the wake of September 11.

Several ministers have gone so far as to compare the military threat posed by Al Qaeda with that presented by Nazi Germany. Blunkett referred to the ongoing

“war against terror” to dismiss concerns over civil liberties, stating that whilst the issues surrounding identity cards were “very difficult... they are ones we are going to have to address if we are actually going to protect the most basic freedom of all, which is to live in peace without fear.”

Leaving aside the fact that the association of Osama bin Laden’s guerilla network with Hitlerite fascism as it occupied most of Europe is ridiculous—and ignoring for the moment the fact that Britain has not been attacked post-September 11—even when the country did face terrorist attacks during the IRA’s long running bombing campaign in British towns and cities there was no dash to introduce identity cards.

The government is reluctant to discuss such incongruities in its case for ID cards, despite its claim to be involved in a consultation exercise with the British people. Instead it piles one excuse upon another, all the time hinting darkly at highly emotive issues—such as fear of terrorism—or those guaranteed to play on prejudice and backwardness.

Thus, Blunkett has also claimed that the need for ID cards arises from matters of “law and order”, and a clamp down on illegal immigration. Both these *bête noires* of the rightwing were combined in the home secretary’s speech. An “entitlement card”, would be a weapon in the fight against fraud, he claimed, especially benefit fraud. Those that were not guilty had “nothing to fear” from their “identity being properly acknowledged and recognised.” But if Britain failed to follow its European neighbours (most of whom have some form of ID scheme in place), it risked becoming the “weakest link” for international fraudsters to exploit, he claimed.

It was also essential to the “fundamental and radical reform” of the asylum system, he continued, and

clamping down on illegal immigration.

Dismissing criticisms that the government was scapegoating immigrants, Blunkett claimed his proposal for ID cards was aimed at protecting immigrants and preventing them from being unfairly exploited. In future, when police and immigration officials raided factories and workshops, they would be able to quickly establish a person's identity, tackling "illegal working" and stemming "the growth of the black economy and an underclass of people paid less than the minimum wage". By eradicating the basis for the belief that illegal immigrants "can work and obtain benefits and public services with impunity", Blunkett went on, bogus asylum seekers would be put off from entering Britain.

Once again, none of the government's claims stand up. A study by the Cabinet Office, released this week, admits that "identity fraud" accounts for less than one percent of the total cost estimated to government of benefit fraud. There were just 564 cases involving some element of identity fraud uncovered by the Benefits Agency Security Investigation Service in 2000-2001, a miniscule fraction of the tens of millions of applications for one form of benefit or another.

The total estimated cost of losses through identity fraud is £1.3 billion per annum, out of a total of £13.8 billion lost through all economic fraud.

As for immigration, the same study found that fraudulent passport applications accounted for just 0.03 percent of the total number of applications made annually. The number of counterfeit passport/immigration documents detected at UK ports of arrival in 2000 was just 0.06 percent of the total volume of traffic.

The consultative document admits that an ID card scheme could "not be wholly effective in bringing illegal working to an end", and would not deter "unscrupulous employers".

Even if the government's claims are to be taken at face value, it is proposing that in order to tackle the possibility of some form of criminal activity by a small segment of the population, everyone must be able to prove their innocence when this is demanded—whether by a host of state officials or an unspecified other, such as their employer.

The potentially sinister and undemocratic uses which the ID cards can be made to perform is implicit in the

technology employed. The document envisages a computerised "smart card" that could store a photograph, fingerprints and "relevant" personal information, and even the possibility of "biometric cards", which would include a fingerprint scan or the image of the iris of the eye, as well as a digital photograph.

What information would be deemed as relevant is not specified, but the government felt the need to reassure the public that the card would not carry details of sexuality, political persuasion nor any other information that may be used for discriminatory purposes. It also claims that the scheme would not be compulsory, as people need only carry the card voluntarily, but it may be compulsory to register for a card.

However much the consultation document twists and turns, what the government intends is the most significant extension of state surveillance over the British population since the Second World War. An extension, moreover, that significantly alters the relationship between the state and its citizens.

Whilst promising that any information held on a central database beyond the bare minimum would be with the individual's consent, Blunkett has said that those who choose to withhold information could find the free access they enjoy to certain services would be impeded.

As John Wadham, director of civil rights organisation Liberty noted, "This plan exposes the fact the government doesn't trust its citizens. It wants 60 million of us to register our identity so it can check up on us, monitor our movements and decide whether we are entitled to the services we have already paid our taxes for. ID cards make us suspects not citizens: that's why all innocent citizens should oppose them."



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