

Britain: Parliament agrees to compulsory ID cards

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Parliament voted through legislation on February 13 to introduce compulsory Identity Cards in Britain.

The government has made a previous attempt to introduce ID cards. The first, introduced in 2004, failed to become law before Parliament was dissolved for the general election in May 2005.

In January this year, the House of Lords had passed amendments to the government's latest Identity Cards Bill—rejecting plans for passport applicants to be obliged to go on an ID card register, and voting for a separate parliamentary act to be passed before the cards could be made compulsory.

On Tuesday evening, a majority of MP's overturned the Lord's amendment. With just 20 Labour MPs joining with the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats to oppose the bill, a government majority of 31 saw the bill passed.

MPs also voted that anyone applying for a new passport from 2008 will be compelled to acquire an ID card, and they voted down another Lords amendment that the commissioner overseeing the national ID card database be appointed on the recommendation of the home secretary, rather than directly by him.

In two years all passport applicants will be required to take out a new biometric passport and a separate ID card that will contain "basic identification information." In addition to biometric information on the holder—such as the person's fingerprints, iris or facial scans—the card will include a photograph and details of name, address, gender and date of birth.

Having effectively ensured that ID cards will become obligatory via the back door, MPs then agreed without a vote to bring forward a fresh parliamentary act to make the cards compulsory. They also agreed that the government should deliver six-monthly reports on the costs of the scheme for 10 years from its introduction.

The government has refused to specify costs on grounds that it would "jeopardise sensitive negotiations" for competitive tendering.

Prime Minister Tony Blair was unable to attend the parliamentary debate after an engine fault on his plane left him stranded in South Africa for more than 24 hours. But from Pretoria he dismissed concerns over civil liberties, claiming that "with the real problems people have today with identity fraud, which is a major, major issue; illegal immigration; organised crime: it's just the sensible thing to do."

Earlier, the prime minister had sought to rally support in the Labour Party for the measure. At the party's spring conference over the weekend, Blair insisted that "once we understand that providing security is our duty, we also see that to try to fight the new security threat of the twenty-first century without the new laws and resources that are needed would be abrogation of that duty."

Similarly, Chancellor Gordon Brown used a speech on security issues to demand support for the ID scheme, arguing that it "could not just help us to disrupt terrorists and criminals travelling on foreign and stolen identities, but more fundamentally protect each citizen's identity and prevent it being forged or stolen."

In reality, the introduction of ID cards would do nothing to stop terror attacks such as those in London last July 7, which were carried out by British citizens, and would be no guarantee against identity fraud.

Concerns raised over ID cards centre on the creation of a vast database of personal information that will facilitate state surveillance of the population and which can be extended to cover all aspects of life. Even MPs on the Home Affairs Committee had raised concerns about "function creep."

Once again, the "war on terror" and "law and order"

rhetoric are being used to justify a further assault on civil liberties by an increasingly discredited government that is strengthening the power of the state along authoritarian lines.

The only time that Britain had ID cards was during the Second World War, when the country was threatened by Nazi invasion. They were abandoned shortly afterwards due to popular hostility.

On Wednesday, February 15, Parliament will vote on the government's proposed anti-terror legislation, which includes measures to outlaw the "glorification" of terrorism.

The government has made clear that any efforts by the Lords to subject the ID legislation to further amendments, when it goes back to the chamber for debate, will be opposed.

The Labour rebels who voted against the government are seeking to downplay the threat to civil liberties posed by compulsory ID cards. John McDonnell, chairman of the Socialist Campaign Group, claimed that amendments meant that the bill was "now unrecognisable from the government's original proposals."

Home Secretary Charles Clarke disabused such claims, stating that there had been no concession "on the principle of going compulsory, which is at the core of the scheme." He confirmed that applicants for residents' permits and for visas from some non-European Union countries and asylum-seekers will also be made to register their biometric data on the ID register.

Certificates issued by the Criminal Records Bureau may also be added to the list of documents requiring registration on the central database, Clarke told MPs during the debate. But this would have to be debated by Parliament first.

Home Office Minister Tony McNulty said that any moves to make the provision of public services dependent on the production of ID cards—which the government has made plain it hopes to introduce—also would be subject to further legislation.



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