

British government moots passport and ID controls between UK and Ireland

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Proposals to introduce passport and identity checks for air and sea travellers between Britain and Ireland are being circulated by the British and Irish governments. Should they be enacted, controls on movement around the little known Common Travel Area (CTA), incorporating the United Kingdom, the Irish Republic, the Channel Isles and the Isle of Man, will be strengthened to levels unseen since World War II.

In a joint statement July 24, British Home Office Minister Jacqui Smith and her Irish counterpart Dermot Ahern pledged to use “state of the art border technology, joint sea and port operations and the continued exchange of intelligence ... to identify those people who may be of interest to our law enforcement authorities.” The announcement attracted little press attention, no commentary and would seem to be, at this stage, a testing of the water for measures that are certain to be hugely unpopular.

The proposal is part of the British government’s drive to implement a host of antidemocratic measures under the guise of the “war on terror” and a clampdown on immigration. Over the last months, Labour has introduced fingerprinting for all visa applicants, on-the-spot fines for employers who do not check workers’ immigration status and an immigration points system. In the immediate future, the government intends to check all air passengers against “watch lists” of undesirables, and introduce ID cards for all foreign nationals in the UK.

The new measures are being overseen by the recently created UK Border Agency, set up by the government last year to integrate Customs, the Border and Immigration Agency, and UK Visas. The agency employs 25,000 staff and has a £2 billion budget.

The government clearly views the longstanding and open travel arrangements between Britain and Ireland, and the “Crown dependencies,” as a weakness within the surveillance apparatus it is constructing. Some 15.6

million passenger journeys are currently made between Britain, Ireland and the Crown dependencies. The vast majority of these are between Britain and Ireland.

In a consultation paper published last month, Home Office Minister Liam Byrne suggested that full immigration controls should be faced by “non-CTA” nationals moving between the UK, Ireland and the dependencies by 2014.

At the same time, “measures to verify the identities of UK, Irish and Crown dependency nationals” would be introduced. All air and sea travel between the UK and Ireland would be monitored against the government’s e-Borders watch lists. Carrier liability would be introduced on these routes to enforce travel companies to adhere to the new requirements.

The government also announced that while the border between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland would not be policed by “fixed immigration controls,” “increasing ad hoc immigration checks on vehicles” would be considered.

The measures do not cover travel between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. But the *Irish Times* reported that powers could be implemented before the end of 2008, allowing British police to demand information about travellers from the UK to Belfast and Derry airports and ports in Larne and Stranraer. This can be done under Section 14 of the Police and Justice Act 2006 and requires only ministerial approval.

Liam Byrne gave a written parliamentary answer stating, “It is expected that this police power will only apply to air and sea routes between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Passengers will not be required to use passports, but may be required to produce one of several types of documentation, including passports, when travelling, to enable the carrier to meet the requirements of a police request.”

The British and Irish governments have also apparently

agreed that vehicles being carried on car ferries can be searched to ensure they have proper documentation, with ferry companies again facing a carrier liability fine.

The proposal has been condemned by pro-British Ulster Unionists, who complain that the controls will contradict Northern Ireland's status as an integral part of the UK. The British government has responded that many carriers already impose document checks. And, in a letter to then Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) leader Ian Paisley, Prime Minister Gordon Brown denied that British citizens would be required to produce documents to travel within their own country.

That, however, alongside the measures between Britain and the Irish republic, is exactly what is being considered.

The CTA itself dates back to the earliest days of the partition of Ireland. Following the 1916-21 War of Independence and the establishment of the Irish Free State, Britain agreed to forgo passport controls between the UK and its former colony in return for the new Irish state's agreement to control "aliens" in general and "Bolshevists" in particular.

Free movement arrangements were suspended during World War II, when Ireland maintained neutral status and was perceived by British imperialism as a potential haven for agents of Nazi Germany. For their part, the Irish authorities wanted to keep refugees out. The British government only allowed entrance to those with employment and with approval both governments, while the Irish government enforced police returns from hoteliers and barred access to all other than British and Irish nationals.

In the aftermath of the war, with demand for cheap Irish labour, free movement was reinstated. Visa requirements for entry to Ireland and the UK were henceforth closely integrated, although not identical.

No formal checks were imposed during the "Troubles," when Republicans conducted an armed campaign against British rule, including several bombings. Although a series of draconian Prevention of Terrorism Acts were passed, this did not extend to compulsory ID checks. Documentation was not even required on the then contested and highly militarised border between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland, overseen with army watchtowers and helicopters.

In 1997, around the time of the Good Friday Agreement that paved the way for Sinn Fein to enter government with the Unionists, the UK and Ireland negotiated an exception for the CTA from the EU's Amsterdam Treaty, which concretised the 1991 Schengen Agreement "Fortress

Europe" immigration policy and information sharing system.

Today, security relations between the UK and Ireland are amicable. The British and Irish governments are closer politically than ever. Sinn Fein sits more or less comfortably in the British government in Northern Ireland, along with the DUP. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) has disbanded. The Northern Irish border is open and un-militarised and increasingly economically irrelevant, save to those exploiting tax and currency differences.

Why then the proposals for such controls? In a report no doubt intended to back the government proposals, MI5 recently claimed that the most serious security threat currently faced by the UK was not from Islamic terrorists, but from some 80 "hardcore" Republican dissidents such as the Continuity IRA.

No media commentator saw fit to point out the massive contradictions between the scale of the measures being proposed and the small numbers identified as a threat. Nor did they ask why the British government feel obliged to propose measures not deemed necessary throughout the entire period of the Northern Ireland dirty war.

Still less was there any comment that this latest claim flatly contradicts the entire thrust of the government's "war on terror," which is supposedly directed against Islamic groups considered to be a mortal threat to UK security.

The truth is that whether under the guise of Islamic terror, a dissident Republican threat, or under the more general heading of a clampdown on immigration, the Labour government is assembling measures more akin to a police state.



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