



ID cards

A new identity for the 21st century?

An ippr roundtable discussion supported by Fujitsu

Tuesday 5 September 2006

Summary

The decision to introduce a National Identity Scheme was announced in the Queen's Speech on 17 May 2005. The Identity Cards Act received royal assent, becoming law, on 30 March 2006.

The Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) held a roundtable seminar on Tuesday 5th September 2006, which was supported by Fujitsu. The purpose of the seminar was to focus on the implementation of ID cards in relation to diversity and community cohesion. The attendees included representatives from the following organisations: Board of Deputies of British Jews, British Transport Police, Commission for Racial Equality, Department for Communities and Local Government, Federation of Student Islamic Societies in the UK and Ireland, Hindu Forum of Britain, Immigration Advisory Service, Institute of Muslim Affairs, Institute of Race Relations, International Organisation for Migration, Islamic Centre of England, Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, Liberty, Muslim Council of Britain, National Assembly against Racism, Refugee Advice Centre, Runnymede Trust, Sikhs in England, Three Faiths Forum and UK New Citizen.

We invited three speakers, David Goodhart, Editor of *Prospect* magazine, Gareth Crossman, Policy Director of Liberty and Lord Toby Harris to start the debate.

David Goodhart, Editor of *Prospect* magazine placed the issue of ID cards within the context of

a citizenship and social cohesion. He mooted the idea of a "*British citizen card*" which would become a symbol or badge of common citizenship. The card would be something that all citizens would have in common regardless of class, race or faith.

The point was raised that the citizenship card would also be a guarantor to welfare entitlement. The card would prove the citizens status and their entitlement to services. Lord Harris agreed that the purpose of a good identity card and register (which would be based on unique personal characteristics) would be valuable in demonstrating who you are and therefore your entitlement to services.

David Goodhart also introduced a philosophical argument to the debate that as individuals we believe in unconstrained individual freedom whilst at the same time seeing ourselves as "consumers" of services provided by the state. If we are placing ever greater demands on the state, in return the state will require greater information from us and the identity card and national register could play a part in this.

Lord Harris stated that the Government was introducing the ID card scheme to the UK to tackle illegal workers; immigration abuse; to disrupt the use of false and multiple identities and organised criminals and those involved in terrorist activities; to help protect people from identity fraud and theft; to improve public confidence and

increase security; to ensure that free public services are only used by those entitled to them.

Lord Harris felt that there was a tension between the Government's stated aims and objectives for ID cards and people's perception of "mission creep" which he acknowledged was a problem.

Gareth Crossman argued that the implementation of ID cards would impact on the relationship between the individual and the state, have privacy implications and impact upon community cohesion. Gareth also stated that one of the main reasons cited for the introduction of ID cards was to help fight against terrorism. He argued that he had yet to hear in any *specific* terms how ID cards would help and in his view, this was because the information held on the national register would not be able to match the information that would be held by the security services or the police. Therefore the card would only help in the fight against terrorism if the amount of information held was to increase dramatically.

However, the government has said that only basic information will be held on the register.

Concern was also expressed about the audit trail that would be left on the national register. Gareth Crossman was fearful that there would be a lack of accountability to the scheme. He argued that any time a public body accesses an individual's entry on the register, a record must be made of it, even if the person concerned does not have access to it. He also expressed concern that the technology needed for the database was not yet up to speed and that the UK Government had experienced some difficulties in managing large IT projects.

Lord Harris mentioned that we already leave extensive audit trails as we go about our everyday lives for e.g. shopping in supermarkets. He argued that with the ID register there should be a *clear* audit trail, the citizen should be able to access the register and find out who has accessed the register about them.

The main points that arose from the debate were:

- Identity cards could be a useful symbol of common citizenship – a "British citizenship card".
- It could be a guarantor to welfare entitlement.
- If as "consumers" of state services we expect a rational and efficient state, as citizens we may need to provide the state with more information and an ID card and national identity register could play a part, in this.
- Public servants might be in danger of being seen to "police" access to services if the card was used as a guarantor to welfare entitlement.
- The introduction of ID cards must allay fears of members of the faith and race communities that it will not disrupt community cohesion.
- A *clear* demonstration of entitlement to services which an ID card could provide, may lead to an easing of community tensions as everyone would know that the users of public services would be entitled to them.
- If the request to produce an ID card becomes compulsory, will we create a situation where identity per se is used *against* people from minority communities?
- The sharing of information between government departments could be useful for example linking up local government and social services but there should be a *clear* audit trail. The citizen must have access to the register and must be able to find out who has accessed the register about them.
- The Government and relevant authorities must guard against "function creep".
- If the ID card scheme is being used to combat terrorism, the fear was expressed that the information that would currently be kept, would be too basic so it would be an inadequate tool.
- Are we moving away from a society where information is not shared unless it needs to be, towards a society where information will be held not because it is of use but because it *might* be at some point? Does this currently contradict principles of data protection which state that personal data shall be obtained only for one or more specific lawful purposes?

The Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) is the UK's leading progressive think tank and was established in 1988. Its role is to bridge the political divide between the social democratic and liberal traditions, the intellectual divide between academia and the policy making establishment and the cultural divide between government and civil society. It is first and foremost a research institute, aiming to provide innovative and credible policy solutions. Its work, the questions its research poses, and the methods it uses are driven by the belief that the journey to a good society is one that places social justice, democratic participation, economic and environmental sustainability at its core.



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