

NATIONAL ID CARD

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DO IDENTIFICATION CARDS REDUCE TERRORISM?

National ID card schemes are traditionally promoted as necessary to prevent identity fraud, but more recently as a counter-terrorism measure.

The main problem with the latter justification is that terrorist groups typically use people who are not known to police, as was the case with the London and Madrid bombers and 9/11 hijackers, people who did not try to hide their identities, only their intentions.

This was also the case in South Africa under apartheid, where ID cards had no more success in preventing terrorism then than today, its main use being to identify the race of card holders.

Counter-terrorism activity should focus on addressing the root causes of terrorism and obtaining intelligence on extremist groups, not wasting resources stuffing computer systems with superfluous data about ordinary citizens, the vast majority of whom will never commit a serious non-violent crime, much less a brutal act of terrorism.



Most ID card proponents say people will not have to carry them (having to do so would turn them into the human equivalent of an electronic dog tag), but if this is the case what use will they be to police in identifying people who are acting suspiciously?

Privacy experts believe centralizing information will facilitate fraud by creating a single point of failure for hackers or corrupt officials.

These experts also point out that almost all the advantages of an ID card could be fulfilled by improving the security of existing documents like Medicare cards, passports and

driver's licences.

As ID cards have not been shown to have any substantive impact on reducing terrorism (or fraud) and are an affront to liberty and human dignity, public resources would be better spent addressing the causes of terrorism and added security measures such as:

- Enhanced surveillance of extremist groups.
- Intern terrorist leaders.
- Increased use of CCTV cameras in cities.
- More security personnel.
- Greater use of bomb sniffer dogs.
- Improved border security.

LIBERTY AND THE CULTURE OF DEMOCRACY

The main problem with an ID card scheme is that it fundamentally changes the nature of the relationship between the state and the individual, by turning citizens into subjects.

Individual liberty is a key cultural component of a successful democracy, one essential for maintaining the autonomy and status of citizens as independent beings from which all [legitimate] power derives.

Many people instinctively feel an ID card is un-Australian without being able to describe exactly why this is the case, perhaps because their sense of freedom is ingrained at a subconscious level.

Critics rightly associate an ID card with an authoritarian culture. Countries like China, Germany, Japan, North Korea, Romania and Spain all have ID cards, namely cultures without a long standing tradition of liberal

democracy like Britain (few of its former colonies have ID cards). It is no surprise to me that Norway, arguably the most socially progressive nation, does not have an ID card scheme.

It should not be forgotten that Islamic extremists also support the introduction of ID cards, which would note the religion (or atheism) of the card holder as plainly as the yellow stars once used to identify Jews.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- ID card schemes have been adopted by dozens of countries but have never been shown to have a statistically significant impact on ordinary crime, much less terrorism.
- The London and Madrid bombers and 9/11 hijackers would not have been stopped by an ID card scheme as they did not try to hide their identities, only their intentions.

RECOMMENDATION

Support groups which oppose the introduction of ID cards.

FURTHER READING

Information as Power: Constitutional Implications of the Identity Numbering and ID Card Proposal, Geoffrey de Q. Walker, CIS Policy Report 2, 1 February, 1986.

