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Coalition MPs attack proposed ID card

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THREE influential Coalition MPs have raised fears that John Howard's proposed new smartcard giving access to government services will become a national identity card, with Bronwyn Bishop warning it failed "the Nazi test".

The protests came during a joint party meeting in Canberra yesterday, on the eve of the Government introducing legislation today giving the go-ahead to 16.7 million cards to be issued across Australia by 2010.

The new card, which will include a biometric photograph and a microchip carrying detailed personal information, is to replace the Medicare Card and up to 16 others that give access to government health and welfare services.

The Prime Minister backs the new card as the best way to crack down on identity fraud, estimated to cost taxpayers up to \$4 billion a year, and to make the delivery of services much simpler.

But the revolt among government MPs - led by Mrs Bishop and fellow Liberals Chris Pyne and Steve Ciobo - revives debate over privacy and potential abuse of a multi-use government card, reminiscent of controversy over the Hawke government's failed attempt to introduce the Australian Card in 1987.

Mrs Bishop, an outspoken Liberal backbencher and former Howard government minister, yesterday raised the spectre of the card being used in a similar way to the Nazis to identify and oppress certain groups.

She told partyroom colleagues that the question had to be asked whether such a card would have assisted the Nazis in their goal of exterminating the Jews.

Assistant Minister for Health Chris Pyne also questioned whether the new card could lay the framework for a future Labor government to introduce a national ID card.

Mr Ciobo, a Queensland Liberal MP, said the legislation was "deficient by omission" in terms of protecting privacy and could lead to an ID card in the future.

"I would like to see additional legislative safeguards against the future consolidation of

identity information," he said.

New Human Services Minister Ian Campbell told The Australian last night that he had given personal assurances to Mrs Bishop and the other MPs that the Government's new Access Card would not "morph" into an identity card.

"If anyone tries to do that they will get put in jail for five years," he said.

"The reassurance I give Bronwyn and anyone else is that if any government seeks to do that they will have to enter parliament and bring in a new law."

Senator Campbell said the Access Card would replace three to four cards for most Australians and potentially up to 17.

He said people were tired of filling out their address and details all the time for separate government services such as Medicare, Centrelink and family tax assistance.

The new card, according to Senator Campbell, would "transform" government by making the delivery of services faster and more efficient.

Senator Campbell said he strongly opposed the Hawke government's attempt to introduce the Australia Card in 1987 and continued to do so.

"This is not an Australia Card by stealth," he said.

He said the new Access Card would be useless as an identity card and any comparison with Nazi Germany was "plain wrong".

The legislation will be introduced into parliament today after it was taken to cabinet a year ago by Senator Campbell's ministerial predecessor, Joe Hockey.

Senator Campbell briefed MPs on the new laws on Monday night and it was taken to the partyroom yesterday.

Despite raising their concerns, the protesting Coalition MPs yesterday indicated they would not oppose the Human Services (Enhanced Service Delivery) Bill 2007 when it is introduced today.

Labor is also expected to support the legislation, despite some qualms over privacy.

Senator Campbell said he would continue to receive advice from professor Allan Fels, former head of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, about the possible impact of the legislation on privacy.

The Government's proposed Access Card is vastly different to the ID card introduced by British Prime Minister Tony Blair, which includes fingerprints and iris scanning for identification.

Using a biometric photo on the Australian Access Card means that a 3D image of card users will be needed by the Government.

Muslims and others who cover their faces for religious reasons will be required to push back head scarves so that foreheads, cheeks and chins are clearly visible.

The Government's Office of Access Card, a unit within Senator Campbell's department, is well advanced with plans for a \$1billion rollout of the card between April next year and

mid-2010.

It will not be compulsory for Australians to sign up to the new card, but anyone not signed up by June 2010 will be denied entitlement to Medicare, Centrelink, Veterans Affairs concessions and other benefits.

The card will be able to be used in conjunction with an ATM card to obtain an instant Medicare rebate credit at non-bulk-billing doctors' surgeries.

KPMG estimates that the introduction of the card will save taxpayers up to \$3 billion in fraud over 10 years. The health and welfare services covered by the new card will total \$100 billion in government spending.

According to government sources, good counterfeits of Medicare cards can cost as little as \$150 on the black market.

Senator Campbell likened the Medicare card, which was introduced in 1984, to a Datsun 200B, which he said was good for its time but had been superseded and needed to be replaced.

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