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# Call it what you like... "Human Services Access Card" a gross violation of civil rights

**It is much more than an ID card: "Any government that wants to issue a unique identification number to most of the population and then to compile and link information about them using increasingly powerful technology bears a heavy onus to justify its case. ... 'Nothing to hide, nothing to fear', directed at each member of the public, should be turned around and directed at government as: No legitimate reason to know, no legitimate reason to ask'."**

(Paul Chadwick, Victorian Privacy Commissioner, *The Value of Privacy*, 23 May 1996)

This is your life, brought to you by Howard government. No it is not the TV show, but a national ID card where every citizen and resident is given their own unique identity number. The number will be found on your ID card, in government records and agencies and will be needed for Medicare, a prescription from the chemist, for pension payments, unemployment benefits, child support, disability benefits, Veterans Affairs benefits and services, and in endless other everyday transactions within the private sector. The card will carry an extensive set of personal information and links to other data bases. Unlike the TV show, you will not know what personal details of your life are recorded or revealed to others on your card. The card is what you see on the surface, behind the Access Card lies a centralised collection of data — over which you have no control and no idea who has access to it.

## **Broad opposition**

Privacy, medical, civil liberty groups, and other organisations and individuals have spoken out strongly against the Coalition Government's draft legislation for the misleadingly named "Human Services Access Card". Despite all the Howard Government's denials to the contrary, the proposed Access Card is nothing short of a national ID card. Even some of the government's closest allies, such as the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry have expressed concern that it could become an identity card (ID card).

Within the Coalition's own parliamentary ranks there is dissent. Former head of the Victorian Liberal Party's Communications & IT Policy Development Committee, Tim Warner, launched "The Access Card No Way" Campaign in June 2006. Liberal MP Bronwyn Bishop spoke in terms of it raising the spectre of paving the way to a Nazi-style regime because of its potential of misuse.

The government allocated \$1.1 billion in the last budget for the card and has already spent millions of dollars (in tenders to the private sector) towards setting up the infrastructure for the new ID card. The Coalition government expects to push the Human Services (Enhanced Service Delivery) Bill 2007, the first of a number of pieces of legislation for the Access Card, through both Houses during the present sitting. Its aim is to begin issuing cards next year, with them becoming compulsory to access health, social and Veterans Affairs benefits and services by 2010.

## **Centralised database**

To obtain a card individuals will first have to register with the Secure Customer Registration Service (SCRS). This involves being interviewed and submitting documents as demanded by the Secretary of the Department of Human Services under a possibly very onerous Document Verification System (DVS). The Secretary has considerable arbitrary powers to demand whatever documentation he or she feels is required to be satisfied of a person's identity.

The SCRS will hold identity data on virtually every citizen and resident of Australia. Personal information to be stored on the register includes: legal and preferred name (if there is one), whether Australian citizen or

resident, gender, address, concession status and benefit cards held, scanned images of card holder's proof of identity documents (as decided by Secretary), digitised signature, photo and numerical template derived from photo, indication of which government agencies the cardholder has a relationship with, emergency payment number details if applicable and other benefit card information.

The information held on individuals by agencies such as Medicare, Centrelink, etc, as far as is known will not be centralised in a single data base but accessible through computer links and the use of the cardholder's unique identity number. There are suggestions that Medicare numbers will be used as the ID number, in a reformatted form to comply with international conventions.

Once registered, it is possible to apply for the Access Card, and details of this card including personal ID number are included on the register.

The Secretary must issue you an Access Card if you are eligible, have carried out the various steps in making an application (form, interview, documents), have satisfied the secretary of your identity and any other requirements in the form of regulations that are decided by the Minister.

### **Smart card**

The Access Card is a smart card, it carries a computer chip (similar to a SIM card found in mobile phones) which can store information. This information can be added to, deleted or amended. The chip has two sections. One which the cardholder can have information added to and the other which is controlled by and accessed by the Commonwealth, not the cardholder. The cardholder may choose a PIN number which is then required before agencies access information (similar to using a credit or debit card).

The Commonwealth's area of the card includes the following information:

- legal and preferred name, if one is used
- date of birth, if requested to print it on surface of card
- gender
- residential address
- photo
- digitised signature
- card number
- card expiry date
- encrypted PIN if you choose to have one
- Medicare number or Department of Veterans' Affairs file number, if applicable
- other benefit card information
- concession status.

Other information could be collected on the card as determined by the Secretary that is "reasonably necessary for the administration of the Register or your Access Card".

The Minister, at present Ian Campbell, has even greater power — being able to determine what additional information is carried in the Commonwealth's section "that is for the purposes of this Act." His additions, by regulation, will bypass Parliament. The wording of the purposes clause in the Bill is so wide open this could mean almost any type of information could be collected.

It is not clear yet what might go on the area that the cardholder can access — possibly medical details, allergies, blood group, next of kin — this is not specified in the draft Bill.

The information carried on the surface of the card is a pointer to the real intent of the card. The draft bill specifies the inclusion of your legal name, card number, expiry date of card, photograph, signature and war veteran details (if applicable). These are the very basics of an ID card, going far beyond what is required to present at a counter to access services.

### **Australia Card revisited**

"... so we've come down against the present ID card, for three fundamental reasons: the first is the enormous invasion of privacy, the second is that the savings and the advantages of it are not great, and thirdly and most importantly, the cost of it..." , said John Howard on ABC PM program in 1987. Howard said what really turned him against ID cards was the possibility of abuse. Howard was referring to the ALP government's proposals for an ID card, called the "Australia Card". It was very similar in many respects to the Access Card, except that the card Howard is now pushing is far more reaching with its sophisticated technology and access to other data bases.

In 1985 Treasurer Paul Keating made proposals for a national ID system in a white paper on taxation reform. He argued that tax evasion and social security fraud would be reduced and that illegal immigrants would also be a target of the scheme. The Australia Card would have to be produced in a range of transactions, including opening of bank accounts, investment, buying and selling real estate and applying for a job. The card, it was claimed, would also assist in combating criminal activity.

The card would carry a unique number and the cardholder's name, address and signature — the idea of a photo met so much opposition that it was dropped. All Australian citizens and certain foreign nationals would be required to register for and obtain a card. Visitors and temporary residents would have a different card which indicated whether they were entitled to work or access Medicare benefits. The card would be needed for taxation, social welfare and Medicare purposes. The Bill had a bumpy road, initially failing to get through the Senate with the Coalition and Australian Democrats opposing it. It reappeared on two more occasions and was eventually buried after running into some technical and constitutional difficulties.

This latest resurrection of the ID card is being done in stages. The first stage is relatively limited in the scope of the card, but the photo is back. The government is silent on the use of the card and data on the register by other agencies such as the Tax Department, Immigration, Police, military, ASIO, Australian Bureau of Statistics, private organisations, or foreign agencies such as the CIA or FBI which has set up office in Australia. Not only could these bodies have access to information on the card, but they will be able to add and alter information. The cardholder has no way of knowing what is in the Commonwealth's area of the chip or any secret areas.

The temptations for hackers will be great and those with legal access to sell information. No government has yet to hold data on individuals and not have some leakages or other security mishaps.

### **Big Brother's dream**

Apart from the many obvious privacy concerns the ID register and card system opens the door to the most massive surveillance operations imaginable, with powerful computers, satellite communications and sophisticated software programs linking digital images, use of the card number and use of signature from all

aspects of a person's life.

Already massive amounts of data are collected by credit card agencies — in particular with the various loyalty schemes such as frequent flyer points encouraging people to purchase everything using their card. There are numerous other collections of information on individuals such as credit records, health, employer blacklists, employment, criminal, education, police and court records, secret intelligence, income, and so on. When linked and accessible in one place you have a formidable data bank of unprecedented proportions, open to economic, political and other abuse.

The Victorian Privacy Commissioner Paul Chadwick warned that the Access Card could be used to identify faces in a crowd. The digitised image recorded and collected on the register could electronically be matched to a face at a protest rally.

It is clear from the government's activities in other areas and its National Identity Security Strategy that it is only matter of time before other sorts of information are added to or linked to the centralised register and secret areas of the card.

These could range from religion, sexuality, political affiliation and activities, work permits, criminal record, places visited, close associates, and be used by employers, military, police, intelligence organisations, immigration, etc. Banks have a particular interest in access to the card because of stringent legal requirements placed on them when people open accounts. Many of the cards they now rely on such as Veterans or Medicare etc will be replaced by the new card.

In the present conditions, with the federal government's beat-up on terrorism, the demonising of Muslims, government advertisements creating fear and insecurity, the fostering of nationalism of the worst type, wide-ranging anti-democratic ASIO and terrorism laws, the massive attack on trade unions and employer offensive on wages and conditions, a national ID card and centralisation of personal information of such proportions should be viewed as extremely dangerous. Even more so in the light of the concentration camps being built in Australia — the most recent one to come to light being for 800 people, including children, on Christmas Island.

### **Private sector rewarded**

The government has not waited for the legislation to be passed to get the card up and running. KPMG and Booz Allen have already been awarded multi-million dollar contracts during the planning stages (\$4 million over three months!) and tenders have been called for the issuing and management of cards and for the hardware, software and services operation of the data bank. The private sector is set to make a killing.

Their involvement also raises serious security concerns. They are not accountable to Parliament, they will be subcontracting to other contractors and who knows where some of the data collected will end up or how it will be used.

As for all the government's claims about the millions of dollars of money that will be saved in welfare payments — in the main those savings will come from the pockets of legitimate beneficiaries who have been unable to get a card. These will be some of the most disadvantaged and needy of all such as the homeless and those with mental illness. For all sorts of reasons people cannot provide endless documents. In particular, asylum seekers and other refugees from war zones, documents get thrown out, records destroyed overseas and so on.

### **Build the opposition!**

The use of the Access Card as a national identity card will expand bit by bit once it is introduced. The government's legislation leaves it wide open for the Human Services Minister to extend its use and the types of data that must be stored. The cardholder, far from owning the card as claimed by the government, will not even know what is on the Commonwealth's areas of the chip.

The government's own Taskforce on the card, headed by former Australian Competition and Consumer

Commissioner Alan Fels, exposed it for what it is and raised concerns about its use.

The card must be stopped. It is being rushed through at top speed, the period of public consultation was limited to one month over the Christmas break. Opposition so far has come from across the political spectrum, including National and Liberal Party MPs. The ALP is so far taking an equivocal position, criticising some detail but not lining up firmly against the card. The Communist Party of Australia opposes the card as do the Greens.

It is important to pressure the major political parties and build as broad a movement as possible to defeat it. The involvement of trade unions in this struggle is imperative. Trade unionists and workers in general could be on the receiving end of the card as well as progressive political activists, Muslims and other groups.

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