

AUSTRALIAN IT

October 16, 2007 09:03am AEST

Labor to dump Access Card

Karen Dearne and Ben Woodhead | October 16, 2007

A LABOR government would scrap the contentious \$1.1 billion Access Card project, human services shadow minister Tanya Plibersek has confirmed.



Labor would scrap the proposal entirely, says human services shadow minister Tanya Plibersek

"We have said all along that if the Access Card had not been introduced by the time of the election we would not proceed with it," Ms Plibersek said.

"So, yes, we would scrap the proposal entirely."

Touted by the Howard Government as a health and welfare smartcard and anti-fraud measure, the scheme has met with sustained opposition as a de facto identity card. Originally proposed and promoted by then minister Joe Hockey in April 2006, the project has been in limbo since July, following a series of legislative and procurement stumbles.

Human Services Minister Chris Ellison was forced to withdraw enabling legislation in March, after the draft bill was rejected by an all-party Senate committee.

A revised exposure bill has since been languishing, with Senator Ellison in June saying the consultation period would extend beyond the 2007 election. "I think the timeline we set was an ambitious one," he said, adding that he would not put the legislation forward until early 2008.

The future of two crucial technology contracts, systems integration and card issuing, is uncertain nearly a year after private sector tenders were called.

But the bulk of the \$1.1 billion project spend is related to the huge task of registering some 15 million Australians for the card.

Other key tenders are for transaction services and the supply of Eftpos terminals.

Overall, spending on project consultants, technology and advertising had reached \$52 million by September.

Ms Plibersek said Labor considered smartcard technology to offer useful applications, "but we have no plans to look at any similar projects".

Labor declared its opposition to the Access Card back in March, with Ms Plibersek describing it as "simply a national ID card in disguise".

"It is an ill-conceived, poorly executed project that will cost a great deal more than the Government imagines or is prepared to admit," she said.

Ms Plibersek predicted the card would be an election issue.

"It will be on the radar, as people realise every single Australian will have to attend an interview, be photographed and provide original documents they will have to apply for and pay for," she said.

"With the potential for the information they provide to be lost, stolen or misused, I think they'll be very anxious."

The federal Government's other big-ticket technology projects remain secure and are likely to continue throughout the election campaign.

Agencies cannot enter into new contracts when the government is in caretaker mode, but those that have already signed agreements can keep working on initiatives under way.

That means that the election will not affect the Department of Immigration and Citizenship's \$495 million Systems for People project, Centrelink's \$312 million IT Refresh and the Australian Taxation Office's \$724 million Change Program.

A tax office spokeswoman said that the election would not affect an industry briefing on the agency's \$1 billion outsourcing program, scheduled for October 31.

The first tender documents for the tax office outsourcing project are not due to be released until next year, well after the election is done and dusted.

A change in government is unlikely to spell the end of the immigration, Centrelink and tax office projects because they mainly involve replacing old infrastructure and systems, and are largely separate from specific policies.

Copyright 2007 News Limited. All times AEST (GMT +10).