# Identity cards, identity databases, biometric passports and compulsion: Some clarifications

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ID cards are a key point of difference between the main parties. Both the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives have pledged to scrap them, while Labour will continue with their plans to introduce them.

The LSE Identity Project has been following developments in the UK's Identity Policy since the early days of the Identity Cards Bill in 2005. Here, Dr Edgar A. Whitley and Dr Gus Hosein from the LSE Identity Project analyse the Labour Party's manifesto comment on identity cards.

What's the difference between "scrapping identity cards", "scrapping the National Identity Register" and "scrapping the next generation of biometric passports"? Different opposition parties have slightly different versions of what they claim they will do if elected. The common ground is that all the opposition parties say that they will scrap "identity cards".

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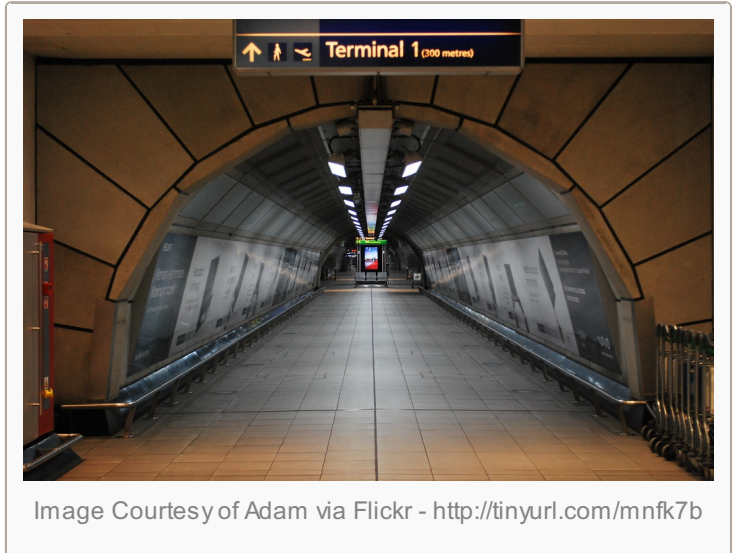
Identity cards

At one level, scrapping identity cards is a fairly trivial activity as the card is simply a piece of plastic, currently with limited functionality (there are very few 'readers' available that the card can be used with, and no online verification capabilities for card holders, so current advice on security checks for the card involve visual and physical inspection of the card and, potentially, phoning a telephone hotline to check that the card has not been reported as lost or stolen). There are no current plans to upgrade the cards either to provide more useful functionality.

The National Identity Register

Lying behind the physical identity cards is the National Identity Register (NIR). This is currently presented as little more than a database storing the details of passport / identity card holders. However, by design, it is intended to be much more than this. The Identity Cards Act specifies that an audit trail be maintained of every occasion on which an identity card is checked against the data held on National Identity Register. There are also financial penalties for anyone enrolled on the NIR who fails to notify the Government of any change in their personal details (name, address etc.). Moreover, once enrolled on the NIR a person's details will remain on the system even after their death.

In December 2006, the Government launched their Strategic Action Plan which announced how the National Identity Register would be implemented. It was decided at that time that there would, in fact, be three distinct databases. One storing biometric information (face and fingerprint data), one storing biographical information (details about who the person is (name, address etc.) and one storing technical system data. The Strategic Action Plan also announced the intention to use the Department of Work and Pension's existing Customer Information System (CIS) to store the biographical information about individuals as this would "keep risks and costs down".

Three years later, in January 2010, however, the Identity and Passport Service announced that it had selected a revised option for the biographical store, enhancing the new system being implemented as part of the UK Border Agency's Identity and Asylum Fingerprint System. This decision explains, in part, why the Government is not rushing to enrol all UK nationals on the National Identity Register as this key component will not be ready until 2012 (at the earliest). This is also why much of the costs of the system have been

shifted into the next Parliament.

Biometric passports

Integral to the Government's claims about the costs of the Scheme has been the argument that the government is obliged to implement biometric passports. The term "biometric passports", however, can mean a range of different things. At a basic level, biometric passports are passports that contain biometrics. In practice, this means that the passport contains a chip and an electronic representation of the holder's face (a face-biometric). The only binding requirement on UK passports is that they are face-biometric passports that include the chip.

There is an obligation for adding fingerprint biometrics to passports issued by signatories to the Schengen Acquis but the UK is explicitly excluded from these requirements. Not only are fingerprints not necessary (e.g. Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the U.S. have all rejected the inclusion of fingerprints), nor is it necessary to store these fingerprints in a central database (e.g. Germany has ruled out a national register of fingerprints).

The UK passport already meets international standards and requirements. Since 1998 security measures for UK passports have included the use of a digital facial image rather than a laminated photograph and since 26 October 2006 the IPS have been issuing ePassports that comply with U.S. visa waiver programme requirements. Any changes, therefore, are unnecessary, unless you are trying to disguise the costs of deploying a National Identity Register.

Policy implications of the distinctions

When the Liberal Democrats talk about scrapping "unnecessary new passports with additional biometric data" what they mean is that they do not believe it is necessary, at this time, to upgrade the face-biometric passports to face-and-fingerprint biometric passports.

The position of the Conservative Party is less clear: they explicitly state that they will scrap both identity cards and the National Identity Register but their manifesto makes no statement about passports at all. This could mean that, like the Liberal Democrats, they intend to delay the implementation of face-and-fingerprint biometric passports. Alternatively, they might still move to storing fingerprint biometrics on the passport but not require them to be stored in a centralised, government run database (as in Germany). Or, they may still move ahead with a passport database holding the fingerprints of every British passport holder, and may combine this with the fingerprints of foreign visa holders (as collected by UK Borders) but this passport database would simply be an internal, administrative system that does not have the data-sharing functionality and legal obligations associated with the National Identity Register.

On Compulsion

The Government has repeatedly asserted that identity cards will not be compulsory for UK nationals but what exactly does this mean? In a written answer on 6 April 2010, the Home Secretary Alan Johnson stated that "the Government's intention is to offer British citizens aged 16 and over the choice of being issued with a passport or an identity card or both documents and for applicants' identity details, including facial image and fingerprint biometrics, to be held on the same National Identity Register" [Written Answer to question 318773]. That is, in the Government's plans the *only* voluntary decision open to you is whether or not you want a passport (or identity card).

If you choose not to have (or renew) a passport your details will not be entered onto the National Identity Register. However, if you *voluntarily* choose to apply for a passport or identity card (from 2012 onwards) then you will automatically have your details enrolled on the National Identity Register. The fact that you are not compelled to be issued with a plastic identity card does not deflect from the obligations and duties associated with your National Identity Register record.

For most people, this is not what they understand when they hear that identity cards will not be compulsory for them. Indeed, this intentionally ambiguous language led to extensive Parliamentary debate when the Identity Cards Bill was being discussed in Parliament. For more details of that debate and its consequences, see Chapter 7 of Edgar A. Whitley and Gus Hosein (2010) Global challenges for identity policies. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.