

Funding the Future

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Keir Starmer has reopened the debate on national identity cards. Supporters say they could make public services, voting, and security simpler. Critics warn of surveillance, discrimination, and exclusion. Are ID cards about freedom—or about state control? I unpack the history, the arguments, and what it means for our rights today.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Al8cyjfNAfc?si=wZylJt06PAGeDjip>

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=a68q5-1978dec-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&fonts=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=auto&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

This is the transcript:

Keir Starmer has said that it is time for the UK to debate whether we should all have identity cards again, and if you are my age, we've been here before.

Tony Blair proposed this around 2004-2005, and the debate went on and on, and eventually the idea was dropped due to the civil liberties concerns about the whole idea.

The fact is that what Keir Starmer is now raising is going to be a rerun of that debate from 20 years ago. So it's time to have a look at this and to look at why the government wants to have identity cards, why it thinks they might improve government services, security, and migration, and also to look at the flip side of this argument, and why

human rights concerns remain central to this discussion.

Let's start, in fact, with those human rights concerns because they are critical to this debate. The European Convention on Human Rights, which was a British initiative after the Second World War, and to which we are still signed up, thankfully, put into place certain key rights that are designed to protect us from the government.

The right to privacy.

The right to equality.

The right to freedom of movement, which has been somewhat curtailed, but does still exist.

A presumption of innocence, and a great many other things.

The fact is that the issue of identity cards might directly affect these rights. For example, the government might quite simply know where you are if you have a government-issued ID card and have to use it for access to certain places. So there's a debate here about the balance of rights versus state control.

That said, there is a government argument for a state identity card. There can be no doubt that government systems are difficult for many people to access as they stand.

We have different logins and identities for many government services. Those of you who are used to HM Revenue and Customs online services will know that the login there is not necessarily the same as for other government services. You might be asked for different information if, for example, you want to renew your driving licence or get a passport. So it is annoying to have all these different ways of accessing data, and of course, the benefit system does, in its own way, run on different data as well.

And the fact that we have some clear national identifiers already, like National Insurance numbers, for example, but which have been open to serious abuse in the past, is not enough at present to ensure that the government can provide us with a single system that guarantees that we can access all its services in the same way.

And there would be an advantage if that happened. Let's be clear about it. One of the things that could happen is that people could vote more easily. If everybody had a single national identity, then the question of how we prove our entitlement to vote would simply go away. You would just present your national ID card, and the problem would be solved, presuming, of course, that you don't lose your national ID card quite often, which I know some people are prone to do with their bank cards, but let's assume you aren't quite so careless.

But you could also then access a whole range of other public services provided by councils, the benefit system, HM Revenue and Customs, your driving licence, maybe

the NHS and who knows what else.

There could be a benefit as a consequence of reducing fraud. And although it seems to me that there should be a reduction in cost, everybody is, in fact, saying that this system will cost more than all the existing systems put together, which I find a little hard to understand.

But the point is that, as far as the government is concerned, issuing people with national ID cards should prevent exploitation, benefit fraud - although there isn't that much of it, despite everything that is said - and maybe will prevent human trafficking and the use of illicit labour in the UK economy, by requiring that employers have actually proved who their employees are, even though that condition is already in place at present and actually seems to be working fairly well overall, unless, of course, the employer is intent on never declaring their own existence to any authority for any reason whatsoever.

So, this being said, the existence of an ID card could reduce the burdens on us if it were applied universally. Those are the pluses. They basically make access to government services easier for many people, and they eliminate abuse for the benefit of the government. The pros look to be clear. The cons are serious.

Let's start with the human rights risks before we move on to some purely practical issues.

There are, of course, serious privacy concerns about having one of these cards. There is a simple and straightforward risk of mass surveillance through the existence of a single centralised database covering everything we do.

Everything we do will therefore be known by the government.

If this were linked to your bank account, and it would be because you would either be paying tax, claiming benefits or whatever else, then the government would basically be able to tell everything about you. Our trust in state institutions might be reduced and not enhanced by this.

And let's be clear, the potential abuse of personal data, either by the government, or by people within it spying on us, or just as likely by people who attack the system and manage to break it, is very high indeed.

Secondly, there is a problem within this whole system of the presumption of suspicion. In other words, citizens will be continually required to prove their legitimacy by being asked to give their identity.

The idea that we'll all have to walk around with this card and present it whenever we are challenged by anyone, be it the ticket inspector on the train, or a police officer, or somebody at the GP's who asks us to prove that we have an entitlement to the

appointment we just made, or whatever else it might be; it's going to be going on and on and on. We will always wonder whether it is us, the person that matters, or the card that really counts.

And this creates another opportunity for abuse. The fact is that there are disproportionate demands made for ID from minorities already. We know that people from all forms of ethnic minorities, and people who do not have white skin colour, are subject to systemic abuse within our society.

They're much more likely to be stopped by the police. They're much more likely to be challenged with regard to not having an entitlement to some form of service. This whole issue of identity cards could, in fact, normalise that, and people who are already subject to discrimination could be subject to a great deal more suspicion and a higher order of proof being required, all the time, in a way that will make it apparent that there is active discrimination in our society. And that to me is a serious threat to the unity of our country, which is very worrying at a time when so many politicians appear to be trying to exploit that fact for their own advantage.

So there is that issue, and then there are other, more difficult ones.

For example, would it be possible for the government to restrict our freedom of movement? They might say, "You are only allowed to live within 10 miles of where you are", because there is what used to be called an antisocial behaviour order on you. Or there might be a requirement that a person is required to live within a restricted area of the UK, as once happened to people in Northern Ireland who had movement restrictions placed upon them.

All of this is possible, and of course, it's also possible that this restriction on the right to move could be applied to those who want to protest. So once you have taken part in a protest, the government says, we will monitor you and we will check where you are going to be. It would not be hard to link this ID card to your bank card, of course, and that would be sufficient to be able to find out where you were.

This in itself is deeply threatening to our right of freedom, our right of movement, our right to be able to say what we wish, and so on.

And links to employment checks could also harm labour rights because our whole history could be shown to our potential employer, and potentially put them off, if at some point we have made a criminal error, and many people have; many more than you would imagine, I suspect. I admit, I don't think I've got a criminal record, but lots of people have, and that could come out in ways that could be deeply harmful.

The fact is, anybody who's already for any reason marginalised in the UK could become very much more marginalised as a consequence of the whole issue of identity cards.

And then there is the right of access. How do we ensure that people get these cards? It's estimated that at least 1.7 million elderly people in the UK never use the internet in any way, including on a phone. They might not even have a mobile phone. In fact, the whole idea of the identity card effectively imposes a phone tax on people. They have to have access to the internet to make these things work, that's going to be the whole point of them. And in that case, that is deeply worrying, A) because of cost, and B) because some people just don't want to or can't have access to a phone.

How are we going to deal with those people?

How are we going to deal with the homeless?

How are we going to deal with the very poorest? Are we going to provide a phone as a universal basic service to ensure that they can get access?

We don't know the answers to these questions, and they worry me enormously. There is a risk of creating a two-tier society.

And then we also have the risk of function creep.

The idea that IDs might be absolutely tied to voting, policing, immigration, taxation, benefits, healthcare, and so much else means that, in practice, we would be totally tied up in bureaucracy all the time. Our human rights would effectively become a data right, and without that data, we will be a nobody.

Is that something we really want? I worry about this.

In theory, ID cards could help because of the way in which they could ease bureaucracy for the most able, let's be blunt. In practice, they pose a risk to privacy, to freedom and to equality.

The UK has traditionally been deeply sceptical of state control. Unlike many European countries, we have resisted this idea of having papers, or an ID card, or whatever it might be. So the core question now is how do we protect our rights without enabling even more surveillance of every part of our lives, and without enabling even more exclusion within our society?

I haven't got an answer.

The government is going to need to find one, and that is something that is the biggest challenge to them in this whole process, because I'm not sure they're any better prepared for this argument now than Tony Blair was in 2005.

What do you think?

Do you welcome the idea of an identity card because it might make your life easier?

Or are you worried about it because it might help the government to monitor you even more than it already does?

Are you worried about exclusion?

Are you worried about minorities?

Are you worried about how your parent, your grandparent, or whatever else might manage all of this?

There's a poll down below. Let us know. I'm keen to see what you think.

Poll

[poll id="212"]

Taking further action

If you want to write a letter to your MP on the issues raised in this blog post, there is a ChatGPT prompt to assist you in doing so, with full instructions, [here](#).

One word of warning, though: please ensure you have the correct MP. ChatGPT can get it wrong.

Comments

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