



Clive Willaims

**P**RIME minister John Howard's floating of a balloon on the national ID card issue before he left to go overseas last week reminded me of a temporary job I once had deputising for the swimming pool manager at Pontin's holiday Camp on the Isle of Wight. He went off for a week's leave and left me with the chemicals for the pool and instructions on how to add them.

Within days, the pool had turned bright green.

He, of course, returned after a week and sorted out the problem, leaving him looking good, and me looking incompetent. PM Howard, too, will soon return and restore order - and of course underscore his leadership credentials.

Anyway, is a national ID card desirable? Australians last had ID cards during World War II. Re-introduction of a national ID card was seriously considered in the 1980s, when the Hawke Government proposed an Australia Card to be carried by all Australian citizens

and permanent residents. The main aim then was to crack down on tax cheats.

Early polls showed 70 per cent support for the proposal. This gradually dissipated as influential individuals like Justice Michael Kirby stated, "If there is an identity card, then people in authority will want to put it to use ... What is at stake is nothing less than the nature of our society and the power and authority of the state over the individual." By the end of 1987, the proposal was politically dead in the water.

What has changed since then? The most obvious changes are in the national security and crime environments, and in biometric and security technologies.

People worried about national security post-9/11, Bali and London now see a national ID card as providing some protection from terrorism. The reality is that ID cards will not prevent terrorism. What they will do is make it more difficult for terrorists to move around and adopt multiple identities. Identity fraud has been present in about one third of terrorist incidents in Western countries; in the remaining two thirds (as in Madrid and London), the perpetrators kept their own identities.

Unofficially, the federal Department of Immigration estimates there are at least 60,000 undocumented illegals in Australia; no doubt most are here for economic or social reasons, but it is obviously undesirable from a national security perspective to have that many people at large that we know very little about.

The big crime problem these days is ID fraud. It is a major security concern for financial institutions, and affects most Australians as the costs are passed on to consumers. In 2003, the Australian Institute of Criminology estimated the cost of fraud in Australia at \$5.88 billion a year; ID fraud was estimated at \$2.2 billion - with additional knock-on costs.

While many people think that ID fraud is a problem for social services, the main fraud cost

there is overpayments to people who have not notified a change of status.

The other major changes since the 1980s are in biometric data analysis and improved security technologies. The most common biometric measures are fingerprints, iris scans, visual recognition and signatures. Most of us are going to be recorded and analyzed increasingly in the future by biometric-based systems - whether we like it or not. Security-sensitive workplaces in Australia are increasingly using biometric screening systems.

The CSIRO has developed promising new secure ID card technology that has been licensed for use in Britain, where much of the current impetus for a national ID card is coming from. (The US has opted instead to make its drivers' licences more secure.)

Pre-election, Prime Minister Tony Blair made it clear that a national ID card would be a priority for his returning government.

Since legislation here would probably be based on British legislation, it is worth examining what is proposed there. Britain would establish a national identification register for everyone over the age of 16, give everyone a unique identification number, incorporate biometric data, establish an ID card, require the card to be produced to gain public services, use the card as a reference point for government data, and use it to cross-reference government agencies' data. Carrying

an ID card would not be compulsory, but having one would be.

Those not obtaining one would be liable to a 2500 fine, with recurring penalties.

The main purpose of the British card seems to be better population management.

Any new national ID card system would, as a basic minimum, have to have an embedded unalterable image of the holder and a secure computer chip containing biometric and other data. The card would need to be biometrically checkable against the holder and when appropriate - such as for the issue of a passport - against a national database.

The cost in Australia would probably be in the range of \$50-100 per card, with recurring costs. Introduction of a national ID card in Australia should be based primarily on a realistic assessment of the financial costs and benefits, and the scope for better population management - and probably not so much on the national security aspects. And of course, any legislation should contain adequate oversight safeguards to prevent government abuse of the system.

Those who have most to fear from a national ID card system are those who are dishonestly benefiting from the current absence of one. Clive Williams, MG, is director of terrorism studies at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, ANU. ■

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