

National Identity Card Schemes in Australia

National Identity Card proposals in the 1980s and 2006/7 failed. In both instances community action resulted in political decisions to abandon the proposals.

The 1980s: the Australia Card

In June 1985 the Hawke Labor Government released a paper titled *Reform of the Australian Tax System: draft white paper* (Canberra: AGPS, 1985.). It contained proposals for a national system of identification, the Australia Card, to be issued to all registered adult Australian citizens and foreign nationals in prescribed categories. The main purpose of the card was to prevent losses through taxation evasion and social security fraud. Illegal immigrants were also targeted through the scheme.

Thirteen Government agencies would use the Australia Card identity number and there would be four main categories of use: legal identification, revenue raising, welfare/benefit protection, epidemiological and statistical purposes. It was also thought that the Australia Card would assist in combating organised criminal activity.

Opposition to the proposal

Senate rejection of the proposal on three occasions and continuing government insistence on its introduction prompted the formation of the Australian Privacy Foundation in late 1987 by a final year school student and a journalist who contacted concerned lawyers, academics and community and business leaders. The Foundation conducted a massive campaign through public meetings, newspaper articles and television programs. Techniques such as "letters to the Editor" (The Sydney Morning Herald published the ratio as being 9-1 against the scheme), public rallies and opinion surveys turned public opinion from 60-30 in favour in late 1986 to about the same proportion against by September 1987.

Identity card proposal 2005-06

The concept of a national ID card returned to the political agenda in the wake of the London bombings in mid-2005. Prime Minister Howard, who actively opposed the Australia Card proposal in 1987, said that a national identity card should be debated in the wake of the London bombings and that the card might be 'one of the things that is needed to be added [to] our armour, maybe'. The suggestion of a national ID card brought renewed comments from civil liberty groups and others, and raised issues about its effectiveness, cost and privacy considerations. In April, despite favourable opinion polls, the Government announced that it would no longer introduce a national ID card as the disadvantages outweighed the advantages.

- 2006 February 1. Newspan. 53% in favour.
- 2005 December 26. Herald Sun poll. 66% in favour
- 2005 August 3. Age poll. 61% in favour.

Smart card/access card proposal 2006-07

On 26 April 2006 Cabinet approved an access card to replace 17 health and social services cards within the Human Services portfolio.

The access card was to have limited cardholder information on it, the cardholder's name, a digital photograph, their signature and card number. A microchip in the card would store a photo, address, date of birth and details of any children or other dependants. The card would also provide cardholders with the option to voluntarily store other information such as emergency contact details, allergies, health alerts, chronic illnesses, immunisation information and organ donor status. Information held on the access card would be subject to strict protections and would be accessed only by authorised people.

In December 2006, the Government released an exposure draft of the proposed 2007 Bill. In February 2007 the access card bill (Human Services (Enhanced Service Delivery) Bill 2007) was introduced into Parliament but was withdrawn after privacy concerns. A revised bill was released for comment in June 2007 but was almost immediately withdrawn.

Following the 2007 election the Labor Government announced that a national identity card was not under consideration.

Arguments for and against identity cards

For:

- It would assist counter-terrorism and security services because some terrorists use false or multiple identities.
- It would assist in identifying illegal immigrants and illegal workers.
- It would be superior to alternatives that have been considered to address these issues.
- Anticipated savings to government.
- Opposition to the card ignores the fact that most Australians already carry a large number of identifying cards.
- There is no historical evidence that an ID card has resulted in the establishment of a totalitarian state. *(this is actually a refutation of an argument against introduction)*
- Identity cards exist in a number of liberal-democratic societies, including in Europe. Unique number identification systems have become de facto identity cards in the USA and Canada.

Against:

- It may be ineffective if it relies on an inadequate basis for identification.
- It may not produce the benefits anticipated by the Government in reducing crime and terrorism.
- It may be more costly than estimated due to additional bureaucracy and private sector compliance costs.
- It would be inconvenient and create problems for members of the public.

- It would dramatically change the relationship between the individual and the State, and provide the basis for mass surveillance.
- It is unnecessary. The Government already has in place facilities to detect those using multiple identities to evade tax or perpetrate fraud.
- Threats to civil liberties—potential to invade privacy by enabling government and private sector databases to be linked.
- The mandatory nature of ID cards would mean that if a person was unable to produce a card because it has been stolen or lost, they would be inconvenienced, treated with suspicion or denied goods or services.
- The cards would need to be issued on the basis of some other form of identification, like a birth certificate or driver's licence, and these documents could be forged or illegally obtained.
- Disproportionate impact on ethnic minorities.
- Accuracy and currency of information.
- Issuing costs to individual cardholders.

References *(The information provided for this case study was sourced from the websites and publications listed above.)*

- Major websites on identity cards:
 - [Australian Privacy Foundation](http://privacy.org.au/About/Formation.html)
http://privacy.org.au/About/Formation.html
 - Caslon Analytics, [Surveillance and Identification page](http://www.caslon.com.au) www.caslon.com.au
 - Roger Clarke's "Australia Card" www.rogerclarke.com/DV/OzCard.html
 - Parliament of Australia, Parliamentary Library
www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/law/identitycards.html
- Further reading
 - R. Clarke, '[Just another piece of plastic for your wallet: the 'Australia Card' scheme](#)', Prometheus, vol. 5, 1987, pp. 29-45.
 - G. Greenleaf, '[Lessons from the Australia Card: deux \[je deus\] ex machina ?](#)', Computer Law and Security Report, vol 3, 1988, pp. 3,6.
 - G. Greenleaf, '[The Australia Card: towards a national surveillance system](#)'. A shorter version of this article was published in the Law Society Journal (NSW), vol 25 no.9, October 1987.
 - G. Greenleaf, '[The Deceptive history of the Australia Card](#)', Australian Quarterly, vol 58, no. 4, 1986, pp. 407-425.
 - E. Smith, 'The Australia Card: the story of its defeat', Sun Books, South Melbourne, 1989.