At the beginning of 2010, the British and US governments approved the introduction of body scanners at international airports. In both cases, the impetus behind their implementation was the case of Nigerian Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who tried to blow up a flight to Detroit on which he was a passenger. He had flown from Yemen via Lagos and Holland’s Schiphol Airport.

Kevin Rudd has since announced his intention to install body scanners in all of Australia’s international airports.

Full body scanners act like X-ray machines, allowing airport security to penetrate fabric and see items pressed against flyers’ bodies.

Sounds like a good investment? It isn’t. Body scanners don’t work. They’re not needed. They invade privacy. And they’re potentially unsafe.

Under test conditions on live German TV, Werner Gruber, an Austrian physics professor, smuggled a detonator, several bottles of explosive powder, a knife and crystal explosives through a scanner operated by a representative from the company that makes them. The operators had advance notice that an attempt to deceive the scanners was being made, a courtesy presumably not extended by terrorists, and the operators had ample opportunity to prepare and (one imagines) had their best controller using the device for the TV test. It still failed.

In evidence before a Canadian parliamentary group investigating scanners Rafi Sela, a leading Israeli security expert has openly derided them as ‘useless’. Sela’s experience is acquired in a country which really knows something about security, and has no plan to introduce scanners.

One problem seems to be that the scanners cannot penetrate beneath skin. So hiding material in body cavities or in implants conceals them from the scanners entirely.

What if they are only a tiny bit effective? We are constantly told ‘if it makes us a little safer, it’s worth it’—‘if it saves one life, stops one crime ...’ But this is a specious argument. It would ‘save one child’ to ban the motor car, or introduce a night curfew, but we don’t, because it would be disproportionate and we have to get on with normal life, even if we incur a slightly higher element of risk in doing so. We don’t encourage people to take wild risks with cars, but we don’t make liberty-reducing and disproportionate laws, either. We should react to the threat of terrorism in just the same way.

But even if they could be made to work, scanners would be disproportionate and unnecessary. President Obama has said that Abdulmutallab was able to get onto the Detroit flight because of systemic failure by the security services with the information they already had. Rather than ensuring that those authorities competently use what they’ve already got, both the USA and the UK are giving more power and new tools to the same systemically incompetent organisations whose incompetence caused the problem in the first place.

Let us remember the tools already available to the services entrusted with significant powers and large budgets in order to protect us. First of all, and most importantly, intelligence—ranging from the research and knowledge and expertise of the security services to the commonsense and experience of border guards. Secondly, infrared scanners which don’t show your body parts. Thirdly, sniffer dogs. Fourthly, standard metal detectors. Fifthly, swabs to detect explosive material particles. So it’s hardly as if we’re without protections already. All of these devices are cheap, they work, they’re available now, and they don’t violate privacy. Scanners are expensive, they don’t work, they’re not available in large quantities for months and they violate privacy.

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And when I say they’re expensive, they’re expensive. They cost between $130,000 and $160,000 each. If one then thinks of the size of a major international airport, one swiftly appreciates that’s a lot of scanners. The cost will of course be passed on to flyers (along with the sizeable delays they cause at the terminal).

It is because of the cost issue that the Head of Interpol has said that expenditure on scanners is not a good use of law enforcement resources. But why put good money into something practical when there’s a more fashionable toy to be played with, which might make your government look decisive?

Governments around the world plan to violate our privacy in a desperate attempt to be seen to be doing something. If you’ve seen images from the scanners (and Google is filling up with them), you will know that they don’t leave much—or anything—to the imagination. For people with prosthetic body parts, for people with medical conditions, for people who are just plain modest, this is hard to contemplate scans of their partners or (particularly) their children.

Some passengers won’t be upset by the scanners. Others will. Those who do object should not have to choose between their dignity and their flight.

Unlike the Canadian or US authorities, the British government allows no exemptions for passengers selected for scans—they permit no alternative for people with moral objections, or for children, or for pregnant women. It is this that’s particularly upsetting people and may be what will cause most trouble.

We have been assured that mature, responsible, sensitive, trained professionals will operate the scanners. Those who accept such assurances might find a recent case in the United Kingdom of interest. One such ‘professional’, John Laker, having received just such training, took a picture of a colleague who entered the machine by mistake, telling her he loved ‘her massive tits’.

We have been given lofty assurances that the images generated from scans will immediately be destroyed. First we were told that they could not store images at all—a claim disproven by documents obtained by the US-based Electronic Privacy Information Centre. Given the machines have the capacity to take and retain images, one wonders how the non-retention policy is to be enforced, and how controllers can in the long term be stopped from simply taking pictures of the screen they’re watching. The British government’s record on data security and data loss is appalling.

The Equalities and Human Rights Commission has stated that scanners are potentially illegal on privacy grounds. For the same reason, the European Commission has questioned their necessity.

Finally on this point, laws against child pornography and indecent imagery are plainly breached by the scanners. That the British government didn’t even bother legislating to ensure this point was covered speaks volumes for the attitude it has towards the rule of law.

It is true that the level of radiation to which one is exposed in scans is small. However, there’s a reason the doctor stands behind a screen when you’re x-rayed; even small doses, particularly when relatively frequent (as they might be for regular fliers) can be harmful, especially to some parts of the body (like the genitals).

The Inter-Agency Committee on Radiation Safety includes the European Commission, International Atomic Energy Agency, Nuclear Energy Agency and the World Health Organization. The Committee has written a report that states that ‘Air passengers should be made aware of the health risks of airport body screenings’, ‘governments must explain any decision to expose the public to higher levels of cancer-causing radiation’ and ‘Pregnant women and children should not be subject to scanning.’

By failing to publicise the health risks, by failing to explain the danger, and worst of all by making scanning compulsory for all, the governments are potentially jeopardising the health of vulnerable people.

Scanners are intrusive and unnecessary—in the UK, or in Australia.

When the IRA was active, they posed a more real threat to the people of the United Kingdom than Al Qaeda—and they regularly delivered on that threat. We didn’t allow them to change our way of life to anything like the degree we now permit these terrorists to change our liberties and freedoms. They hate us because we are free. We should think carefully about infringing our freedoms in the face of their threat.

What sort of free society do governments think they’re protecting with these scanners? When we have to expose ourselves to a man at the airport in order to fly, perhaps the terrorists have won.