

Reject the Australia Card

The proposal to introduce a compulsory identity card — the Australia Card — should be rejected because it poses a major threat to our liberties.

Australians will be required to use the card for any application for employment, the opening of any bank account, the purchase of any house or flat, the purchase of shares, and soon it will also have to be used by any aged pensioner or other welfare recipient when applying for benefits.

It has been estimated by the Australian Tax Office that during the next ten years average tax collections would increase by \$400 million per annum if the Australia Card were introduced. There would also be savings in regard to welfare fraud, but these are not easy to quantify.

However the costs — both economic and social — of introducing the card and running the I.D. system are high. Running costs and compliance costs in the community will absorb a large proportion of the hoped-for savings.

The social disadvantages of the Australia Card are largely bound up with questions of civil liberties. Use of the card would enable comprehensive information to be obtained in regard to many financial and personal aspects of individuals' lives. It is hardly going too far to say that it would enable bureaucrats to have complete dossiers on all Australians.

This comprehensive information would become highly relevant if, for example, new and confiscatory taxes were to be imposed or if a government were to attempt a higher level of regulation over people's lives. These matters should by no means be regarded as remote or irrelevant risks. Recent Australian history has shown how easily governments of both political persuasions have imposed a high level of economic regulation on individuals.

It is not possible to justify substantial intrusions into privacy and reductions of civil liberties of these kinds by reference to increased tax revenue, which could in fact be secured in other, less sinister ways.

Preferable alternative courses should be examined.

In regard to tax evasion the problems that have been raised by the taking by taxpayers of second jobs have been largely overcome by the system of pay-as-you-earn tax deductions. This system does not prevent a failure to pay tax in certain circumstances, particularly where a small amount of casual work is involved. However it is extremely unlikely that an Australia Card would be effective in this instance.

Another area where there is presently a loss of revenue is in regard to interest on amounts in bank accounts and on other securities. However here more could easily be done by improving current Taxation Office checking procedures, without the drastic step of introducing compulsory general identity cards.

Similar comments apply in regard to welfare fraud. Procedures for verifying claims ought to be strengthened, and in particular more attention should be given to the important problem — which would not be solved by compulsory identity cards — of persons, and particularly young persons, who do not make proper efforts to find employment.

On a full analysis it appears that the alleged necessity for an Australia Card does not exist. As Professor de Q. Walker has said, "The only effective safeguard against the dangers of this proposal is to prevent it from becoming a reality in the first place."

So far the case for the Australia Card has been based upon misinformation. Alternative methods of protecting the Revenue have been suppressed, and the general dangers of a compulsory general identity card have been glossed over.

Australians should not allow themselves to be bullied into accepting a proposal which has ominous implications and particularly a grave temptation for abuse by government.

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