

Surveillance State

The UK is leading the way in the development of both state and corporate surveillance technologies. The UK has more CCTV cameras than any country in the world. Over 300 new ones go up every week. The most advanced CCTV Control Centre in the UK, a public/private partnership (in Manchester) can provide coverage of the city centre with over 400 cameras and an 18 metre (!!) monitor wall which can display from 6 to up to 180 high resolution images. All images are recorded and stored for at least 92 days.

Manchester police also have their own surveillance plane. It can stay airborne for over 5 hours, is 40% quieter than the helicopter and is the first police aircraft in the UK that can send and receive live video images in flight. Its equipment includes thermal cameras and 'moving map' technology.

Communications data is stored for years. Your emails can be read and the history of your websurfing analysed, without a court order, by six government agencies and the police. Thanks to pressure from the UK, personal communications data of the whole population of the European Union are now to be stored. Your landline phone can be tapped. Your mobile is a tracking device. Your mobile phone company records and stores your geographical location every few minutes.

Vehicles can be tracked across the country through number plate recognition software - which also allows congestion charging.

The police now have power to access your NHS records, without having to establish that a criminal act may have taken place. Important changes are taking place.

We are moving from an age of targeted surveillance to an age of universal surveillance. Society is becoming a technological Panopticon. Much like Bentham's 19th century 'ideal' prison in which you can be watched everywhere but you can't tell if, right now, you are being watched. Another step in this progression will be the introduction of national identity cards.

National Identity Cards

The government wants to introduce a national identity card. Packaging identity cards as "entitlement" cards isn't going to fool anyone.

They are planning to create a high-quality population register of everyone 'lawfully' resident in Britain. National population registers have only been previously thought necessary in wartime situations. This new database will hold "core data" of every UK resident, who will be assigned a unique personal number that can be used across the public sector. The "entitlement" card will contain a photo and some kind of biometric information (fingerprint or iris scan) which will allow the verification of your identity.

Everyone above the age of 16 will be registered and issued with their own "entitlement" card which allows them access to social security, health, education and other services. You won't be required to use a card unless you wish to work, use the banking or health system, vote, buy a house, or receive benefits. The card is planned to be combined with the existing photocard driving licenses and the forthcoming passport card. So you will also need your "entitlement" card to drive a vehicle or travel abroad.

They say that you won't have to always carry the card. But once it's in place, you can bet this will change. Radio 4's Today programme incidentally revealed that the alleged "entitlement" cards are referred to as ID cards internally at the Home Office anyway.

"The issuing of a card does not force anyone to use it, although in terms of drivers or passport users, or if services - whether public or private - required some proof of identity before expenditure was laid out, without proof of identity and therefore entitlement to do it I doubt whether non-use of it would last very long."

David Blunkett

The ID card is not just another piece of plastic.

It is an integral part of a vast national information system.

It is likely to contain four key components. The first is the card itself, which can be used for low-level identification purposes such as entering a secure building or renting videos. The second is a biometric identifier such as a fingerprint or an iris scan, which will be linked to a national database. The third is an electronic storage chip, which will contain multiple levels