Brown to let shops share ID card data

Opponents warn that linking police databases with the private sector to beat crime will lead to a 'surveillance state' and a big assault on privacy

**Gaby Hinsliff, political editor**
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Gordon Brown is planning a massive expansion of the ID cards project that would widen surveillance of everyday life by allowing high-street businesses to share confidential information with police databases.

- Far from intending to dump ID cards once he is in Downing Street, Brown is quietly studying how biometric technology - identifying people by unique markers such as fingerprints and iris patterns - could be expanded over the next 20 years to fight crime.

Police could be alerted instantly when a wanted person used a cash machine or supermarket loyalty card. Cars could be fingerprint-activated, making driving bans much harder to disobey.

The plan would make the ID cards scheme cheaper, since companies would pay for access to the national identity register - a government database of biometric information being compiled for the ID cards programme. Brown's plans belie reports that the Treasury, concerned about the cost of ID cards, would ditch them when he became Prime Minister. 'It's almost the opposite - Gordon's thinking about ID cards is that it's part of the answer but there's a much wider picture,' said a source close to him.
There are serious questions about the existing ID cards project - designed primarily for immigration control. The Commons' science and technology select committee last Friday said it was still unclear how cards would be used or what data would be revealed, while a Home Office consultation with the IT industry - to be published this month - is expected to argue that the cards should be phased in so that technical glitches can be sorted out.

Brown has set up a taskforce, under former HBOS bank chief executive Sir James Crosby, on identity management, and a broader review of public services, led by Sir David Varney, on optimising use of existing identity information. He is considering a fundamental redesign of the ID project to fight a wider range of crime. He believes that, as private companies acquire biometric security systems, their spread in daily life is inevitable.

'There is going to be a key issue over the next 10 to 15 years about identity management right across the public and private sectors,' said the source close to Brown, adding that immigration control would be only part of it. 'It's about people coming to accept that this is not only a necessary but desirable part of modern society over the next 10 years. What [the Tories] are objecting to in the political sphere is going to be absolutely commonplace in the private sphere and saying "it's not the British way" is just not going to work.'

Brown believes that, if myriad private databases develop, there is a risk that information will leak or be stolen. The Crosby review is looking at safeguards.

Critics said the ID cards project was already too troubled to be expanded. 'It's a pretty shoddy way of cutting the costs, and it doesn't really alter the fact that all the signs are Whitehall is simply not in a position to deliver even the early stages of an ID card,' said Nick Clegg, the Liberal Democrat spokesman for home affairs. He said giving the private sector access to centralised databases was a big step towards 'a full surveillance state'.

David Davis, the shadow home secretary, said: 'This is an admission that the government's ID card system as it stands is destined to fail without something else to prop it up. It is regrettable that what the government is proposing will actually worsen the assault on privacy without materially improving security.'
Tony Blair's insistence on Thursday that ID cards would be a 'major plank' of the next Labour manifesto was seen as an effort to tie Brown into the idea, but it appears Brown is already committed.

The Observer recently disclosed that the company analysing police DNA samples was storing them, despite assurances they would not stay in private hands. However, sharing biometric data with high-street companies would be even more controversial.

Science and technology committee report on ID cards (pdf)

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