

An open letter to readers

The Scottish Identity Card Scandal

Most people will recognise the above card: it's the pensioner bus pass, first introduced by the Scottish Government in 2006. Well no, actually it isn't. In fact, it's a fully functioning Scottish identity card. And its covert and dishonest introduction has been a gross national scandal. I think that it's time at last for the Scottish people to know the truth.

It's hardly believable that a Scottish Government could actually do such a thing. To deliberately deceive its population into accepting identity cards under the pretence that they are something else. The fact that it chose to target first the most vulnerable members of the population, namely pensioners and the disabled, only adds to the disgrace. So this is something for which Scotland should be ashamed.

I know all about this because I'm retired, and so was an early 'bus pass' applicant back in 2006. But, in addition, because of my extensive professional and academic IT research background I was immediately able to see that there was more to this card than meets the eye.

Nevertheless, the card was heavily promoted as 'the new bus pass', using publicity which was disgracefully misleading. As a consequence, most people remain completely unaware of the power of these cards and what they truly are.

But be in no doubt: the 'bus pass' is a fully functioning Scottish identity card. Later, in 2008, the project was further advanced, with the introduction to teenagers of the 'Young Scot Card', a very similar form of national identity card.

For the past seven years I've been strenuously fighting to bring this scandal to public attention. But remarkably, the Scottish Government remains in total denial about it. Nothing has changed, and nothing has been done. So the scandal continues, and grows.

SOMETHING FISHY

Even just a cursory glance at the above card reveals something distinctly odd about it: there is no clue as to what it's for.

Most similar cards carry clear and informative branding, such as 'Visa Credit Card' or 'Staff Card'. Given that this supposed 'bus pass' is for pensioners you'd have thought that the designers would have taken extra care to incorporate, say, a picture of a bus or simply the words 'bus pass'.

So why the curious absence of such clear branding? Is it just a case of substandard design? Certainly not.

The plain truth is that this card is not simply a bus pass, and so it should never be named and referred to as such. So how should it be labelled?

The answer becomes clear if you visit some of our council libraries. Here you may see a pensioner using her 'bus pass' to withdraw books - as a library card. So how should one label and brand this card?

THE NATIONAL ENTITLEMENT CARD

It really is quite simple. The correct and most universally accepted name for such a government-issued, multi-function card carrying the name and portrait photo of the bearer is 'identity card'. And this is the branding that should appear on the so-called 'bus pass'.

But back in 2006, the New Labour-Liberal Democrat Scottish Government, having no mandate to introduce identity cards into Scotland (and with almost all Scottish Parties actively opposing Westminster's ID scheme), decided it would nevertheless do this, but do it deceptively.

So this is what happened. Identity cards purporting to be 'bus passes' were issued to pensioners and the disabled. But when the unsuspecting applicant received her new 'bus pass', it arrived with a slip of paper entitled 'National Entitlement Card'. So she got more than she bargained for. And the government did not see fit to clarify matters.

'National Entitlement Card' is, in fact, an old alternative term for a government-issued identity card: even in the UK.

For back in 2002, New Labour Home Secretary David Blunkett was preparing his bill to introduce a national UK-wide ID card. Aware that many people disliked such cards, he decided to introduce the alternative name 'National Entitlement Card'. This was in the hope that it would make them more acceptable. The public saw through this ruse, however, and he went back to calling them identity cards.

Four years on, in 2006, it was therefore a high risk strategy for the Scottish Government to reuse the name, thereby implying that the 'bus pass' was an identity card. But the label was carefully left off the card itself, so that people would not be reminded. And so it remains to this day without proper labeling.

SYSTEMATIC DECEPTION

When, in 2006, the Scottish Government introduced its new 'bus pass' identity cards, it therefore went to considerable lengths to emphasise only the bus pass function.

All the publicity focused on concessionary travel. In Edinburgh, at considerable expense, a lavish photo-opportunity was set up on the Castle Esplanade. This involved a special bus, bus stop, a huge mock 'bus pass' and media personalities carrying suit-cases labelled 'Glasgow', 'Inverness', etc.

This was patently not the promotion of a new national identity card! And indeed the *Edinburgh Evening News* then and ever since has consistently referred to the card as 'the free bus pass'.

I still have a copy of the original application form for the card. This is clearly headed 'Application for Scotland-Wide Free Bus Scheme for Older and Disabled People'. So there's nothing remotely ambiguous here. This is an application for a national bus pass and **not** a multi-purpose identity card.

First Minister Jack McConnell was equally ‘on message’ the following year in the run-up to the Scottish Parliament election. On *The Politics Show* (BBC1, 15 April 2007) he proudly declared: “We [New Labour] introduced the free national bus pass.”

There can be little doubt that the Scottish Government’s deception was deliberate, comprehensive and meticulously carried out.

A SCOTTISH NATIONAL IDENTITY REGISTER

The issuing of identity cards invariably proceeds in parallel with some form of national registration on a centralised database. In other words, when an applicant is supplied with her ID card, her details are stored in a Scottish National Identity Register (NIR). This is a process which takes place invisibly and well behind the scenes for all ‘bus pass’ applications. Each card applicant is allocated a Unique Citizen Reference Number (UCRN), a 19-digit reference birth number supplied by the General Register Office for Scotland in Edinburgh.

What is this if it is not a National Identity Register?

Applicants are told nothing about the register. The Westminster UK version was hugely controversial in 2006, and the Scottish Parliament subsequently voted to oppose it. So instead, in true Orwellian fashion, the Scotland-only NIR got a new harmless-sounding title: ‘the Citizens’ Account’.

This is how it was referred to on my application form:

“This [personal reference number] will allow us to create your own personal record (a “citizen’s account”), and you can then be provided with joined-up public services.”

So yet more shocking deception heaped upon shocking deception. If the Scottish Government had been 100% honest it would not have shied away from referring in its publicity to both the NIR register and the UCRN number. It would have also gone on to explain that:

“Your UCRN number will potentially in the future allow us to cross-reference everything that is known about you in all state databases: civil registration, passport, driving licence, health, criminal record, social service, income tax, etc. And this will allow us to provide you with joined-up public services. You should also be aware that your card carries an RFID electronic chip. This will allow us to monitor all your bus journeys should we decide to do so in future.”

This, then, represents the true and horrific, technical capabilities of every Scottish ‘bus pass’. So, of course, pensioners, the disabled, as well as teenagers and the public at large have been carefully kept in the dark about it.

THERE CAN BE NO DOUBT THAT THIS IS AN IDENTITY CARD

The accompanying table provides a straightforward comparison of the properties of three cards: the pre-2006 Edinburgh bus pass, the new National Entitlement Card (‘bus pass’) and the UK Identity Card, introduced in 2006 and abolished in 2010.

This clearly reveals that the earlier, true bus pass and the new 'bus pass' have nothing in common, other than the name itself. In addition, you will see that the National Entitlement Card 'bus pass' and the UK Identity Card have identical properties. Essentially, therefore, they are both ID cards: they clearly came from the same design stable at about the same time, and with the same ID card objective.

They and their supporting infrastructure also exhibit the worst sort of design for protecting privacy. It may surprise you to know that this 'bus pass-ID card' would not be legal in Germany - a country which actually uses ID cards! A national identity register and a unique 'person number for life', such as the UCRN, are not permitted in Germany for sound personal privacy protection reasons. They are deemed to give the government far too much power.

BUT AT LEAST THE CARD IS NOT COMPULSORY

It's sometimes presumed that because people aren't forced to take the 'bus pass' it hardly matters whether it's an ID card or not. "For if you don't like it you can easily dispose of it." This argument must be questioned.

Firstly, anyone who refuses to take the 'bus pass' is disadvantaged. I sent mine back in 2006, and as a result lost my concessionary travel entitlement. This has since cost me several thousand pounds in bus fares - but at least I had the choice since I could afford it. However, for those who can't afford not to take the 'bus pass', it is effectively compulsory.

Secondly, so-called 'mission creep' has already begun for this project. So when enough people - old and young - are registered, it becomes all too easy to expand the scheme. What additional entitlements may eventually become dependent on registering for the card beyond borrowing books? Using the NHS? Voting?

Little by little, living without possessing 'the card' can become progressively more difficult. And once the majority have been coerced into accepting it, the authorities can then declare it compulsory. Anyway, with the diversity of uses, it will effectively become compulsory and essential to carry at all times. Those who don't will be treated with suspicion.

SO WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

This is one of the most shocking governmental scandals that I can ever recall. It has involved a deliberate, systematic deception of the Scottish people by their government over several years. Stealthily creating a National ID scheme and supporting database represents a most sinister and despicable conspiracy against the people. And yet it continues today.

For the past seven years, I, and others, have arduously attempted to have this matter put right. This has involved many letters to the press, a Holyrood briefing for MSPs, as well as discussion and correspondence with several individual MSPs, including Finance Minister John Swinney. But all to no avail.

Most recently I have corresponded for over a year with the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO).

If anyone was going to call the powerful to account I was reasonably confident that I could count on the SPSO to take notice, and do the right thing. But no, I met the same brick wall. It really comes to something when a concerned pensioner has to pay to publish an open letter in a newspaper in order to have a serious matter like this properly aired and discussed.

My abiding hope is that here in Scotland, we will have sufficient honest and decent politicians and civil servants who will be brave enough to recognise that there is an alternative and proper outcome to this scandal. The whole secretive Scottish ID card infrastructure needs to be completely demolished.

Those individuals and agencies responsible for developing it have demonstrated a disgraceful, persistent expertise in deception and dishonesty.

They must therefore be brought to account, and their ID scheme swept aside. A completely new broom is clearly required. We now need to find people with the necessary technical competence, integrity and the decency to see that things are at last put right.

ACT NOW!

Please do take whatever action you can. This Trojan Horse ID card has absolutely no place in Scotland, so complain to your MSP and council about it.

If you're a pensioner with a 'bus pass', either send it back or else restrict your use of it to travel only. When the card was issued to you, you were deliberately misled into believing that it was just a plain old 'bus pass'. So, take them at their word, and insist that you're only prepared to use it for travel. Refuse to use it as a library card: instead insist on the library issuing you with a simple, single-function library card. It's your right. And don't accept any card linked to the 'citizens' account' national register system. It's your right to refuse such a card.

Demand honest government and transparent, privacy-friendly entitlement systems.

We deserve nothing less - take action now.

John Welford

Disclaimer:

This is an open letter written by Dr John Welford, a retired IT specialist at the University of Edinburgh, whose PhD doctoral research concerned personal identity issues and automated demographic record matching and linkage systems. Dr Welford takes sole responsibility for the letter's content. Reader responses should be sent to John Welford at idcardscandal@jwelford.demon.co.uk. www.jwelford.demon.co.uk/snec.html

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