

Thu 14 Apr 2005

Fingerprinting a passport to a safer country

FOCUS

BRUCE ANDERSON

THE right to be suspicious of the state is one of the many privileges of being British. Most of us believe that all governments waste money and are guilty of serial incompetence. They want more powers and more expenditure, when they would be better off using their current budgets and their current powers to maximum effect.

All this has coloured a debate on identity cards. Except in wartime, the British have never been obliged to carry them, unlike many of the unfortunate foreigners on the mainland of Europe. It is a matter of patriotism and pride - not to mention convenience - that the words "vos papiers, monsieur", do not translate into English without further explanation.

There are now anxieties that all this is being overridden, and that the "papiers" are now being made compulsory through a side entrance. The government is proposing that future applicants for British passports will have to be fingerprinted and that the data will be stored. Some civil libertarians are objecting to this. In my view, they are entirely mistaken, for two reasons.

In the first place, they are ignoring the new realities of the British passport. Until recently, a passport was a document which made it easier for British subjects to visit foreign countries. Over the past few years, however, stolen and forged passports have enabled tens of thousands of illegal immigrants to enter Britain. A fingerprint passport would eliminate the trade in stolen passports. These days, passport controls are not just a matter of letting the right people in. It is even more important to keep the wrong people out.

Second, fingerprint technology already exists in the US, where it works with minimum inconvenience to foreign travellers. Since 11 September, the US immigration authorities have not set out to make life easier for foreign visitors. They've been happy to use "security" as a catch-all excuse for multiple inefficiency on the part of airport staff. Last September, I arrived in Washington, knowing that I would be fingerprinted as well as photographed for eye-iris identification. I wondered how many hours this would add to the hideous process of queuing.

My anxieties were groundless. The whole business took less than half a minute. On subsequent visits, the fingerprinting and photographing have been even more rapid. As a result, the immigration authorities could be sure that I was the person whom my passport described. This certainty about visitors' identity undoubtedly brings benefits such as swifter immigration procedures.

The same would be true in the UK, and this does not only apply to passports. At present, the big banks are losing several billions every year because of the fraudulent use of their plastic. If all credit and debit cards had to have a fingerprint and a photograph, most of that fraud would be eliminated, instantly.

This would bring immediate benefits to the banks' customers. When clearing banks are defrauded, they do not lose money. They merely pass on the loss to their customers, in the form of higher charges. If they were to spend a fraction of the sums which the fraudsters extract, in order to ensure that every bank card was reinforced with a photograph and fingerprint, everyone would benefit.

In a world in which global terrorism and global fraud are endemic, we must expect the authorities to take precautions. The ease of travel which was enjoyed by the small percentage of our forebears who were able to afford it will never be replicated in our lifetime. We are condemned to live in a world of airport queues and identity checks. So it is in our interests, as well as that of the authorities, that the maximum use should be made

of technology in order to make life easier for the officials, and the airport transit more rapid for the passengers.

This is not the same as the imposition of identity cards. There, the principal objection remains valid. Unless a failure to produce an identity card were a criminal offence leading to immediate arrest, there would be no point. The suspicious character would be stopped by the police. He would be asked for his name; he would give a false one. He would be asked for his ID card; he would not have it with him. He would then be solemnly instructed to produce it at the nearest police station within three days. He would solemnly agree. He and the police would part company; in his case, to disappear back into the criminal or terrorist underworld.

To make it compulsory for ordinary citizens to carry ID cards would merely aggravate their relations with the police. It would do nothing to help the police capture serious criminals or foreign terrorists.

None of that applies to passports. Anyone entering Britain has to pass through border control. At that point, their identity can be checked. At that stage, those who are not entitled to enter this country can be caught and excluded. But without fingerprint passports, all that is much harder.

Those of us who are law abiding citizens have nothing to fear from fingerprint passports. Those of us who wish to ensure that only those who ought to enter the United Kingdom are enabled to do so have everything to gain.

- *Bruce Anderson is a leading social commentator, writer and broadcaster.*



THE SCOTSMAN

Mon 18 Apr 2005

Complacent picture

What a complacent picture Bruce Anderson paints of fingerprint passports (Opinion, 14 April): introduce them and all will be well, our borders will be secure and bank fraud a thing of the past. And he adds: "In a world in which global terrorism and global fraud are endemic, we must expect the authorities to take precautions." Indeed we must, but those precautions must be tried and tested, and not introduced to promote political ideology or the profits of companies promoting biometric identification technology.

There are also two major problems with his forecast. Fingerprint identification technology is not foolproof, and fingerprint experts are not infallible.

As if this wasn't bad enough, we have in Scotland, as the Shirley McKie saga shows, a police service, Crown Office and Executive who refuse to acknowledge these facts. In effect, this means that, if the technology goes wrong, and the experts are in error, there is no safety net for the innocent victim.

I find his closing statement chilling: "Those of us who are law-abiding citizens have nothing to fear from fingerprint passports." Try telling that to Shirley, who, after eight years, sits with her health and career ruined and faced by a system that is in total denial.

IAIN AJ McKIE

Donnini Court

South Beach Road, Ayr