

The quiet death of freedom

People ask: Can this be happening in Britain? Surely not. A centuries-old democratic constitution cannot be swept away. Basic human rights cannot be made abstract. Those who once comforted themselves that a Labour government would never commit such an epic crime in Iraq might now abandon a last delusion, that their freedom is inviolable. If they knew.

The dying of freedom in Britain is not news. The pirouettes of ambition of the prime minister and his political twin, the treasurer, are news, though of minimal public interest. Looking back to the 1930s when social democracies were distracted and powerful cliques imposed their totalitarian ways by stealth and silence, the warning is clear. The Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill has already passed its second parliamentary reading without interest to most Labour MPs and court journalists; yet it is utterly totalitarian in scope.

Presented by the government as a simple measure for streamlining deregulation, or "getting rid of red tape," the only red tape it will actually remove is that of parliamentary scrutiny of government legislation, including this remarkable bill. It will mean that the government can secretly change the Parliament Act and the constitution and laws can be struck down by decree from Downing Street. Blair has demonstrated his taste for absolute power in his abuse of the royal prerogative, which he has used to bypass parliament in going to war and in dismissing landmark High Court judgments, such as that which declared illegal the expulsion of the entire population of the Chagos islands, now the site of an American military base. The new bill marks the end of true parliamentary democracy; in its effect, it is as significant as the US Congress last year abandoning the bill of rights.

Those who fail to hear these steps on the road to dictatorship should look at the government's plans for ID cards, described in its manifesto as "voluntary." They will be compulsory and worse. An ID card will be different from a driving license

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or passport. It will be connected to a database called the NIR (National Identity Register), where your personal details will be stored. These will include your fingerprints, a scan of your iris, your residence status and unlimited other details about your life. If you fail to keep an appointment to be photographed and fingerprinted, you can be fined up to £2,500.

Every place that sells alcohol or cigarettes, every post office, every pharmacy and every bank will have an NIR terminal where you can be asked to "prove who you are." Each time you swipe it, a record is made at the NIR. This means that the government will know every time you withdraw more than £99 from your bank account. Restaurants and off-licenses (liquor stores) will demand that the card is swiped so that they are indemnified from prosecution. Private business will have full access to the NIR. If you apply for a job, your card will have to be swiped. If you want a London Underground Oyster card, or a supermarket loyalty card, or a telephone line or a mobile phone or an Internet account, your card will have to be swiped.

In other words, there will be a record of your movements, your phone records and shopping habits, even the kind of medication you take.

These databases, which can be stored in a device the size of a hand, will be sold to third parties without you knowing. The ID card will not be your property and the Home Secretary will have the right to revoke or suspend it at any time without explanation. This would prevent you drawing money from a bank. ID cards will not stop or deter terrorists, as Home Secretary Charles Clarke has now admitted; the Madrid bombers all carried ID. On 26 March, the government silenced the last parliamentary opposition to the cards when it ruled that the House of Lords could no longer block legislation contained in a party's manifesto. The Blair clique does not debate. Like the zealot in Downing Street, its "sincere belief" in its own veracity is quite enough. When the London School of Economics published a long study that effectively demolished the government's case for the cards, Charles Clarke abused it for feeding a "media scare campaign." This is the same minister who attended every cabinet meeting at which Blair's lies over his decision to invade Iraq were clear.

This government was reelected with the support of barely a fifth of those eligible to vote: the second lowest since the franchise. Whatever respectability the famous suits in television studios try to give him, Blair is demonstrably discredited as a liar and war criminal. Like the constitution-hijacking bill now reaching its final stages, and the criminalizing of peaceful protest, ID cards are designed to control the lives of ordinary citizens (as well as enrich the new

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Labour-favoured companies that will build the computer systems). A small, determined, and profoundly undemocratic group is killing freedom in Britain, just as it has killed literally in Iraq. That is the news. "The kaleidoscope has been shaken," said Blair at the 2001 Labour Party conference. "The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us reorder this world around us."