Support for ID Cards Slumps

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A remarkable slump has taken place in support for identity cards. In September 2003 YouGov, in common with other polling companies, found a large majority in favour. In that survey, 78% supported ID cards while only 15% opposed them. YouGov's latest survey, for the Daily Telegraph, conducted at the end of June 2005, finds that support has slumped to just 45%, while 42% now oppose the scheme.

When likely costs are taken into account, the figures look even worse from the Government's point of view. Back in September 2003, when minister were projecting the costs of introduction to be ? 2-5 billion, 50% thought this was worth spending on ID cards, compared with 37% who were opposed.

Ministers now project the cost to be around ? 6 billion. Only 25% think this amount is worth spending, while 66% disagree. An independent study, conducted by the London School of Economics, puts the possible cost even higher: ? 10- ? 19 billion. Only 10% think ID cards should go ahead if this is the cost, while 81% would prefer the scheme to be scrapped.

These figures help to explain why some people say that ID cards could be Labour's "plastic poll tax". When Margaret Thatcher's government was taking the poll tax legislation through Parliament in the late Eighties, ministers predicted that the tax would cots, on average ? 170 per person per year. In the event, the tax was double that figure, and led to enormous public hostility.

Today, at the very minimum, Charles Clarke, the Home Secretary, needs to persuade voters that the cost of introducing ID cards can be kept down - and would achieve useful results. Capping the charge to individuals would help; but if this cap merely transfers escalating costs to the taxpayer, and crowds out other government spending, then the public is unlikely to be satisfied.

Clarke has another, linked, challenge: to show that ID cards can be introduced smoothly, both in the sense of getting the technology working, and in the sense of providing a near-foolproof way of checking people's identities. In September 2003, most people were already sceptical: just 20% thought ID cards could be introduced "smoothly and efficiently". That figure has now halved to a mere 10%, while as many as 84% think there will be "a lot of disruption and inconvenience".

These are truly awful figures for the Government. The one crumb of comfort is that there is nothing in this latest poll to suggest that the underlying principle of ID cards is unpopular. Most people view the issue in practical terms. If ID technology turns out to be both expensive and unreliable, then the public view is that the cards are not worth having.

If the poll tax provides one warning from the past, Iraq provides an equally telling, and more recent warning. When American troops first entered Baghdad, two-thirds of the public thought the war was worth fighting. But as Iraq descended into internal conflict, and as it became clear that Saddam Hussein had no usable weapons of mass destruction, public support evaporated. A botched an expensive introduction of ID cards could prove equally damaging for ministers - and, like Iraq, could harm the Government's wider reputation for taking the right decisions on the right evidence.

The full report can be viewed at: http://www.yougov.com/