



Your data private? Access all areas is on the cards



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The Minister for Human Services, Joe Hockey, wants to convince Australians that the most complex and expensive IT project in Australian history – his proposed Access Card – is all about our convenience. It will, Hockey boasts, replace 17 other cards: for example the Medicare card, veterans' gold card and pensioner concession card.

Sounds great, but most people don't have 17 cards. They have just one: their Medicare card. For most of us this means replacing our Medicare card with a supercharged version chock-full of personal information.

A Medicare card has just a name and Medicare number. The new card has a name, personal identification number, signature and biometric photograph. It also has a digital chip that can carry medical information, address, emergency contacts, concession status, even an "electronic purse".

Mal Brough, the Community Services Minister, floated the notion of children bundying on at child care; Hockey says the card can be used as a shopping list, or be shown to prove concession status for cheaper cinema tickets. Businesses using your personal number could develop clear ideas of your lifestyle and spending – information that may have enormous commercial value.

All Australians over 18 will be photographed, with photos kept in an enormous database. This database is to prevent more than one card being issued to any Australian.

Reducing welfare fraud is a good thing. People shouldn't make unjustified claims. But photographing every adult and spending more than \$1 billion (and possibly up to \$5 billion) to issue us all ID cards is an expensive and complex way to

reduce fraud.

The Government won't say exactly how much welfare fraud there is. We do know people claiming benefits in false identities are only a small proportion of wrong payments. For years, auditors-general reports have shown that Centrelink makes mistakes the card won't fix. It also won't stop people claiming in their own names for payments they aren't entitled to.

The aim of reducing fraud doesn't explain why the Government thinks most Australians who aren't claiming Centrelink benefits need new ID cards.

Privacy is not an absolute right; you can't claim privacy protection when you've committed a crime. But the Government does have to give a decent reason for reducing the privacy of law-abiding citizens.

When identity fraud is an increasing problem, why give criminals everything they need to know about us in one convenient bite-sized piece? Joe Hockey says not to worry: criminals wouldn't get any more information than if they stole your wallet. Most people worry when someone steals their wallet.

The principal criminologist with the Australian Institute of Criminology and the Deputy Commissioner of Taxation have both said this card may make identity fraud easier.

The Access Card might turn out to be "access all areas". Professional criminals may be able to break into the card to get electronic information, or bribe a public servant for access to the database. The other danger is simply that the face of the card will be used to claim an identity simply by flashing the card. ("That was before I put on weight / had my hair cut / grew a beard.")

Biometric photography – a way of electronically reading photographs by translating the measurements of the

human face into unique mathematical formulae – is notoriously unreliable. In tests at airports, biometric readers confused similar-looking people. The

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Government itself claims biometric readings are about 90 per cent accurate.

Who will have access to the photographic database? It may sound far-fetched, but without this and other information spelled out before the Government starts buying technology, it's no wonder people are concerned about privacy. Australian governments are already talking about standardising closed-circuit TV technology nationally.

Reports on the card have been kept secret or heavily censored before release. Alan Fels, commissioned to review the privacy issues surrounding the card, made some important recommendations that were ignored. The two most senior public servants in charge of the card have resigned in alarm.

In April, the Government announced its plans for a national ID card were scrapped, replaced by the Access Card. It's up to the Government to explain how this is not a national ID card – a high-tech version of the Australia Card, a proposal defeated by public outcry 20 years ago.

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