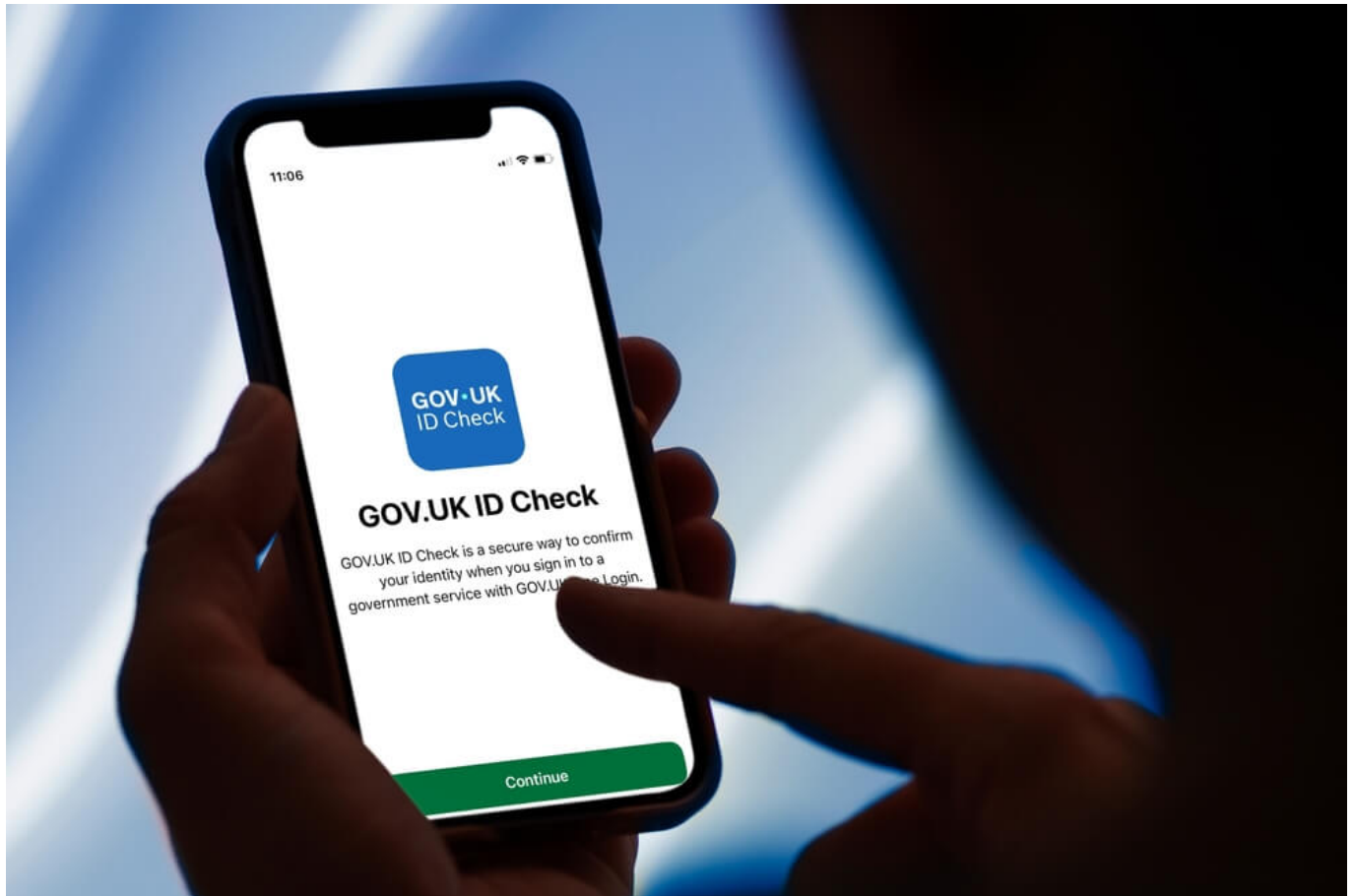




By: **Harvey Morris**

UK's civil rights groups poised for a fight over compulsory ID



The UK government recently announced the introduction of compulsory electronic IDs for those born in 2027 and beyond.

The scheme prompted not a whimper of public dissent because it **applies** only to cattle, as part of measures to control the spread of bovine disease.

The government may face a rougher ride if, as anticipated, it goes ahead with a plan to launch digital IDs to keep track of the nation's diverse and pesky herds of humans.

Merely floating the idea has prompted civil rights groups to warn of a future dystopian nightmare in which the public would be forced through digital checkpoints to go about their everyday lives.

An announcement could come as early as next week when Prime Minister Keir Starmer is due to address his Labour Party's annual conference, having confirmed his government is looking at digital IDs as a way to **tackle** illegal immigration.

The perceived benefit of the digital ID system is that it would help to sort the sheep from the goats when it comes to determining who has a right to work, rent a property or access a public service.

In Starmer's words, the policy could "play an important part" in reducing the attraction of the UK as a destination for illegal migrants.

Although the prime minister has yet to clarify whether the ID would be mandatory for all UK citizens and legal residents, one insider **told** the Financial Times that the programme's efficacy "depends on everyone having them".

A familiar feature of daily life—or an unwelcome demand?

Labour Together, a think tank that backed Starmer's election to the Labour leadership, has no qualms about compulsion. Trumpeting the virtues of a so-called BritCard, it **proposed**

a mandatory national digital identity, downloaded to a user's smartphone.

This "new piece of civic infrastructure" would become a familiar feature of daily life for everyone in the country, supporting better enforcement of migration rules and protecting vulnerable British citizens from being wrongly denied their rights.

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Although the think tank says its polling suggests 80 per cent of the public supports digital ID for a range of uses, many Britons retain a visceral resistance to arbitrary demands from officialdom to "show me your papers".

The UK is one of a minority of countries, principally in the Anglosphere, that do not have compulsory national ID cards.

Identity cards were compulsory during World War II and grudgingly accepted by a population that would nevertheless complain about having to prove their identity to the occasional zealot from the Home Guard. They endured until 1952, when they were abandoned amid much celebration and card-burning.

The next logical step?

Resistance reasserted itself two decades ago when Tony Blair's New Labour government legislated to introduce compulsory ID cards, a move that proved widely unpopular among the public and within parliament.

The Conservative-led coalition government that succeeded him scrapped the scheme, and the national database that underpinned it was destroyed.

But will the latest initiative, yet to be formally

unveiled, confront the same levels of opposition in what some proponents of a national ID argue is a changed, digital-dominated world?

“The great majority of people now provide a mass of information about their identity to Google, Apple, Microsoft and many other service providers” – William Hague

Their argument is that so much personal information is now held online that a centralised nationwide digital system is just the logical next step.

Former Conservative leader William Hague argued this week that the public had moved on in the 15 years since Blair’s ID scheme was scrapped. He **wrote** in The Times that: “The great majority of people now provide a mass of information about their identity to Google, Apple, Microsoft and many other service providers.”

He pointed out they still nevertheless had to produce a utility bill, council tax statement or passport to prove who they were to public authorities. In the meantime, illegal immigration had become one of the top issues of public concern.

Controversial 2023 rules

Among politicians, even the Liberal Democrats appear to be wavering in their traditional opposition to a national ID scheme. As they assembled for their annual conference at the weekend, party leader Ed Davey also **acknowledged** that times have changed and warned members against any knee-jerk reaction in opposing a future ID plan.

Davey is among a number of UK politicians who say they have been impressed by the experience of Estonia, where digital identity allows citizens to access government and private services such as medical records,

voting and banking.

The introduction of digital IDs did not figure in Labour’s 2024 manifesto

While growing numbers of politicians appear to be talking up the public benefits of adopting a national digital ID, it is worth pondering the immediate origins of the current debate.

The introduction of digital IDs did not figure in Labour’s 2024 manifesto, and on coming to power, ministers assured the public they were not part of the new government’s plans.

On a related issue, Angela Rayner, the former deputy prime minister, even **suggested** that Labour might scrap new and controversial 2023 rules that oblige voters to show a photo identification document before entering the polling booth.

A hot-button issue for every political party

What has changed is that immigration has been elevated into the hot-button issue for every political party and for a government struggling to find a formula to stem the cross-Channel traffic of illegal migrant boats.

The introduction of a national ID scheme might be just one more step to show that it is serious about confronting an issue that has come to dominate the national debate.



The Liberals' Ed Davey warned against adopting a model that could be abused by a future authoritarian government

Without the moral panic over irregular migration, would the country even be debating an ID scheme?

The Blair initiative was spurred in part by the looming threat of terrorism after the 9/11 al-Qaeda attacks on the US. This time it is not terrorists but migrants who are being cited to justify the British surrendering what many consider a fundamental right.

In a paper on past experiences of identity card initiatives, the science historian Jon Agar **concluded**, "One lesson to be drawn from historical experience is that universal registers of personal information are held to be solutions to moral panics, but in operation they are very rarely as effective as their proponents hope."

Even some of the new enthusiasts for a national ID have sounded a cautious note. The Liberals' Davey warned against adopting a model that could be abused by a future authoritarian government.

With many governments seemingly headed in that direction, the British public should perhaps retain its traditional scepticism and foresee the day when they might be plucked out of the herd by some street enforcer with a demand to "show me your ID."