

LIBERTY

PROTECTING CIVIL LIBERTIES
PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS

YET ANOTHER STEP ALONG A DANGEROUS ROAD
Shami Chakrabarti, Director of Liberty

Published in The Independent, Monday 15th January 2007

Once upon a time I thought that this Government was complacent about our personal privacy. Then I thought they were careless with it. Now, from those in power, I see nothing but contempt for that little bit of personal space and security that is so essential to our dignity, that makes us all human. When the private and family matters of Cabinet Ministers are up for grabs, particularly by the grabbing hand of the tabloid press, Government is quick and right to protest. However, the same rules don't seem to apply to the rest of us.

My problem as Director of Liberty is that at the height of the so-called War on Terror, when absolute rules like the prohibition on torture are compromised by our political rulers, how much harder to defend more subtle and qualified rights like the presumption of privacy from the chilling slogan politics of "nothing to hide, nothing to fear".

Those who speak up for the importance of personal privacy are routinely painted as paranoid cranks and sure enough, some of them don't do the cause any favours. In reality most sensible people know that privacy cannot be absolute and support necessary and proportionate intrusions for tightly defined purposes and under protection of law. However, a society that doesn't value and protect the privacy of the individual is one without intimacy, honesty or trust. By moving away from human rights' principles adopted in the aftermath of the great dictators of the last century, Government has taken us too far down that dangerous road.

CCTV can be a useful enough tool when employed in a targeted and proportionate manner to deter crime. But why should Britain be the CCTV capital of the world?

Then, there is the new political Viagra of the massive database, which joins the overbroad criminal offence and the unfair trial as the latest answer to all of society's ills.

Children are abused, neglected and under-protected so the answer is a mammoth database containing intimate information on every single child in the country. DNA technology can be a vital tool in linking serious criminals to the scenes of their crimes so instead of a safe, secure and well-maintained database of those convicted of serious sexual and violent crimes, we have a growing and racially biased database of people who have been unfortunate to come into contact with the police, including those never charged or even cautioned with a crime.

Perhaps when policy is built upon opinion-polling rather than principle, these are the inevitable authoritarian results? But I wonder. Support for the intrusive, discriminatory and expensive folly of identity cards is in steady decline. The latest bright idea of an information free-for-all within Government with the massive corresponding risks of error and fraud will only exacerbate widening popular concerns as to the competence of public administration and who really serves whom. Any new Prime Minister seeking to put some principle, prudence and trust back into politics might be tempted to think again.

Shami Chakrabarti
Director of Liberty
January 2007