

Your papers, please

It's impossible to get by these days without being asked to show government identification



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This plague has not been with us since Eve gave the forbidden fruit to Adam. Only recently did Canadians have to start carrying government-issued photo ID. In Quebec, it is only since 1996 that all medicare cards in circulation required photographs; and until late 1999, not all drivers' licences bore their holders' pictures. Today, government ID papers, even if they are not called ID cards, are virtually as prevalent in the

U.S. and Canada as in Europe.

Air Canada officially asks travellers on its domestic flights to show "government-issued picture ID," as an interior passport, even if the Transport Canada order to that effect has been abolished. Policies like these would crumble very rapidly if only a small number of customers refused to comply; on three different flights in November 2003, I refused to show any photo ID and was allowed to board the planes as a free man. At WestJet, any form of ID, like a credit card, will do—a requirement that would still have looked very un-Canadian a few years ago.

The Concordia University library in Montreal requires government photo ID from extramural users who borrow books, even if they have a library card. The university's official policy in

this regard is as muddled as their understanding of our traditional liberties. Unlike others, though, they cannot use 9/11 as an excuse.

Starwood Hotels, a New York State-based chain that owns hundreds of hotels in the world, including Westins and Sheratons, now mandates government photo ID at check-in. Yes! Like in France a couple of decades ago. ID papers came from Europe to the U.S., and from the U.S. to Canada. "What if I refuse?" I asked the general manager of the Westin Prince, a Starwood franchise in Toronto that reluctantly implemented the policy in 2004. "I would not lose the business," he replied. But very few customers object.

The problem with government ID papers is that they reduce the cost for the state of tracking individuals and, therefore, of enforcing laws that have little to do with

real crimes. Remember: in Europe and America, murder and theft were prosecuted long before anybody had heard of ID papers. What ID papers do is help the state monitor financial transactions, track taxpayers, efficiently deliver a host of licences and permits, et cetera. Without a cheap, reliable way to know who the subject is, and where he camps, how would the state impose, say, the recent pleasure-craft operator cards or gun licences? How could it ever contemplate a parenting licence, an idea that has been quietly circulating in academic circles since 1980? Without government ID papers, it is difficult to control individuals from the cradle to the grave.

Not to mention hard tyranny, as opposed to our soft brand. ID cards have frequently been used to oppress minorities. "When the Hutu militias, the gangs of killers, began their genocidal massacres of Tutsis in April," wrote *The Independent* on July 7, 1994, "they needed only to ask for identity cards to decide who

lived and who were chopped or speared to death." Is it a coincidence that the national ID card in France (which is not compulsory anymore: many forms of government photo ID can be used, just like in Canada) was created by Maréchal Pétain's collaborationist government in October 1940?

A good argument could be made that, for a time, North Americans better resisted administrative

tyranny than Europeans precisely because of the absence of official ID papers here. Our descent into tyranny accelerated markedly when photographs were added to drivers' licences and medicare cards. Of course, private businesses free-ride on the government ID papers, making them more indispensable.

Creeping ID papers, creepy state. To push back Leviathan, we have to reduce the powers of the state. One simple but effective means to do this and start restoring our traditional liberties would be to abolish government ID papers, and especially photo ID. Will the next federal government work towards this goal or will it, like recent governments, move closer to the next step: a national ID card? **WS**

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