



Debate Needed Over ID Cards

By Dr. Lorne Foster

At one point in “Scary Movie II,” the satirical spoof on horror films and slasher flicks, the main characters are obliged to split up into two groups in order to combat a rather malicious poltergeist. They end up in two groups comprised of three Whites and three Blacks. One of the Black characters then delivers the punch-line: *“I’ve seen this part in the movies ... this is the part where all the Black people die.”*

This motion picture scenario might be playing itself out at this very moment in Canada as the specter of border security raises its malicious head, threatening to divide society along racial lines.

Recently, for instance, Immigration Minister Denis Coderre called on a Commons committee to launch a Canada-wide debate on the need for national identification cards with embedded biometric identifiers such as fingerprints or eye scans.

Since the September 11 terrorist attacks, the U.S. has instituted a border crackdown, adopting an entry-exit control scheme under which some foreigners, mostly from the Arab world, are registered and fingerprinted at entry points - and that scheme may be extended to all travelers, including Canadians, by 2005. The Canadian government is already seeking an exemption from plans to keep track of all foreigners as they leave the United States.

However, in order to get out ahead of the post-September 11 “fortress mentality” curve, Mr. Coderre recommended a national ID may be a way to avoid the brunt of tighter U.S. entry-and-exit measures.

Of course, this proposed immigration debate is hardly ingenious or innovative. Many countries already have national identity cards, as well as other stringent assortments of entry-and-exit restrictions. Moreover, since many of the ancestors of people of colour and other religious minorities in Canada came to here to escape such repressive regimes, such a debate is anathema to why many Canadians are Canadians in the first place.

Still, the Immigration Minister argued that a new Canadian identity card with biometric information will stop identity fraud and answer U.S. calls for tighter border security.

“This nation has to take its head out of the sand and address the fundamentals, and identity is a fundamental,” he said. “The time when Canadians and permanent residents could be confident of crossing the border into the U.S. solely on the basis of a valid driver's license may well be over.”

In other words, the parameters of this national debate proposition goes something like this - “In order to allay the imposition and harassment of (foreign) government intrusion, Canadians had better capitulate to more (homegrown domestic) government intrusion.”

It is in this regard that Privacy Commissioner George Radwanski has said the new card is part of a growing intrusion of government into the private lives of Canadians.

The ID card also met with some skepticism from MPs from all parties, some of whom worried about cost overruns like those in the gun registry.

But Mr. Coderre noted in the press that Canadians typically carry a number of cards such as passports, driver's licenses and health cards. Though he did not say whether he personally favours replacing all of them with a national ID.

Mr. Coderre said that a so-called off-line biometric system - one where a fingerprint or eye is checked only against the coded scan on the card, but not against a central database - would be less invasive than keeping a central registry of the fingerprints of all Canadians.

Technology experts, on the other hand - like Andrew Clement, a University of Toronto information technology professor who has studied national identity cards - warn that such an off-line system is not much use as a security tool since someone could obtain a card under another name, but with his or her own fingerprint or eye scan on the code bar. A central database with the fingerprints or eye scans of all Canadians would be needed to make it work.

Even with a central database, such a card would not be much of a deterrent for terrorists, he said. Anyone would be able to obtain such a card by presenting other fraudulent documents such as a birth certificate. The creation of the secure card depends on the presentation of much less secure documents.

Yet, beyond all the issues of cost-efficiency and technology, it is important to grasp the fact that to suggest Canadians should fingerprint themselves before American border guards do is not really a call for a free and open public debate, it is tantamount to a hedge against the risks to the dominant White majority at the expense of vulnerable minorities. For the parameters of Mr. Coderre's proposed national debate are already entirely circumscribed around the idea of the inevitability of an erosion of some individual rights and the sacrifice of some personal autonomy for a practical advantage - which, of course, in the context of post-September 11 alienation, is only accrued to those whose rights and autonomy are not fundamentally at stake, or integrally threatened by their ethno-racial affiliation.

In the end, and quite apart from all deflective rhetoric and pragmatic strategies of the new world order, the abiding national debate in Canada is still about a principled society and a life worth living?