



The Politics of Ignoring Facts

By Dr. Lorne Foster

Immigration Minister Denis Coderre's support of biometric identification cards for Canadians has been well-documented and highly publicized.

What has not been highly publicized is the fact that in July a parliamentary committee went on a two-week, six countries European trip to investigate hi-tech national ID cards and discovered none of the countries they visited used them. The committee was led to believe that some of the European countries they visited included biometric features such as fingerprints and eye scans. Instead, what they saw was a variety of different, low-tech versions of national ID cards, which are fairly common in Europe.

In a smaller context, this "fact-finding mission" is perhaps one reason that the federal Cabinet is split over whether to adopt a national identification card and many Liberal backbenchers are on the verge of insurrection, even though a new poll finds that the average "Joe" Canadian supports the idea.

In a larger context, it also highlights the fact, that without full disclosure of the facts, Canadian immigration policy reverberates between reason and fear.

Pollara Inc., who recently conducted a survey on behalf of the federal government, found that seven of every 10 Canadians now support the issuing a national identification card to citizens – which would include embedded biometric fingerprints and eye scans – to enhance national security and deter the growing problems of fraudulent travel documents and identity theft.

Support for a mandatory biometrics card was highest among residents of Quebec (78%), while opposition was highest among residents of British Columbia and the territories (34%). Support for the card among residents of Ontario (71%) reflected the national average, while support among residents of the Prairies (67%) and Atlantic Canada (59%) was below the national average.

Women of all ages (71%) were more likely to support mandatory biometrics cards than men (68%). Support for the biometrics ID card was greatest among Canadians 55 and older and among Canadians who graduated from high school, but had no university education, the poll found.

The Pollara poll results were based on telephone interviews with a national sample of 1,678 Canadians who were questioned from June 2 to 8. The results are considered accurate to within 2.4 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Mr. Coderre is reported to be surprised the June poll found public support for a biometrics ID card had remained so strong – a poll with similar results was done in January – because there has been pointed criticism of the idea by MPs from all parties and George Radwanski, the former federal privacy commissioner.

Mr. Radwanski called the card “a hare-brained scheme,” saying it would likely cost taxpayers up to \$5-billion and lead to a police state.

Paul Martin, the Liberal leadership front-runner and likely future prime minister, expressed reservations about a national identification card with fingerprints or iris scans stored on a computer chip.

“You're going to have to demonstrate to me that the means being taken can be justified in terms of the ends that will be realized,” Mr. Martin said, adding his opposition to that of Elinor Caplan, the National Revenue Minister and Mr. Coderre's predecessor, who also dismissed the proposal as “inappropriate.”

However, Mr. Coderre argues in favour of a biometrics ID card because it could help Canadians avoid future problems at U.S. border crossings and airports. And such a card would also respond to growing concerns among U.S. immigration and law-enforcement officials about the forging and trafficking of Canadian passports and travel documents by suspected terrorists.

“We cannot just bury our heads in the sand. Biometrics is not a panacea. It just puts you one step ahead,” he said. “Whether Canadians want a national ID card or not, they need to start discussing and debating the issue so they do not get left behind in a fast-evolving world in which citizens' concerns about terrorism, national security and identity theft are beginning to outweigh privacy protection.”

To this end, his department will host a two-day national forum on October 7 and 8, featuring national and international speakers who support or oppose a national biometrics ID card.

Of course, the impending public dialogue proposed by the Immigration minister can only make a significant contribution to our everyday life when it is centred by clear and comprehensive goals and objectives. In this respect, Canadians may want to go beyond the contingency of the post-September 11 question of whether they should fingerprint themselves before American border guards do, and begin to address the more substantive and deep-seated issue of whether being one step ahead of a growing global “fortress mentality” is a worthy national aspiration.

Indeed, the strength and consolation of Canada's democratic discourse has always been that when the Canadian public is privy to full disclosure of the facts, it has historically rejected the politics of fear.