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Government's digital ID plan won't fix the countless problems we face

I REALLY do wish I could have more faith in the UK Government to be reliable and competent – I promise you, I do. Yes, I'm a politician and, yes, I represent a party that isn't in government, so I understand it's easy to criticise from the outside looking in.

But I'm a citizen of this country, too, and I'm increasingly fed up with successive governments' failures to simply do better.

My frustration doesn't just lie with the current Labour Government, although I do feel let down by a party that I thought would be doing better, having had 14 years to prepare for government.

Perhaps naively, I assumed they would be brimming with ideas, not just about what to do but how to do it. But if the winter fuel payment, family farm tax or welfare system U-turns are anything to go by, they haven't quite cracked questions of policy or implementation.

Which is one of the many reasons why I simply don't trust them on digital IDs.

Let's be clear from the outset: Liberal Democrats (and to be doubly clear, including me), oppose mandatory digital IDs. It goes against our values of individual liberty and freedom to be forced to have, and produce on demand, something to prove who you are and your right to exist in this country.

And let's also be clear: Labour's newly-announced policy of introducing compulsory digital IDs was not in their manifesto. They have no mandate for this.

But apart from the obvious concerns about the infringement of civil liberties, I simply don't believe the Government has the ability to deliver this accurately and in a properly thought-through manner, within the arbitrary deadline of the end of this Parliament, by 2029. After all, they don't exactly have a great track record.

Here is an example. In the early 2000s, the UK Government (again, Labour) launched the National Programme for IT (NPfIT), an ambitious initiative aimed at revolutionising the NHS by creating a centralised electronic health records system. With a projected cost of



A demonstrator protests against the Labour Government's plans to introduce a Digital ID, outside the Labour Party's conference in Liverpool at the weekend
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more than £12 billion, it was one of the largest public sector IT projects in history. However, the programme was plagued by poor planning, lack of stakeholder engagement, and repeated delays. Technical challenges, shifting requirements, and resistance from healthcare professionals further undermined progress.

By 2011, the project was officially dismantled, having failed to deliver on its core objectives. The NPfIT is now widely regarded as a cautionary tale of how large-scale digital transformation efforts can falter without clear governance, realistic goals and effective collaboration.

Speaking from personal experience, I can't say things have got much better since then. I started writing this article just after I spent considerably more time than I wanted trying to log in to the HMRC website to check some tax informa-

tion. The whirling circle of doom spent a long time going round and round on my screen before the website eventually decided to tell me that the service I was trying to access was experiencing problems. No kidding!

I'm not sure I've told you this before, but I have a background in IT, including systems design and analysis. I therefore feel reasonably confident in saying that this is really poor. If a system is down for planned maintenance, it should say so on the home page, along with information about when it is expected to be back up and running.

If it's experiencing unexpected difficulties, it's highly unlikely that I was the first person to experience this, so it should also be noted on their home screen, and at the very least, it shouldn't take so long for the system to recognise that something wasn't working for me to be able to log in.

If you've ever had the misfortune of having to use HMRC's online system, you'll note that a sizeable proportion of it still looks like it was designed and coded a couple of dec-

ades ago. There are far too many clicks to get things done, and information is often not where you expect it to be.

My point is this: if successive governments have failed to get this right, or to direct civil servants to get this right, or to employ civil servants who recognise that this isn't how it should be, then why on earth would we trust them to design, develop and launch successfully a new system that every person seeking work in the country must adopt in just a very short number of years?

There are many other reasons why I oppose the introduction of digital IDs. From a security point of view, having a centralised database tying together very sensitive information about individuals will be a huge target for hackers. Data security experts are already warning about the dangers of this.

Some point to the fact that we already have lots of different digital forms of identification, including NHS numbers, Government Gateway IDs, National Insurance numbers, so what's the problem with one more? Again, my concern is the abil-

ity to tie all of these together, potentially creating a single way to access all other information.

I'll admit to feeling conflicted about this. As a former IT professional, I love the idea of the potential efficiency savings that could go with this. Logically, it makes perfect sense to bring things together in one place. The problem is that I just don't trust the Government to do this competently.

Remember the recent leak of information about Afghan workers who had helped British forces? Now imagine that kind of information being made available about all of us.

Some say that surely we shouldn't worry about this if we've done nothing wrong. To which I respond: you don't necessarily have to have done anything wrong for others to be able to use your data for corrupt purposes.

There are some who might say that we could copy successful models of digital IDs in other countries. Estonia is frequently cited as a shining example of how to do it. Indeed, Estonia does appear to be using cutting edge technology in the form of blockchain to ensure that its digital ID system is secure and trustworthy.

But there's a huge difference between Estonia and the UK: Estonia's population is about 1.5 million, while the UK's population is approaching 70 million. In terms of sheer scale, it's a whole other ball game.

There's a lot more to say about this, but I'll end by saying this is a solution in search of a problem. It seems to me that the Government is trying to pretend that this idea will somehow fix the country's immigration issues, or the countless other problems we face. It won't.

A digital ID won't build homes, solve the crisis in our special educational needs system, sort out adult social care, magically create more GP appointments or lower hospital waiting lists. It will do nothing to tackle the climate emergency, bring about peaceful solutions to wars and it definitely won't improve our economy and put more money in people's pockets.

So, apart from anything else, I'm frustrated with a Government that is choosing to spend time and energy on this, rather than working towards fixing all those other things. I and my party will be firmly opposing the Government on this.

Thanks for reading.

Marie

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