Let's Follow the Brits' Lead in Restoring Civil Liberties

Here in the United States, liberal Democrats claim to be defenders of civil liberties, yet since taking power in January 2009 they have done little to restore lost liberties and much to encroach further upon them.

In just the past couple of weeks, for example, the Democrat-controlled House of Representatives has voted to pay state governments to collect the DNA of Americans arrested for, but not necessarily guilty of, crimes and to store that information in a centralized FBI database; and the Democrat-controlled Senate has voted to allow the federal government to collect detailed data on Americans' every financial transaction.

Over in Great Britain, however, the leader of the Liberal Democrat party, Nick Clegg, not only campaigned on restoring Britons' civil liberties but is actually making good on those promises just two weeks after assuming the office of Deputy Prime Minister in a coalition government with the Conservative Party. The government's first initiative under Clegg and Prime Minister David Cameron is a bill to repeal a national ID card and database, reports the U.K. *Guardian*. (This was not a hard sell to Cameron, who is also opposed to national ID cards.)

Just as 9/11 was used as an excuse to clamp down on civil liberties here in the former British colonies, so it was in the mother country. The *Guardian* writes that "compulsory identity cards ... were first floated by the then-home secretary David Blunkett in the aftermath of 9/11." After numerous attempts to pass legislation enacting a national ID card, it finally passed in 2006. Then-Prime Minister Gordon Brown promised in 2009 that the cards would not be compulsory, though that was only true, as the *Guardian* reported, if one did not "want to leave the country or legally drive a car" since obtaining a passport or driver's license would automatically register a person in the national database.

Approximately 15,000 people have obtained national ID cards in the past four years; under the new legislation those cards will also be invalidated. "The role of the identity commissioner, created in an effort to prevent data blunders and leaks, will be abolished," says the *Guardian*. The government expects to save one billion pounds between this legislation and other legislation "to cancel the next generation of biometric fingerprint passports," the *Guardian* reports.

According to the *Guardian*, Clegg's comment on the upcoming legislation was: "The wasteful, bureaucratic and intrusive ID card system represents everything that has been wrong with government in recent years." This is in keeping with his campaign rhetoric, as in this Associated Press report: "'This government will end the culture of spying on its citizens,' Clegg said during a speech in north London. 'It is outrageous that decent, law-abiding people are regularly treated as if they have something to hide. It has to stop.'" Among the civil-liberties violations Clegg promised to end or restrict were, in addition to the national ID card and database, the use of closed-circuit TV cameras to monitor citizens' activities

and a national DNA database. The AP points out that British police "currently have the power to take DNA or fingerprints from anyone at the point of arrest, and can hold the information of those found innocent for years." Sound familiar?

The British government, having heard from its fed-up citizens that it was intruding on their privacy, is actually taking steps to rein in the worst of its abuses. Meanwhile, in the alleged land of the free, our government is headed in the opposite direction. The House wants to expand the national DNA database to include innocent people's biometric data. U.S. cities are installing TV cameras at an ever-increasing pace; the AP noted, for instance, that New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg visited London in an effort to learn how the British government spies on its citizens with cameras so that he could do likewise in the Big Apple. The REAL ID Act, which would create a *de facto* national ID card, although officially opposed by at least half the states, is still scheduled to go into effect next year despite then-Senator Barack Obama's "flatly opposing" it in his response to a CNET questionnaire of 2008 presidential candidates. It's time our government heard from *its* fed-up citizens and started cutting back on its violations of our privacy, too. Let's not keep our opinions on the subject private.

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