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CR-49

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Secure Fax: 847

21 August 1996

No of pages including this one: 3

To: HQ
For: R Montgomery

From: Belfast
From: K Dowling

PI-PA
AS 2.6

Subject: Identity Cards

1. I understand from the British side here that the Home Secretary will make his announcement on the Identity Cards issue at 11 am tomorrow (Thursday). In addition to the Home Secretary's "announcement", the Government's response to the Home Affairs Committee Report will be published at the same time. This will cover the main arguments for a voluntary identity scheme.

2. I have little detail in the matter, but I understand that Minister Ancram wrote to the Home Secretary yesterday proposing a compromise on the issue and that the Home Secretary was "content" and indeed "extremely grateful" for his proposal in this regard. The "compromise" would essentially seem to involve allowing the present NI photocard driving licence to remain in existence, for the foreseeable future, side by side with the new voluntary documents which will carry the Union flag, and which will be available to anyone in NI who wants them, on exactly the same basis as in GB.

3. The information I have is that the following is the line which could be taken here on the NI dimension:

- Why is NI being treated differently?: NI already has a separate photocard Driving Licence. There is no immediate need to change that, whereas in GB photocard driving licences will be introduced for the first time and from the outset they will be designed so as to meet EU requirements.

  The NI photocard Driving Licence will simply continue to be available alongside the new documents. The new identity/travel documents will be the same in NI and in GB.

- Different versions of the Driving Licence in use: current licences will remain in use until they are replaced or until they expire. The take-up of the combined Driving Licence/Identity Card is hard to predict. As now, people will probably only replace existing licences when they have to do so - when they change address, lose it or have it stolen. So, current licences will remain in use until they are replaced, or until they expire.

- Union flag being imposed on people in NI who do not want it?: Nothing is being imposed. The new documents with the Union flag will be available to those who want them and who would qualify for British travel documents. In

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deciding whether to renew or replace their existing Driving Licence, it will be open to British nationals who want the additional benefits, and are willing to pay for them, to decide whether to apply for the new documents. As now, people wishing to have a document which affirms their nationality will be able to apply to the authorities of the country whose nationality they hold.

- How do the Government's proposals meet the need for parity of esteem?: The Government recognises fully the various sensitivities about national symbols. The Driving Licence is not being changed - the new identity documents will be available only to those who choose to have them. Nothing is being imposed.

- Does the scheme infringe civil liberties?: People already voluntarily carry many forms of identification. The proposed new documents are voluntary. They extend the range of acceptable forms of identification and provide convenient new travel documents.

Timing and other technical aspects

- When will the new documents be introduced?: Cannot yet give a date. Legislation will be needed first.

- What will the documents cost?: There will be no change to the fees already announced for Driving Licences. Fees for the new identity documents will be set, in NI as in GB, so as to recoup administration costs.

- Can the NI Driving Licence be used for travel?: No. Nor can the GB equivalent.

- When will the EU directive be fully implemented?: Some changes required under the Second Directive on Licensing (e.g. the theoretical driving test) have already been introduced. Others will be introduced during 1997 (e.g. changes to the categorisation of vehicles). A date has not yet been fixed for changing the NI photocard licence.

- Issuing authority for the new documents in NI: The Driver & Vehicle Licensing Agency for Northern Ireland, based in Coleraine.

Overall advantages of new proposals

- What are the advantages of the Government's proposals?: Proving identity quickly and easily in everyday transactions, providing proof of age, and as a convenient travel document. In addition, in NI, it is expected that the new documents would be added to those used to provide proof of identity at polling stations.

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4. I understand that the Home Office may take the following line on NI points

- Will the Government's proposals extend to NI?: Yes. ID cards will be available to people in NI on exactly the same basis as in GB.

- Will ID cards in NI carry the Union flag?: Yes.

- Will all Driving Licences in NI carry the Union flag?: The combined photocard licence/identity card available in NI will carry the Union flag. But NI already has a photocard/driving licence, widely used as an informal identity card. That does not carry the Union flag. It will continue to be available alongside the new documents for the time being. Comment: There is a certain fudging here. The intention is to leave it vague as to when exactly the design of the existing NI photocard may have to be changed in implementation of the EU directive, which, strictly speaking, does not have to be implemented until 2001.

- Why the different approach in relation to NI?: NI already has a photocard/driving licence. There are political sensitivities to be taken into account when the EU directive comes to be fully implemented there. The other new documents will be the same as in Great Britain.

- Is this a significant step in the fight against terrorism?: This is not a security initiative. Assisting the police is just one of the benefits of the proposed scheme.

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HOME OFFICE

News Release

50 Queen Anne's Gate, London SW1H 9AT
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270/96

22 August 1996

0171 273 4610

GREEN LIGHT FOR VOLUNTARY IDENTITY CARDS: MICHAEL HOWARD

A voluntary identity card - linked to the planned photocard driving licence - is to be introduced, Home Secretary Michael Howard announced today.

The public will be able to choose from:

- a joint identity card and full or provisional driving licence;
- a separate identity card for non-drivers; and
- a photocard driving licence only, for those who decide not to hold an identity card or for residents who are not citizens of the UK.

British citizens who hold an identity card will be able to use it as a travel document in the European Union and elsewhere instead of a passport.

Today's announcement coincides with the Government's response to the Home Affairs Select Committee's report on identity cards. The Committee's report unanimously recommended the introduction of a voluntary identity card and this has been accepted by the Government. The Committee rejected the proposal for a compulsory identity card on the grounds that:

- it would be harmful to civil liberties;
- the police did not want a special power to require an individual to produce the card which would be needed to enforce a compulsory card;
- there was no strong support for a compulsory card in the evidence the Committee received.

Mr Howard said:

"When we published our consultation paper on identity cards, 65 per cent of responses were in favour of introducing some form of card.

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"A voluntary card will bring direct benefits for those who carry it. It will make life easier by acting as a reliable proof of identity and as a travel document in the EU and elsewhere.

"A card would also make it more difficult for bogus officials to trick their way into people's homes. This can often lead to burglary and violent attacks. It would also help to prevent those under age from buying alcohol or cigarettes.

"We will be setting up a rigorous system of checks on applicants to make sure the card scheme is not abused."

Commenting on the announcement David Blakey, Chief Constable of West Mercia Constabulary and lead member on this issue for the Association of Chief Police Officers' Crime Committee said:

"We welcome this decision as a positive and helpful step forward."

The new cards will be issued by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (or the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Northern Ireland Agency) working together with the United Kingdom Passport Agency and a modest fee will be charged.

New applicants for provisional driving licences will be the first to own the new style cards which will begin to be phased in once the necessary legislation is in place.

Mr Howard added:

"The identity card will be available as a voluntary option to driving licence holders. It will only be available to British citizens so that it can be used as a travel document in Europe. There will also be a separate voluntary identity card for non-drivers.

"We accept the Home Affairs Select Committee's view that we should seek primary legislation to underpin an identity card scheme. The necessary legislation will be brought forward when there is a suitable opportunity and the new combined photocard driving licences and identity cards will start to become available once the necessary legislation is in place.

"The standard of security for the identity card will be at least as high as the standard which applies to the issue of British passports."

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Notes to Editors

1. The Government published its Green Paper on identity cards in May 1995. It sought the views of the public on the principle of introducing identity cards and the possible types of card schemes. 90,000 copies of a Home Office information book were also distributed to the public free of charge. There were 3,000 responses. Of those who expressed a view, 65% were in favour of introducing some form of identity card scheme.

2. Media copies of the Government's response to the Home Affairs Committee's Report on Identity Cards are available from the Home Office Press Office 0171-273-4610. Copies for members of the public are available from HMSO.

3. The new combined photocard driving licence/identity card available in Northern Ireland will carry the Union flag. Northern Ireland already has a photocard driving licence, widely used as an informal identity card. It does not carry the Union flag. It will continue to be available alongside the new document for the time being.

4. The photocard driving licence and the identity card will be phased in starting initially with new applications for provisional driving licences/identity cards and extending over a period of 18-24 months to include applications from those who need to exchange or replace existing licences and for the separate identity card available for non-drivers

5. The Government is giving interested parties a further opportunity to comment on the proposals. All views must be submitted by 20 September 1996.

6. All Home Office News Releases are available on the Internet on www.coi.gov.uk/coi/depts/GHO/GHO.html

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