

Passports will be needed to buy mobile phones

From The Sunday Times October 19, 2008

A British passport

David Leppard

Everyone who buys a mobile telephone will be forced to register their identity on a national database under government plans to extend massively the powers of state surveillance.

Phone buyers would have to present a passport or other official form of identification at the point of purchase. Privacy campaigners fear it marks the latest government move to create a surveillance society.

A compulsory national register for the owners of all 72m mobile phones in Britain would be part of a much bigger database to combat terrorism and crime. Whitehall officials have raised the idea of a register containing the names and addresses of everyone who buys a phone in recent talks with Vodafone and other telephone companies, insiders say.

The move is targeted at monitoring the owners of Britain's estimated 40m prepaid mobile phones. They can be purchased with cash by customers who do not wish to give their names, addresses or credit card details.

The pay-as-you-go phones are popular with criminals and terrorists because their anonymity shields their activities from the authorities. But they are also used by thousands of law-abiding citizens who wish to communicate in private.

The move aims to close a loophole in plans being drawn up by GCHQ, the government's eavesdropping centre in Cheltenham, to create a huge database to monitor and store the internet browsing habits, e-mail and telephone records of everyone in Britain.

The "Big Brother" database would have limited value to police and MI5 if it did not store details of the ownership of more than half the mobile phones in the country.

Contingency planning for such a move is already thought to be under way at Vodafone, where 72% of its 18.5m UK customers use pay-as-you-go.

The office of Richard Thomas, the information commissioner, said it anticipated that a compulsory mobile phone register would be unveiled as part of a law which ministers would announce next year.

"With regards to the database that would contain details of all mobile users, including pay-as-you-go, we would expect that this information would be included in the database proposed in the draft Communications Data Bill," a spokeswoman said.

Simon Davies, of Privacy International, said he understood that several mobile phone firms had discussed the proposed database in talks with government officials.

As The Sunday Times revealed earlier this month, GCHQ has already been provided with up to £1 billion to work on the pilot stage of the Big Brother database, which will see thousands of "black boxes" installed on communications lines provided by Vodafone and BT as part of a pilot interception programme.

The proposals have sparked a fierce backlash inside Whitehall. Senior officials in the Home Office have privately warned that the database scheme is impractical, disproportionate and potentially unlawful. The revolt last week forced Jacqui Smith, the home secretary, to delay announcing plans for the database until next year.

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article4969312.ece?print=yes&randnum=1227686061508>