A NATIONAL ID CARD

An idea whose time has come …

by Vic Berecz

As I noted a few weeks ago, I believe that a fool-proof ID card is an a good approach to current and future immigration problems. If you needed an appropriate ID to get any job, to claim American citizenship for any child born here, or to access government benefits, there would be no incentives for adding to the tally of undocumented immigrants. So we would have biometric ID cards for *Permanent Legal Residents*, *Temporary Workers*, *Foreign Students*, *Business Travelers*, *Tourists*, and perhaps a couple of other categories … in other words, every non-citizen who sets foot in this country. So long as the ID's are clear, explicit, and easy to verify, rigid enforcement of fair employment regulations and benefits rules should be quite workable.

But, there is one hitch … so far we've talked only about non-citizens having these ID cards. What's to keep illegal immigrants from claiming to be American citizens? The fact is we have no universal mechanism for identifying our own citizens. In August I wrote: "without an ID, jobs and government services are unavailable" in my argument for fool-proof universal ID's for all non-citizens. Now I ask: why not require the same fool-proof universal ID for citizens? I personally would be proud to carry an ID card that proves I'm an American, just as I am proud to carry a U.S. passport which identifies me as an American citizen overseas.

I've gotten some feedback on this idea before finalizing this posting … so I'll discuss some of your concerns and comments. First there's cost. I have seen cost estimates of several billion dollars to implement a nationwide biometric ID card. Initial costs of $50 per card wouldn't surprise me … startup per-unit costs are always high. Think back 30 years to the birth of UPC bar-codes. Storeowners were concerned about going bankrupt due to the cost of the technology. As with most digital technology, the cost drops exponentially as the product becomes commonplace. Today we couldn't imagine the labor-intensive process of putting prices on each item in a grocery store, compared to the inventory control and checkout-speed advantages of low-cost barcode readers. Note that during the higher-cost start-up period, biometric ID cards will largely be paid for by those who want them … the legal immigrants and visitors who want to come to our country.

Next, there's states-rights concerns. As you know, I'm generally an advocate of leaving to states all aspects of governing that are not necessarily and/or most efficiently performed at a national level … ie. move government involvement to the lowest possible level. I have to agree with critics of national ID cards that states must provide ID cards for most of their residents … we call those driver's licenses … so national ID's are perhaps redundant. Most states, particularly at the request of senior citizens who no longer drive, have extended their driver's license program to a more general ID card. I carry both a Florida driver's license and a Florida ID card, and these have both photos and holograms. Some states have taken the next technology step and include biometric information. As this trend progresses, these state programs will drive the cost of biometric ID's down. Keep in mind that fingerprint readers (like those on most recent laptop computers) cost less than $10! Another thing that is missing from my Florida ID is citizenship status. If state IDs are the answer, they must differentiate between US citizens and those who possess one of the forms of national ID for non-citizens.

I noted in today's news that the ACLU is objecting to the arrest of a man wanted for murder in California, who was *on-the-lam* in North Carolina. He was located by the FBI using the North Carolina state driver's license database and face recognition software. The ACLU feels the privacy of thousands of innocent North Carolinians was invaded since the software scanned their images looking for the suspect. I say, tough! We need to get murderers off the streets. As times and technology change, our expectations concerning privacy must change also. I just can't buy the *privacy* arguments that many use as objections to mandatory ID cards in a world with security cameras everywhere and *EZ-Pass* transponders in most cars.

Finally, there's the question of placing unnecessary burdens on people. I personally don't think it's particularly burdensome to ask people to carry one additional ID card … especially since most of us voluntarily carry a half-dozen credit and debit cards. But, if states did the job right, there certainly is no near-term necessity to impose even this very minor burden.

Like most things, the process of developing better ID mechanisms … whether done by states or nationally … doesn't have to happen overnite. It can be phased in over many years … but maybe we should start the process with fool-proof IDs for all non-citizens in our midst …

… we really have nothing to lose and much to gain.