

Dear Keir Starmer,

As a lawyer with an understanding of the breadth of expertise you gained during your tenure as a human rights barrister, it is disheartening when decisions appear to compromise ethical standards. You made a commitment to uphold a standard of honour in your work as a barrister that you might find useful to bring into your work as a politician.

The Labour Government has shown us that whether the party in power is left-leaning or right-leaning, the story remains the same: Modern governments rarely expand their powers by openly admitting to a desire for greater control. However, from my observation over recent years, there has been a growing and evident pattern of expanding state power framed as necessary responses to urgent social problems. Whether it be emergencies, terrorist attacks, assassinations, a pandemic, or marginalised groups, the broader social anxieties that can be provoked using those issues can create a moral and political justification for the executive to mandate ‘solutions’ that permanently expand its power.

The pattern appears as follows: 1) Identify the scapegoat, 2) Amplify fear, use media and social rhetoric to intensify perceptions of crisis, 3) Introduce a solution that is a bureaucratic measure presented as necessary, and 4) Expand and normalise those measures for everyone. Immigration debates in the UK illustrate this clearly, particularly with the government’s push toward a Digital ID system. Governmentality reminds us that the state governs not only by repression but by defining problems that appear to demand its intervention. Crises enable governments to normalise extraordinary powers that later become routine.

The Digital ID has been announced as a requirement for Right to Work checks that will be mandatory by the end of this Parliament in 2029. While presented as a tool to prevent illegal

working and to streamline verification, its implications extend far beyond immigration. Imposing mandatory ID cards on law-abiding citizens is excessive state interference. By tying basic participation in economic life to biometric identification, the state is embedding a new apparatus of control into everyday transactions. What is presented as a technical fix to immigration “abuses” is, on closer inspection, an infrastructural transformation with consequences for the entire population.

While there are still immense human rights concerns surrounding digital IDs, such a system embedded into the UK would give the Home Office more mass surveillance powers - at a time when they already have too many. Your government has stated that Digital ID will require biometric data such as a photograph, name, date of birth, and nationality or residency status, replicating elements of a passport or eVisa. Your government has stated that this is to adapt to “the modern digital world we live in.” But unlike passports, which we present selectively, a centralised digital system raises profound questions about surveillance, data storage, and scope creep. How would such an infrastructure promise to be limited to its initial mandate?

What makes the Digital ID proposal so politically paradoxical is that it reverses the usual dynamics of power. Traditionally, right-leaning voices resist Big Government initiatives while left-leaning ones defend them, as we saw with Labour’s support for the track-and-trace app during the pandemic. Yet here, a Big Government project like a Digital ID system is being advanced in the service of a traditionally right-wing cause: restricting immigration. That inversion suggests the Digital ID will not work. I predict that the left will resist this Big Government initiative because of its right-leaning anti-immigration rhetoric, and the right will resist because it does not hate immigration so much that it will embrace Big Government for it. Thus, the policy risks uniting opposition across the spectrum, not through consensus, but through shared distrust of the state.

Moreover, citizens already need National Insurance numbers to work legally in the UK, so introducing the Digital ID under the pretence that it has anything to do with halting “illegal” workers should be an additional eye-opener for people. It raises the question: why add a new, more invasive requirement, unless the aim is to create a broader system of population management? The way the state mediates between individuals and institutions is a constitutional issue that is now also becoming a technological one.

I urge you to clarify:

How will biometric data be stored and protected, and what safeguards will prevent function creep?

What independent oversight mechanisms will be in place to prevent the Home Office from unilaterally expanding the scope of Digital ID?

Why is a new Digital ID necessary when existing systems already verify legal work and residency?

What limits will you place on the use of Digital ID beyond the employment context, and how will you ensure those limits?

If your answers rest on scapegoating rhetoric - “illegal workers” today, another group tomorrow - it will reinforce the concern that we are witnessing a state of exception being normalised, with lasting consequences for British democracy.

Yours sincerely,

Emina Arella Haddlesey

