

Civil Liberties: Our Duty to Protect Them as British Asians

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Not only was September 2001 a turning point for many, it's impact was also felt acutely by British Asians. The 'War on Terrorism' and the constant fear that has been generated (some rightly so), has meant that we in the United Kingdom live in a heightened state of fear. Many of us used to believe that the Orwellian fantasies in 1984 were just that, fantasies! However, 1984 has very real relevance to 2004.

The threat to the UK by terrorists has been around for decades through the IRA and now by Al-Qaeda. Yet, in the last 3 years the very civil liberties that many of us took for granted and which are a shining example to many across the world have been pulled back, sometimes very quietly. For example, the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act (2001) allows for people who are arrested and not yet charged, to be fingerprinted, photographed and their DNA taken. Before the Act, only those arrested and charged had to undergo such a process. Effectively, what the current legislation means is that anyone who is arrested is liable to this demeaning and questionable process. The data is also held for an indeterminate period of time and put on a national database where it will be used when searches are conducted against fingerprints and DNA that may have been collected at crime sites.

I would also like to add another important point that has not been picked up on as of yet. By retaining DNA and with DNA decoding nearly complete through the work of geneticists and biochemists, is it not possible for the Government to find potential weaknesses or genetic malformations within people from whom the information has been taken? Not only does it bring up ethical and civil liberties questions, it also raises the spectre as to what Government departments may do with such information. Genetic aberrations can effectively be used against the individual. Whilst I am not suggesting that the Government will use the information against individuals, nonetheless the potential for abuse does exist.

The treatment of people (who are not even charged) as potential criminals by the taking of biological information shows that our civil liberties are at stake. Now take into account the recent Home Office figures for England and Wales for stop and search in 2002 / 2003 and the statement made above about civil liberties being at stake becomes ever more relevant. The figures show that the number of stop and searches under terror laws doubled from 8,550 to 21,577. The number of people from Asian backgrounds stopped and searched by police increased by 300% since the Anti-Terrorism legislation came into force. Yet, the number of arrests were extremely low in comparison with the number of stop and searches. Such procedures also bring into question the very process of stop and search as a tool when it seems to bear very little fruit and manages to alienate more people. There has to be a fine balance between intelligence led policing and stop and search and the 2002 / 2003 figures show that something is not right within the process.

Another major impact on civil liberties (which will be relevant to all citizens) will be the introduction of Identity cards. Both the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary (David Blunkett) want to introduce the cards as soon as is possible (the likelihood is completion of the process by 2013). The cards will hold personal information and an iris scan and fingerprints. It is being billed by the Home Secretary as an Entitlement Card and what is interesting is that to sell the idea the Identity Card is being brought in through the much used 'back door.' It is being linked to the provision of public services, which in my opinion is an abuse of public funds and public services. In order to collect vital information about people the Government have linked it to the use of vital public services. ID cards are not only an expensive project; they also impinge on minority groups. For example, many British Muslims who are already scared of divulging sensitive information, post September 11th 2001, will feel particularly vulnerable.

The only way to ensure that our fundamental civil liberties are protected is by ensuring that we as British Asians inform, debate and work with the Government in ensuring that they are not encroached upon through successive legislative measures. To me the Great in 'Great Britain' holds relevance because of this country's protection of fundamental civil and human rights and the protection of individual rights. If these are eroded (as they are very subtly) then our very history and the positive cultural, social and economic impact that British Asians have had in the UK will be pushed aside and that is frankly, not acceptable.

By Fiyaz Mughal, 2006

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