
Boozing in the stairwell of life

WHEN I WAS sorting through my parents' belongings after my Mother's death I came across their British identity cards dating from the Second World War. They were dog-eared pieces of cardboard, which when folded were about twice the size of a credit card. The most impressive thing about them was the prancing lion and unicorn of the royal crest: *Honi soit qui mal y pense*, above; *Dieu et Mon Droit*, below, then the legend "National Registration IDENTITY CARD". Inside, the person's name, address and card number were hand-written in ink; there was no photograph, and no other information of any kind.

The Nazi spymasters must have had a good laugh; forging them was evidently a doddle. At any rate, they certainly didn't stop large numbers of deserters from the British armed forces roaming the country unmolested between 1939 and 1952. Of course, if you were an information officer and wanted to enter the Cathay Building in Singapore before the city fell to the Japanese, or you were in some other kind of special service then the wily British authorities would insist on sticking a small portrait photograph of the bearer inside the card, but these embellishments were comparatively rare; the mass of ordinary civilians had to make do with the very basic efforts of the National Registration Office.

People hated them, and once the associated ration book fell into disuse as food, petrol and other essentials "came off ration", refusal to carry the cards or to present them to the police, became widespread; by 1951 defiance had made the ID setup inoperable, and this led to the abolition of national registration the following year.

Of course, the whole system was operated manually and involved the writing out and storing of literally tens of millions of filing cards. It was vastly

expensive and hopelessly cumbersome; routinely adding photographs would have made things much worse. After all, until well into the nineteen sixties getting a small portrait photograph made for a British passport involved a trip to the studio of a professional photographer, and a return trip a day or two later to pick up the snapshot. Although coin operated photo booths began to appear in the New York subway system in the mid-twenties, it took another forty years for them to become widely available in Britain. Consequently, library cards, staff cards, and passes of all kinds were issued without photographs; computer networks, bar codes, and the digitalising of personal information, all had to fall in price before card surveillance could become really practical or widespread.

Consequently, when I was fifteen I could venture into a pub and get served without much trouble. Occasionally, the bar staff would ask your age, but a confident lie would normally satisfy all concerned. No one asked for *proof* of anything because, of course, a birth certificate, without a photograph, would prove nothing at all. These less documented days have now become a distant memory as one scheme for monitoring the drinking and smoking habits of the young have followed another, each one becoming more intrusive than the last. Promoted by publicans and retailers and endorsed by the government these measures have driven very young drinkers out of pubs and clubs, forcing them to buy alcohol in minimarts and corner shops, leading in turn, to fifteen, sixteen, and seventeen-year-olds boozing unsupervised in bus shelters and stairwells where they can now sell or share their alcohol with those much younger than themselves.

The police and local government officers have responded for some time by seeking to entrap local off licences by sending in especially dolled-up under age youths to illegally buy alcohol and cigarettes – then pouncing on the shopkeepers with a spate of prosecutions and shocking revelations orchestrated for the local rag. Although a number of successful court

appearances have resulted those pesky kids have found little difficulty in outwitting the authorities throughout the country, freely buying fags, lager, cider, knives and other contraband, and distributing it or selling it on to even younger children.

Now, local trading standards officers have started to target big supermarkets: a Tesco store was recently taken to court in Blackpool under new statutory regulations, fined £6,000 and threatened by magistrates with the loss of its licence for selling alcohol to sixteen and seventeen-year-olds. Under the Licensing Act as amended by the Violent Crime Reduction Act (2007), cashiers, counter staff, shopkeepers, store managers, publicans, and bar staff can all be prosecuted. As Blackpool's trading standards boss explained: "We are determined to improve the quality of life for residents in Blackpool."

Tesco is, as you are all aware, totally committed to improving the quality of life throughout Britain. So it has decided to enforce the new policy by teaming up with Asda and Morrisons in a scheme called *Challenge 25*. Cashiers and counter staff in every branch and outlet have been especially trained to spot all those who look under 25 years of age. The Wine and Spirit Trade Association has helpfully pitched in with "a suite of designs, from posters to shelf barkers to badges, to reinforce the message throughout" the stores.

From now on all young people between the ages of 18 and 25, 26 or 27, will be required to carry "a card bearing the PASS hologram, a photographic driving license or a passport, if they wish to buy alcohol" or cigarettes. Consequently, there is a convergence between trading standards officers, supermarket bosses, and Parliament; discrimination against young people is not merely being widened it is being ratified by commercial companies and trading associations in league with the authorities. Not satisfied with imposing discriminatory minimum wage rates the government is now forcing millions of young people to produce ID cards when they go shopping.

Now, of course, I would be momentarily delighted if somebody thought I looked under 25. However, despite all those who will be offended by *not* being asked for proof of age, many more people will be outraged and inconvenienced by being expected to produce ID cards at the checkout. Whichever way you look at it, these are discriminatory measures being taken against adult citizens; never mind the widespread discrimination practised against children in pubs, restaurants (“No children under 12”), and shops (“No more than two children in the shop at one time”).

Does discrimination against children and young people really matter, after all in the fullness of time they will all outgrow these restrictions? Yes, I think it does matter. For young adults such discrimination strengthens cynicism and a sense of disengagement from many political and social commitments. Discrimination against young adults in the field of pay and services undermines the legitimacy and effectiveness of many quite sensible policy objectives.

Reducing alcohol consumption, nuisance from drunken kids, and damage to the health of pre-teens and young teenagers is a great idea, but repressive and discriminatory measures will not solve the problem of neglectful and demoralised parents, or spiritless and bored kids. A policy of positive engagement is needed which focuses upon getting kids involved with each other in more dynamic and creative ways than binge boozing in a stair well, bus shelter, or on the benches of deserted shopping parades. Stiffer policing and ID cards will not succeed.