



# From Big Brother to the Big Society?

Considers the reasons for the growth of surveillance in the UK and its consequences. Christians have a responsibility to offer a vision for our society and stimulate debate about civil liberty issues.



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Clegg and Cameron make an unusual civil partnership. More a marriage of convenience than a match made in heaven, this union may not last very long beyond the honeymoon period. In whatever time they may have left together, we may well see some dramatic changes in British politics. Not least because it is expected that the coalition will be most strongly directed by a shared libertarian penchant for reducing the role of the state.

This will have implications for what we have come to describe as the surveillance society. As we hail the dawn of new politics, it's worth considering how we got to the situation that we are in, and what might come next.

Politicians like to make their mark in history. This usually happens via a set of projects that realise a vision. But projects cost money. With the issue of reducing the national deficit set to dominate politics for the foreseeable future, it will be difficult for governments to pursue any grand schemes for societal change. Working with an ever-decreasing budget, it is more likely that the most radical changes will relate to the relatively low-cost policy areas of human rights and civil liberties. Although analysis and prescription of these areas differ between Conservatives and Liberal-Democrats, there is a consensus that Labour handled things badly and that measures need to be taken to redress the situation.

So, to what degree did the Labour government actually foster a culture of surveillance? Balancing security and freedom is a tricky job for a politician at the best of times, but after 9-11 it seems that state-facilitated market-led surveillance went into overdrive. A 2007 report by the UK's Information Commissioner's Office

highlighted the need for the public to be made more aware of the 'creeping encroachment' of surveillance apparatus into their civil liberties. A year earlier Richard Thomas, the Information Commissioner, warned that Britain was 'sleepwalking into a surveillance society'.

Though some in Parliament had sought to generate debate on this issue, in fearful times the trend was a largely unquestioning acceptance of how new technologies can provide more security. Alongside the long-running identity card debacle and the debate about the length that those suspected of terrorism can be detained without being charged, Labour governments also floated proposals to create massive databases to record every phone call (including around 57 billion text messages a year) and all e-mail communications (presently running at 3 billion a day). These innovations would sit alongside newly introduced Control Orders to monitor and restrict the movement of individuals deemed to represent a danger to the state, and Anti-Social Behaviour Orders for criminals, both of which require a ratcheting up of state surveillance through electronic tagging, curfew enforcement, etc. Add to this the emergence of 'hate crimes' that require the monitoring of all things verbal and textual, and a disturbing picture begins to emerge.

Perhaps this kind of thing should be seen as inevitable. In a mass, complex, fluid society, we may need these new ways of maintaining law and order – and who could argue against the need to deal with the threat of terrorism and tackle organised crime? Indeed, for the law-abiding citizen, such innovations in a fallen world are surely to be welcomed.

But what implications do the restrictions of freedom have on what the Bible says about freedom? How *truly* free are we with such surveillance in our lives? Christ came to set us free, and we need to be mindful that many of the civil liberties we now enjoy are biblically inspired and humanly costly. Historically, the gospel ensures forms of public and personal freedom because it requires and proposes them. Today, however, we seem to have a lot more faith in science delivering new technologies to keep us safe – from each other.<sup>1</sup>

Although the UK holds the dubious distinction of having the largest DNA database in the world, it is the ubiquitous CCTV camera that serves as the most visible symptom of our present paranoia. The UK has 1% of the world's population but 20% of its CCTV cameras. That's 4.2 million cameras or one for every 14 people. The average person is captured 300 times a day on CCTV. Although it is estimated that up to 90% of CCTV

develops, it is anticipated that 'Golden Shield' will be rolled out across the whole of China, centrally administrated to preserve the 'harmonious society'. Surely that couldn't happen here? We have great liberal prophets, like John Stuart Mill and George Orwell, to protect us. Yet, in spite of 1984's chilling warning of the perils of state repression, we are seeing statist mission creep today. The cases of local authorities using laws designed for tackling terrorism to monitor school admissions and rubbish collection are as astonishing as they are predictable. It seems that humankind, not content with the delusion of omnipotence promised in science, is now attempting omnipresence.

Until quite recently, substantial opposition to such developments was sparse. In 2008 a report by the Home Affairs Select Committee recommended that government should adopt a guiding principle for public policy of 'least data for least time'. Welcome though this was, to address properly the dangers posed by surveillance, a broader, more positive vision for society would be needed to restore trust between the citizen and the state, and the citizen and the citizen. Sadly, we seem to be interested in what other people are doing, but not really interested in other people – so we defer responsibility to the state or the market. Politically, this is a reflection of the fact that there are no viable political ideas for how to manage a diverse and fragmenting public square. In the absence of such a vision, recent governments have opted to simply police things through technology.

Even as a short-term social benefit, the installation of every CCTV camera needs to be seen as symbolic of the demise of democracy. They represent the failure of a nation who have rejected the Word of God and lost the moral capital and ability to police themselves. Importantly, in line with the history of such statist responses, quite apart from being ugly and intrusive, they don't actually work. The police know this. In 2008, Detective Chief Inspector Mick Neville (head of the Metropolitan Police's Visual Images, Identifications and Detections Office) admitted that criminals were not scared of cameras, and that despite the national obsession with CCTV, only 3% of robberies were solved by them.

So, why the proliferation in surveillance? Or more significantly, how could this happen with a Labour Party that is to all intents and purposes now very liberal? It doesn't really make sense, until you scratch the surface of the New Labour veneer and look at the often contradictory ideas beneath. New Labour's legacy does bear some traces of Christian-influenced ethical socialism that inspired the early moral crusades to improve life for working people and their families. Yet, it is a very mixed bag, and needs to be understood in the broader historical trajectory of the party. Amid the social affluence and shifting political identities of post-war Britain, the party became subject to increasingly atheistic, liberal and individualist influences. With the demise of militant socialism in the 1980s, this secularising trajectory would find its expression in the New Labour project.

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## Notes

1. Methods available for 'intelligent policing' now include: registration plate recognition, shop RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) tags, mobile phone triangulation, store loyalty cards, credit and debit card transactions, Oyster travel cards, smart cards, embedded chips, satellites, car SatNavs, electoral rolls, NHS patient records, worker call monitoring, worker clocking-in, mobile phone cameras, location apps, internet cookies – and much more.

2. See [bigbrotherwatch.org.uk/](http://bigbrotherwatch.org.uk/)

3. Chris Blackhurst, 'We need police to watch our streets not CCTV cameras', *Evening Standard*, 27 May 2010, p. 14.

4. Already in use in a pilot scheme in Middlesbrough, they are to be extended

cameras are illegal and breach the Data Protection Act, we could see further expansion of new high-definition digital cameras that can work in sync with facial recognition technology to track individuals in busy environments. It is perhaps this integrated use of these new technologies by government and business that presents the greatest threat to civil liberties.

Software is being developed that can identify 'deviant' behaviour by looking for particular types of body movement or particular clothing or baggage. The theory is that in public spaces people behave in predictable ways. People who are not part of the 'crowd', in particular those up to no good, do not behave in the same way. The computer can identify their movements and alert the operator that they are acting 'out of the ordinary'.

According to Big Brother Watch,<sup>2</sup> a campaign group against the erosion of civil liberties, there are 60,000 local authority cameras in the UK. Outside the capital, Portsmouth and Nottinghamshire Councils have the most, with 1,454 each. London has more than 10,000 cameras operated by local authorities and Transport for London. A number apparently matched only by North Korea.<sup>3</sup> Ears are being added to eyes. Listening to the public via directed microphone technology is on the horizon and would no doubt be a valuable addition to the 'talking' CCTV cameras that tell people off for dropping litter or committing anti-social behaviour.<sup>4</sup>

Where is this 'progress' taking us? In the Chinese city of Shenzhen, a pilot scheme that links cameras and transactions to a central database is successfully monitoring its 12 million citizens, each one individually 'trackable'. As the technology (our exported technology)

Now largely a secularist construct, the Labour Party (and to some degree the associated Trades Union movement) is dominated by liberal progressivism – the idea that human nature being good and even perfectible, is moving inexorably forward as individuals are freed from the oppressive constraints of the past. All obstacles on the path of progress are surmountable because, for the secular mind, there is a political solution for every problem. The difference now is that, whereas previous Labour governments used the state to improve the lives of the masses, they now used the state (often in tandem with the market) to secure the lifestyle choices and values of groups with a stake in the project of progress.<sup>5</sup>

So, it is widely acknowledged that under New Labour the state assumed an increasingly interventionist role that supported a particular set of lifestyles choices and values. It was now all about what the state can do for the individual – particularly the sexually liberated, unaccountable, all-consuming, mobile, middle-class individual. This aggressive liberal progressive project of cultural engineering was promoted via an 'equality and diversity' agenda based on a particularly atheistic view of human rights. All enforced by more and more laws. Encroaching particularly upon civil liberties, religious liberties, freedom of speech, privacy and even freedom of thought,<sup>6</sup> this very selective 'enforcement of pluralism'<sup>7</sup> echoes Rousseau's seemingly oxymoronic notion of being 'forced to be free'. With this 'nanny knows best' state facilitating the market and vice versa, such a liberal authoritarian (or even liberal fascist<sup>8</sup>) attitude provided fertile soil for the cultivation of a surveillance society. Classically, (for the left) confusing the state and society, the culture of 'watch thy neighbour' arose in the name of spurious and subjective notions of a common good or public interest. The logic goes something like this: people need more freedom to progress; the state must grow in order to promote and secure these new freedoms; in a mass, complex society of individuals more centralised and mutual monitoring is a necessary corollary.

The slow development of debate on these issues is indicative of the scale of public apathy and lack of vision for a better tomorrow. As lazy, passive, consumers we seem less and less capable of envisioning a society which takes its cues from biblical principles for prioritising our social relations. We can't seem to imagine a society in which we trust one another and offer hospitality to strangers rather than just tolerating their presence. We don't have that kind of *faith* in each other today or *hope* for a good future. This places a responsibility on Christians to provide some vision and to stimulate debate about what freedoms and constraints we are bequeathing to subsequent generations. It may be a truism that if the Church can't really handle the freedoms that Christ brings, then we should not be surprised when the world completely misapplies and abuses them, but that does not let us off the hook. We need to re-articulate the promise of freedom which Christ has given to us, and reaffirm the social, political and economic repercussions of it for public imagination. Only then can we begin to dream about

a society in which the only place for a CCTV camera is in a museum. As journalist Chris Blackhurst noted: 'We were never asked if we wanted them – the police and Home Office knew best, or rather thought they did. The result is that the police and MI5 can follow a car as it goes virtually anywhere in the country. They are allowed to keep the information for five years. Ours has become a police state. But one without effective policing. The coalition must give Britain back to its people. And that means getting rid of the hated cameras.'<sup>9</sup>

From 1997, on many of the legislative proposals relating to civil liberties issues (though interestingly not the human rights issues), it is worth noting that numerous Liberal-Democrat parliamentarians were vociferous opponents of New Labour's state control approach. The

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Conservative response was to develop an alternative narrative with the 'Big Society'. A way of empowering individuals and local groups to hold the state and each other more accountable. There is much in it that chimes with Lib-Dem thinking. As the 'Big Society' purports to look beyond 'Big Brother', possibilities may appear for a more mutual, relational, renewed civil society.

Christians can and should speak into this debate and scrutinise the practical outworking of the vision. There will almost certainly be a need to provide a biblical 'check and balance' to it. Given the human tendency to misapply most good ideas, such libertarian dreaming could quite easily end up as a relativistic nightmare. In the absence of some moral references and guiding principles, the 'Big Society' could quite easily end up as a neo-liberal mandate for the state to neglect its broader duties to protect the 'widows and orphans' of our society. Taken to its logical extreme, state-reducing libertarianism from the right could usher in a new Wild West, a form of social Darwinism in which the fittest (or richest) survive. Yet, with many leading figures in the coalition having stated commitments to social justice, there may be an opportunity for a more plural and freer public square to develop. The commitments in the Queen's Speech to abandon the ID card scheme, cancel the National Identity Register, extend the Freedom of Information Act, restore the rights to nonviolent protest, reform of libel laws to protect free speech, preserve the right of trial by jury, and to introduce measures to reduce CCTV cameras in public places, are a welcome start towards this. If the Cameron-Clegg partnership lasts, we can expect much more to come.

to 20 areas across England.

5. See J Gray, *Heresies: Against Progress and Other Illusions* (London: Granta, 2004).

6. T Bruce, *The New Thought Police: Inside the Left's Assault on Free Speech and Free Minds* (New York: Random House, 2001).

7. This term was developed in EU law in the 1990s regarding the regulation of religious broadcasting.

8. See J Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the Left from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning* (London: Penguin, 2007).

9. Blackhurst, 'We need police to watch our streets not CCTV cameras', p. 14.