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Controversial from the start

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TAX rorters, illegal migrants, welfare cheats ... there were a lot of them about, so cabinet decided there was a way to stop the rip-offs merchants: the Australia Card.

On June 24, 1985, it considered a report by an inter-departmental committee on the introduction of national identity numbers, which recommended the issuing of a card with a number, name, photograph and signature to all citizens and permanent residents over age 18, beginning in 1987.



Australia card sample.

It was a fraught undertaking.

Civil libertarians cranked up, business did not like it and nor did the Australian Democrats. And from the start there were administrative problems. Health minister Neal Blewett told cabinet that while there appeared to be general support, it was doubtful that the tax benefits alone would secure the acceptance of vital groups such as the Democrats. Dr Blewett suggested emphasising the benefits of identifying illegal immigrants and preventing welfare fraud.

Cabinet agreed to introduce the Australia Card and on September 19 treasurer Paul Keating announced it as part of his tax reform statement.

Cabinet did retreat from the photograph proposal - mainly because it was too difficult to implement - but did stipulate the Australia Card could not be used in private databases.

Legislation was introduced in 1986 but failed to pass the Senate. The Australia Card died a quiet death in 1987 although its close cousin, the tax file number, appeared in 1988.