

British government backs down over database plan

April 27 2009, By JILL LAWLESS , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- The British government said Monday it wants communications companies to keep records of every phone call, e-mail and Web site visit made in the country. But it has decided not to set up a national database of the information, a proposal that had been condemned as a "Big Brother"-style invasion of privacy by civil liberties groups.

The government said in October it was considering a central database of phone and Internet traffic as part of a high-tech strategy to fight terrorism and crime.

But Home [Secretary](#) Jacqui Smith said Monday the plan had been dropped.

A document outlining the department's proposals said the government "recognizes the privacy implications" of a database and "does not propose to pursue this approach."

Instead, the government said it was backing a "middle way" that would see service providers store and organize information on every individual's phone and [Internet traffic](#) so that it could be accessed by police and other authorities on request.

The Home Office estimated introducing the new system would cost up to 2 billion pounds (\$3 billion).

Under current rules, British Internet service providers are already

required to store records of Web and e-mail traffic for a year. The new proposals would also require them to retain details of communications that originated in other countries but passed across British networks - for example if someone in Britain accessed a U.S.-based e-mail account.

Industry group the Internet Service Providers Association said companies would want the government to compensate them for the cost of keeping the data. Secretary-general Nicholas Lansman said the group would hold talks with the Home Office on details of the proposal.

The government said providers would not store the content of calls, e-mails or [Internet use](#). They would retain details of times, dates, phone numbers, e-mail addresses and Web site URLs.

Smith said officials had to strike "a delicate balance between privacy and security," but insisted police and intelligence agencies needed more tools to fight crime and terrorism in an ever-more complex online world.

"Advances in communications mean that there are ever more sophisticated ways to communicate and we need to ensure that we keep up with the technology being used by those who would seek to do us harm," Smith said.

The proposals are still a long way from becoming law. The government is seeking public comment until July, and widespread opposition is expected.

Chris Grayling, law-and-order spokesman for the opposition Conservatives, said the government had "built a culture of surveillance" and should scale down its proposals.

"Too many parts of government have too many powers to snoop on innocent people and that's really got to change," he said.

The government said there would be strict safeguards on who could access the information, but critics say existing surveillance powers have been abused by local authorities investigating relatively trivial offenses such as littering or failing to clean up dog mess.

That led the government in December to say it would clamp down on abuses of surveillance laws.

Trust in the government also has been hit by a series of lost data incidents. In November, a government department lost a disk that contained the names, addresses and bank details of 25 million people.

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