



## Population database will move to India

Protests at offshore move for lists of births, marriages and deaths

**David Hencke, Westminster correspondent**  
**Thursday June 23, 2005**

### Guardian

A database containing details of every birth, marriage and death in England and Wales since 1837 - all 250m of them - is to be transferred to India in one of the biggest offshore contracting deals ever to be signed by the government.

The controversial deal - due to be signed in a fortnight - is going ahead despite criticism from MPs, peers and trade unions that to transfer the information could be illegal, could put people's personal data at risk and could lead to inaccuracies in historical registers.

The digitisation of the registers is seen by the government as a huge step forward in meeting booming public demand for instant access to ancestors' records as a result of a growing interest in genealogy. Demand is up 13% a year, with 2.2m applications annually.

The move would create 1,000 jobs under a contract to be signed with Siemens Business Services by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), but most of the work will be done in Madras, in India.

A spokesman for ONS said yesterday that the computerised records from individual registrars would be scanned in the United Kingdom and then sent by an encrypted link to India to form part of a new digital database. He said the contract would insist on a minimum of 99.5% accuracy and special provisions to ensure a high level of confidentiality.

The news provoked a furious reaction from trade unions and MPs who have tabled a motion objecting to the deal, which has already been criticised by two Parliamentary committees.

Mark Serwotka, general secretary of the Public and Commercial Services Union, said yesterday: "Not only is this highly irregular, but it is outrageous that a government will so readily dismiss the concerns of both houses of parliament in handing over the records of 250 million people to a third party halfway across the globe .

"Ministers need to intervene, stopping ONS playing fast and loose with such valuable and sensitive information, and ensure that the population's personal information remains in the hands of the public sector."

MPs and peers originally accused the government of trying to bypass parliament by pushing the deal through under fast-track regulation, and demanded that the deal be properly scrutinised.

They were anxious about the security of the information and concerned that future records could become inaccurate, with implications for the calculation of population estimates, which are used to calculate council funding.

The MPs also questioned whether the move was lawful without a new act of parliament because the Births and Deaths Registration Act forbids the information leaving England and Wales. Evidence was also given to them suggesting that an Indian workforce may have difficulty spelling complex Welsh and English names.

The MPs' motion tabled today by John McDonnell, Labour MP for Hayes and Harlington, demands that the government drop the plans to move the information offshore.

Guardian Unlimited © Guardian Newspapers Limited 2005