

Dutton's plan for a surveillance state

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We've all seen it in some American police drama: the line-up from which a victim of crime is asked to pick out the perpetrator among a range of suspects.

Now envision a situation where those suspects are selected by an algorithm capable of scanning the biometric data of almost every citizen of the country, held on a single central government database. Where we are all potential suspects, all the time, and, unlike those in an old-fashioned line-up, are completely unaware of it. Where any one of us – particularly if we are female or a person of colour – could be falsely identified on the basis of a picture taken as we go about our daily life, on the street or at the football. Where the state could go after dissenters, in the style of the crackdown on protesters in Hong Kong.

In summary, you have the basis of a regime of mass surveillance, enabled by artificial intelligence. And you have the future as envisioned by Peter Dutton's Department of Home Affairs.

“The perpetual line-up” is how Emily Howie, legal director at the Human Rights Law Centre, describes the consequence of two pieces of legislation proposed by the government. It's a phrase borrowed from academic researchers at Georgetown University in Washington, DC,

who in 2016 compiled a paper on the threats posed to personal privacy and civil liberties by the widespread use of facial recognition technology.

They were alarmed to find that one in two Americans was in a law-enforcement facial recognition database. But what is proposed in the Identity-matching Services Bill 2019 and the Australian Passports Amendment (Identity-matching Services) Bill 2019 is even more wide-ranging. Here, the database would include anyone who has a passport, driver's licence or other photographic identification held by federal, state or territory governments. That is to say, almost everyone.