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TX: 17.04.03 – BLUE BADGE THEFT

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BARCLAY

A You and Yours investigation has revealed that thousands of disability parking permits are being stolen every year. The stolen blue badges are being sold in pubs and garages across the country. We were offered one at the bargain price of £40.00 in a garage in North London. One official spokesman spoke of an epidemic of blue badge theft and misuse that's undermining the entire system. Poraic O'Brien reports.

O'BRIEN

If I drove to work everyday and parked in this car park it would cost me £150.00 a week, that's £5.00 for the London Congestion Charge and £25.00 for a day's parking. A blue badge enables the holder to avoid these costs, so it's become very valuable indeed. For the disabled driver the badge is the key to accessible city living, for the street criminal it's easy money.

FOX

My name's Theresa Fox, I'm a wheelchair user, I've got multiple sclerosis. The first time the badge was actually stolen a few months ago it was parked outside the house. I suddenly opened the door in the morning and there was broken glass everywhere and the badge had gone.

O'BRIEN

How did you feel when you saw that?

FOX

Really sick. It's not something I can do without.

O'BRIEN

And that wasn't the only this happened?

FOX

No I'd just got everything fixed - got the badge replaced, the car replaced - and parked in another disabled bay on the other side of Camden, went to the swimming baths with the children, came out and it had happened again - there's broken glass all over the pavement and the badge, the newly replaced badge, had gone. It really is the lowest of the low kind of crime.

O'BRIEN

Surprisingly neither the Department of Transport nor the police actually keep figures on how many blue badges are stolen in each year, so You and Yours surveyed 12 inner city councils across the UK to find out the extent of the problem. In Camden, for example, where Theresa lives, 2,400 blue badges were issued last year, 1,000 were reported lost or stolen. And it's not just a London problem.

WATSON

Well in Glasgow we're experiencing what I would describe as an epidemic of blue badge misuse and theft.

O'BRIEN

Alistair Watson is a local councillor in Glasgow.

WATSON

It's a beginning of a niche trade for the criminal fraternity. So I think we're dealing with something here that quite frankly has got the potential of running out of control. In one day we inspected 90 vehicles along with the police and in that particular day a third of the vehicles were not entitled to use that badge.

O'BRIEN

Our survey of 12 local authorities revealed that over 4,000 badges were reported lost or stolen last year. At the top of the league comes the London borough of Tower Hamlets, where a total of 1200 had disappeared. So why is it so easy for stolen badges to be displayed by unauthorised users? Carl Powell is head of transport at Westminster Council. He explains that it's all down to a simple design cock-up.

POWELL

We've recently had a new badge, one has to say fostered on us by Europe to an extent, which is European friendly and we've actually got a copy in front of us here and if I just show you what the front side looks like - it has a disabled image and it has an issue and expiry date but then other than a serial number it has no means of identification. And you might be a bit surprised to see, if I turn it over, that the photograph of the owner of that badge, their name and their signature, is actually on the backside, in other words it's on the side that will be face down on the dashboard, so if a parking attendant is trying to verify whether this is a fraudulent badge or whether it's a badge that's being used legitimately all of the key information is hidden from his view.

O'BRIEN

Well at least if a parking attendant comes across a person and their car they can ask to see the underside of the badge - right? Wrong. Jane Wilmoth advises the Government on transport issues affecting disabled people.

WILMOTH

It's an amazing fact that currently there are no formal powers to inspect badges in England and Wales. Which is a different situation from that in Scotland.

O'BRIEN

So are you telling me Jane that officials can't actually check whether the badge is being misused or not?

WILMOTH

That is the current position. They cannot ask a disabled person holding a badge to give it to them, to show them the photograph, because there are some misconceptions that this may be invading their privacy. Actually, more importantly, to make sure that the right person is using the badge to protect the blue badge scheme. It is not a fair and equitable scheme, it is administered differently across different parts of the country and many people think this is grossly unfair, in fact it is a postcode lottery.

O'BRIEN

Unfair, badly administered, misused - who's responsible? Ann Fry's a civil servant in charge of the Government's transport and mobility unit. I started by asking her why her department didn't even keep figures on how many badges are stolen each year.

FRY

The issuing of the badges is a matter for local authorities. We issue the advice on which they give out the badges but we don't have any control over what happens at a local level.

O'BRIEN

We have evidence that thousands of these badges are being stolen each year, surely that's a national issue?

FRY

Well it seems to me that's a matter for the police, it's a criminal offence so it's something that should be being dealt with at a local level where the crime occurs.

O'BRIEN

But one of the problems that we've come across is in the actual design of the badge - why did you adopt a system with such an obvious design flaw?

FRY

Essentially because that's what disabled people asked us to do because they were concerned for their own personal security. What people were frightened of was if a badge was displaying a photograph, details perhaps of a woman, that anyone passing in the street could see it actually makes disabled women, in particular, very vulnerable.

O'BRIEN

But in England and Wales authorities don't even have the power to inspect badges - isn't that correct?

FRY

They don't have the power to insist, they can certainly request to see the badge and that's how they mostly go on.

O'BRIEN

But somebody could just say no.

FRY

They can say no and that's why we're going to take powers, as soon as we can, to give authorities the powers to inspect. What we need to do, I think, is, as we're going to do, take the powers so that it's easier to inspect the badges, it's easier to enforce against abuse. We're also going to look at setting up a national database so we do have proper records nationally of how many badges are on issue and to whom, so that when they are being inspected it's easier to check up on has the badge been stolen that you're seeing in a vehicle?

BARCLAY

Ann Fry ending that report by Poraic O'Brien.