

Australian Labor government unveils sweeping political censorship laws

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Working closely with the Liberal-National Coalition, the Australian Labor government is rushing to ram through four far-reaching political censorship bills in the final parliamentary sessions before the next federal election, which it must call by May.

The bipartisan Labor-Coalition laws would (1) ban access to social media completely for teenagers up to the age of 16, (2) impose jail terms of up to seven years for circulating personal information about Gaza genocide supporters and other warmongers, and (3) up to seven years for supposed “hate speech” that threatens “the peace, order and good government of the Commonwealth” and (4) punish alleged online “misinformation,” particularly anti-government comment.

Taken together, these provisions would result in a wartime-style censorship regime not seen in Australia since World Wars I and II, when opposition to these imperialist wars was essentially outlawed and anti-war and socialist leaders were imprisoned.

This is occurring today under conditions in which the already limited popular support for Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s government is collapsing, above all because of its deep attacks on working-class conditions and its ongoing support for the escalating US-armed Israel genocide in Gaza and US militarism globally.

The growing hostility has produced, according to the corporate media polls, the near-certainty of a “hung” parliament and a fragile minority government after the election, whether headed by Labor or the Coalition, amid mounting social unrest and political disaffection.

The bills being proposed by Labor and the Coalition are a warning of the anti-democratic measures that the corporate and political ruling class will take to suppress dissent and opposition in the period ahead, particularly as the US-led war drive intensifies, regardless of the outcome of the impending election.

First, Albanese declared last week that his government would legislate before the end of the year to set a minimum age limit, between 14 and 16, for teenagers to access any social media platform, without revealing how this ban would be implemented or enforced.

This is a far-reaching attack on the rights of young people to access information and communicate, free of the lies, distortions and propaganda of the corporate-controlled media, the real source of misinformation. That has included promoting the “weapons of mass destruction” fraud to justify the barbaric US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and demonising opposition to the Gaza genocide as antisemitic or “terrorist.”

Albanese said the government would run an unspecified “age verification trial” before introducing age minimum laws this year. This could include the use of facial recognition technology or other means of data-tracking and surveillance. That poses a direct threat to the fundamental democratic rights of all internet users, as well as

those of young people.

The law would put Australia, along with the US, among the first countries in the world to impose age restrictions on social media. Previous attempts, including by the European Union, have stalled following complaints about reducing the online rights of teenagers, but this offensive is continuing globally.

In Brazil, a Supreme Court judge recently announced the indefinite suspension of X/Twitter, blocking millions of people from one of their main sources of information and communication with an international audience.

Young people around the planet, like the rest of the population, are connected via social media like never before in human history. The capitalist class regards that a threat to its rule amid mounting social inequality, political unrest and a plunge into war.

The opposition and horror to the genocidal barbarity being inflicted on the Palestinian people by the Israeli government has been fuelled in part by the access to information through social media. This is independent of the mainstream media outlets that in the most cases support and justify Israel’s actions.

Australia has one of the world’s most online populations, with four-fifths of its 26 million people on social media according to tech industry figures. Three quarters of Australians aged 12 to 17 had used YouTube or Instagram, a 2023 University of Sydney study found.

Experts have condemned the proposed ban, challenging the unsubstantiated government and corporate media claims that social media is harming the mental health of young people.

Daniel Angus, director of the Queensland University of Technology Digital Media Research Centre, said: “This knee-jerk move ... threatens to create serious harm by excluding young people from meaningful, healthy participation in the digital world, potentially driving them to lower quality online spaces.” It would remove “an important means of social connection,” he wrote on LinkedIn.

To claim support for the ban, Albanese cited the Alannah & Madeline Foundation, a charity committed to protecting children from online harm. But Sarah Davies, the foundation’s chief executive, told the media:

“A massive concern for us is that actually children and young people don’t think this is a good idea ... There are cohorts of children and young people who find the use of tech and social media incredibly empowering and positive, and basically we will be denying them that ability.”

Davies called instead for serious regulation of tech companies—not just social media—including banning the selling of data of young people, restricting algorithms that selectively direct people to favoured sites and forcing tech companies to give users the highest privacy

settings by default.

While Davies did not say so, her comments highlight the real source of “social harm”—the corporate control of both social and non-social media, permitting billionaires such as Rupert Murdoch and Elon Musk to determine content.

The proposed laws would reportedly lay out a broad definition of “social media services” that would drag into its net any service that enables online social interaction between two or more people, allows people to connect with some or all other users and allows them to post material to that service, as well as search engines and app stores.

Games popular with children such as Roblox, chat apps like Discord and streaming platforms like Twitch could be banned.

“Doxxing,” “hate speech” and “misinformation”

Second, under the guise of updating the Privacy Act, the Albanese government introduced a bill last Thursday to outlaw the so-called malicious release of personal data online, known as doxxing, punishable by up to seven years in prison.

The new crime’s definition is deliberately vague. It covers any release of personal information “where a reasonable person would consider the conduct to be, in all the circumstances, menacing or harassing.”

This law is explicitly aimed, in the first instance, at prosecuting opponents of the Gaza genocide, after much-publicised complaints that details of members of a Zionist WhatsApp group were published online in February.

Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus told parliament: “The creation of this offence also responds to a recent, shocking incident of a group who were targeted with doxxing on the basis of their religion.”

This turns reality on its head. The WhatsApp group served as a vehicle for various Zionists to make vexatious complaints to employers targeting Palestinian activists, dig up dirt on perceived opponents and doxx medical professionals.

Doctors were anonymously reported to the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency—threatened with de-registration—on the basis of fraudulent allegations of antisemitism for having publicly opposed Israel’s mass murder of Palestinians. The doxxing laws would seek to outlaw any exposure of such witch-hunting activities.

Alleged victims of a “serious” invasion of privacy would also be given the right to sue for damages, with exemptions for corporate media journalists, police and intelligence agencies. At the same time, business data collection and trading would be protected, with the definition of “personal information” excluding digital identifiers, which enable targeted advertising.

Third, the government also introduced laws last Thursday to create new penalties of up to seven years in jail for “hate crimes.” These consist of making comments deemed to be threatening force or violence against a group or member of a group, including on the basis of race, gender or “political opinion.”

This test is amorphous as well, based on whether “a reasonable member of the targeted group would fear that the threat will be carried out.” The punishment would rise from five to seven years’ imprisonment if “the threat, if carried out, would threaten the peace, order and good government of the Commonwealth.” That could cover any comment seen as a danger to the political establishment or the

capitalist system.

Also, a person could now be prosecuted if they did not intend force or violence to result but were merely “reckless” as to that possibility. A previous defence of making comments in “good faith” would be removed too.

Fourth, on the same day, the government tabled a Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation bill to fine internet platforms up to 5 percent of their global revenue for failing to prevent the spread of “misinformation” online.

This would require tech platforms to set codes of conduct governing how they shut down “misinformation” or “disinformation.” That would be material that allegedly “is reasonably likely to cause or contribute to serious harm.”

That “harm” could be to election integrity or public health, designated “critical infrastructure” or emergency services, or “the Australian economy, including harm to public confidence in the banking system or financial markets.”

This could cover any criticism of the financial elite or anti-capitalist sentiment.

“Disinformation” is loosely defined as existing “if there are grounds to suspect that the person disseminating, or causing the dissemination of, the content intends that the content deceive another person.”

The actual codes of conduct would be largely left to the discretion of the digital platform conglomerates, which have long records of blocking anti-war and socialist postings. At the same time, the bill protects “professional news content” produced by officially accredited media outlets—the main sources of misinformation.

These measures are unprecedented, except in wartime. Nothing like this has been seen since World War II, when the federal governments, first conservative and then Labor, issued regulations to place the entire press, broadcasting and film industry under the control of a Director General of Information, who was directly responsible to the prime minister and the war cabinet.

National Security regulations outlawed “interference in the war effort,” such as industrial action that held up war production, supposed disloyal statements and undermining public morale by spreading false rumours. Police were handed wide powers of arrest on suspicion of any such conduct.

After police raids on their offices and homes, three Trotskyists were jailed for up to 12 months for possessing literature exposing the imperialist character of the war, calling for the election of soldiers’ committees in the army, and hence “causing disaffection” in the armed forces.

Today’s bipartisan rush of censorship bills is another warning that preparations for involvement in a potential US-led nuclear war against China are well advanced. The enactment of such wide-ranging censorship laws is an attempt to prevent the inevitable mass anti-war movement that will arise.



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