

Australian Labor government faces widespread opposition to its “misinformation” laws

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The Albanese Labor government confronts public hostility to its Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation Bill, which is a form of political censorship. The bill faces defeat in the Senate, adding to the government’s growing crisis, despite it managing to push the bill through the House of Representatives last Thursday.

A Senate committee inquiry into the bill is currently underway, after the planned legislation triggered more than 24,000 mostly critical submissions. This public response reflects wide concern over the government’s bid to suppress online material that is deemed by a government agency or the social media giants to be politically or economically harmful.

At a hearing on Monday, legal experts also warned that the bill could be unconstitutional. It could violate even the weak, implied freedom of political communication that the High Court has found in Australia’s colonial-era 1901 Constitution.

Nonetheless, the government is intent on trying to get the legislation through parliament before the next federal election, which must be called by May. It has spent the past year revising and honing the bill to attempt to quell opposition.

The bill is a centrepiece of Labor’s four-pronged attack on the basic democratic right of free speech.

Labor’s other legislation would (1) ban access to social media for teenagers up to the age of 16, (2) impose jail terms of up to seven years for revealing publicly-unavailable information about supporters of the Gaza genocide and other warmongers, and (3) set prison sentences of up to seven years for supposed “hate speech” that threatens “the peace, order and good government of the Commonwealth.”

The Misinformation and Disinformation Bill seeks to

give the government-appointed Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) unprecedented powers, including to fine social media platforms for not adequately shutting down “harmful” material.

The bill would also hand the communications minister powers to personally order what would be stage-managed “Misinformation Investigations and Misinformation Hearings.”

The bill’s official explanatory memorandum points to the legislation’s far-reaching potential to silence dissent. It defines misinformation as content containing information that is “reasonably verifiable as false, misleading or deceptive.” Information includes “opinions, claims, commentary and invective.”

“Disinformation” is equally vaguely 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.”

Who decides whether an opinion is “reasonably verifiable?” What are “grounds to suspect?” These terms obviously leave vast scope for blocking commentary that ACMA, an agency of the capitalist state apparatus, or a social media conglomerate, such as multi-billionaire Elon Musk’s X, decides is not acceptable.

The bill would compel all tech platforms to set codes of conduct governing how they shut down “misinformation” and “disinformation.” That would be material that allegedly “is reasonably likely to cause or contribute to serious harm”—another amorphous and politically-loaded test.

The actual codes of conduct would be largely left to the discretion of the corporate digital platforms, like Google and Facebook, which have long records of blocking or burying anti-war and socialist postings, notably articles on

the *World Socialist Web Site*.

By contrast, the bill exempts “professional news content” produced by officially accredited corporate media outlets, which are the main sources of political cover-up, distortion and other forms of public misinformation.

The bill’s targeted “serious harm” could be to the “integrity” of the electoral system or to public health, designated “critical infrastructure” or “the Australian economy, including harm to public confidence in the banking system or financial markets.”

The latter phrase could cover any anti-capitalist sentiment or criticism of the financial elite. That is indicated by several of the examples provided in the government’s explanatory memorandum.

One example is: “In March 2023, posts on social media regarding the financial health of Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) went viral, and in response, customers withdrew \$42 billion in just a few hours. SVB was placed under receivership the following day.”

The explanatory memorandum thus blames social media, not the inflated banking system, for the SVB collapse. It adds concern that such events could “undermine public confidence in the banking system as a whole,” noting that following SVB’s failure, “the share price of Switzerland’s Credit Suisse fell 30 percent.”

As another example, “a study on the impact of ‘disinforming news’ in the lead up to the federal election in Germany in 2017 found that ‘because of its disruptive, right-leaning nature’, this type of content ‘apparently alienated voters from the main governing party’ and ‘drove them into the arms’ of the right-wing populist party AfD.”

Again, social media, not economic hardship and political discontent, is accused of undercutting “the main governing party.” Shutting down such material would constitute outright political censorship.

Other examples accuse Russia and China of using social media to conduct global “covert influence operations.” That dovetails with the alignment of both the Labor government and the Liberal-National Coalition behind the escalating US-led military and economic offensives against them.

Some of the criticism of the bill has come from the far-right, including Musk, who branded Albanese and the government as “far left Fascists” for seeking to pass the laws. Likewise, Murdoch and Nine media publications and TV shows have denounced the bill, falsely posturing as champions of free speech, resulting in the Coalition

opposing it.

As always, however, any censorship, even if nominally directed against far-right agitation, will be centrally directed against left-wing and socialist opposition.

Popular support for Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s government is disintegrating, above all because of its deep attacks on working-class conditions and its ongoing support for the escalating US-armed Israel genocide in Gaza, the US-NATO war in Ukraine against Russia and US militarism globally, especially against China.

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

The bill and Labor’s other censorship laws are a warning of the anti-democratic measures that the corporate ruling class and its political establishment will take to suppress dissent and opposition in the period ahead, particularly as the US-led war drive intensifies.

Taken together, Labor’s 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.

In the US, the warmongering and anti-working-class policies of the Biden-Harris Democrat administration have paved the way for the fascistic Donald Trump.

Similarly, while pledging to “work together” with Trump, the Labor government is pursuing a pro-US war agenda, with repressive measures to stifle dissent, opening the door for a far-right Coalition government.



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