

# Widespread opposition to Australia's social media ban for under 16s

Oscar Grenfell  
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Teaming up with the far-right Liberal-National Coalition, the Australian Labor government rushed laws through parliament last Thursday banning children under the age of 16 from accessing social media. It did so despite widespread opposition from young people, parents, youth advocates and privacy experts, and without any concrete explanation of how the measure would be implemented.

The social media bill was among 31 pieces of legislation rammed through the Senate in the final parliamentary sitting day of the year.

The Greens aided Labor in suspending debate to get the laws through. They voted for 27 government bills, including handouts to the property developers and corporations. Labor and the Coalition then joined to pass three draconian anti-immigrant bills, providing for mass deportations, and the social media ban.

The ban has attracted substantial international coverage because it is the first of its kind, targeting an entire cohort, in an ostensibly democratic country. The fact that no other government has attempted such a ban, including those engaged in widespread censorship of the internet, is telling of the far-reaching character of the measure, and the reality that it may be impossible to implement.

In seeking to justify the ban, Labor MPs have spoken vaguely of safety dangers online, which are hardly new, and particularly of the mental health impacts of social media on children. The government, however, has shown no interest in boosting mental health assistance to youth. It is in fact slashing billions of dollars from the National Disability Insurance Scheme, the market-based funding mechanism for most disability programs across the country.

The implausibility of the official rationale is because it is a lie. Under the cynical cover of protecting children, Labor is seeking to impose further government and state control of the internet. The government's clear impulse, accelerated by mass hostility to the Gaza genocide, substantially fuelled by information on social media, is to shut down oppositional discussion and content online.

The lead up to the passage of the bill was marked by

opposition from diverse sources, and the inability of the government to explain its own far-reaching policy.

In a September 10 statement, for instance, the country's leading mental health organisations warned that the ban would likely worsen psychological problems among young people.

Signed by Beyond Blue, the Black Dog Institute, Headspace and seven other prominent organisations, it warned: "The proposed social media ban will risk cutting young people across Australia off from mental health support, exposing them to new harms, and leaving many without any support." The statement noted recent research, showing that as many as 73 percent of young people report having used social media for mental health support.

The government simply ignored the statement.

After the passage of the legislation, while crowing over the ban at a press conference, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese was asked about its potentially deleterious consequences for gay and minority youth, whose only means of social connection and expression is often social media. Albanese could not really answer, instead making buffoonish comments about the importance of "all Australians" having more face-to-face conversations.

Similar responses have been made by the government to young people who have passionately condemned the ban and pointed to their use of social media not only for social connections, but also for such varied interests as arts, sports and news reportage.

In the weeks leading up to the passage of the bill, it became apparent that the government did not have a clear conception of its own measure.

Government spokespeople indicated that YouTube would be covered by the ban, despite the fact that its primary purpose is to upload and view carefully moderated videos, while Snapchat potentially would not be affected, despite experts warning that its design, based around private messaging, creates risks to youth safety.

The situation descended into absurdity. The Wiggles, a performance group pitched to preschool children, waged a

successful campaign for YouTube to be excluded from the legislation, while the government backflipped on its inexplicable support for Snapchat.

Young people are the immediate target of the measure, because of ruling-class fears that they are being politicised by the reality of genocide, militarism, environmental destruction and massive social inequality. Over recent years, school-aged children in Australia have used social media to organise significant protests, including mass climate strikes and demonstrations opposing the Labor government's complicity in the Gaza genocide.

The ban, however, is not simply targeted at children. While the government has dodged the question of its enforcement, such a measure would inevitably require determining the age of all social media users. That means that the ban would impact the entire population, effectively ending relative online anonymity and increasing the surveillance power of the social media behemoths and state agencies.

In a cynical bid to allay those fears, the government amended the bill before its passage, with purported privacy provisions. That was in part driven by a minority of Coalition MPs, who have postured as “free speech” supporters as part of their cultivation of a right-wing, quasi-libertarian base.

The provisions, however, are exceptionally vague. Under the bill, it will be the responsibility of the social media companies to ensure age compliancy. That is, even as Albanese and his ministers rail against the tech barons such as Elon Musk, they are proposing to hand them substantial power over the population.

The bill includes vague provisions against the corporations storing such data for extended periods, or using them for other purposes. But these provisions are clearly not worth the paper they are written on.

In the most heavily-promoted amendment, the social media corporations are prohibited from insisting that users provide them with government-issued identification to ensure age compliance. The bill, however, allows the social media companies to request such identification, so long as an alternative option is also provided.

As technology experts have stated, that alternative would likely be some form of biometric facial scanning. Internet users, therefore, will be given the option of handing over their sensitive identification to the social media giants, or having their face scanned.

The far-reaching nature of the bill is also indicated by the fact that it does not list the social media companies covered. Instead, it gives a very general set of criteria for what sort of websites could be covered, including that “the service allows end-users to link to, or interact with, some or all of the other

end-users” and “the service allows end-users to post material on the service.” It will then be up to the government to introduce legislative rules specifying targeted websites.

The ban will not come into effect immediately, but will follow a trial. That is set to last for only a few months, from January to March, and involve a miniscule sample size of just 1,200 people across the country.

The passage of such sweeping legislation, without any coherent rationale or explanation, points to the increasing turn to authoritarian measures. With an election due by May, Labor is in a deepening crisis, and the entire parliamentary establishment is widely despised, continuing a decades-long trend of a rupture between ordinary people and the political elites. The mainstream media too is viewed with broad suspicion and distrust, with social media increasingly the source to which people turn for news and information.

This progressive and democratic tendency has been under attack by governments for years, as they have escalated their drive to imperialist war and accompanying domestic repression.

A significant turning point came in 2017, when Google, acting in concert with US government agencies, began artificially restricting search traffic to anti-war and alternative websites, including the *World Socialist Web Site*. The WSWWS waged a campaign against the censorship, winning widespread support, but the WSWWS continues to be subject to restrictions by search engines as well as social media platforms.

The defence of basic democratic rights, including the fight against internet censorship, raises the need for an independent political movement of the working class against the entire political establishment. Its aim must be ending the domination of capitalist governments and the major corporations over the internet, as part of the broader struggle for an egalitarian and democratic, i.e., socialist, society.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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