

Australian Labor government threatens to censor Internet

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Under the guise of “protecting children” from pornography and X-rated violence, the Australian Labor government has announced that it will attempt to censor local internet access. Labor’s plans, which were mooted by Minister for Communications Stephen Conroy on December 31, constitute a direct attack on freedom of expression.

While the government has not yet provided exact details, Conroy told the media that it would censor online child pornography and other “inappropriate material” by compelling local Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to block websites listed by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA). The blacklist would be updated by the government regulatory body in consultation with the Australian Federal Police, and international agencies such as Interpol and the FBI.

“Labor makes no apologies to those that argue that any regulation of the Internet is like going down the Chinese road,” Conroy told the media.

“If people equate freedom of speech with watching child pornography, then the Rudd-Labor Government is going to disagree,” he insisted, implying that anyone opposing these measures was aiding child pornographers.

When Labor’s Internet censorship policies were announced just prior to the recent federal election some commentators suggested that the filtering system might not be compulsory—i.e., that individual users would have to notify their provider if they wanted to have their content blocked.

Conroy made clear on December 31, however, that this would not be the case and that the system would be mandatory. Those who don’t want their content filtered will have to inform their provider. This means that people choosing to “opt out” will be noted, and could

face ongoing government scrutiny of their Internet use.

Notwithstanding Conroy’s denial that the government was “going down the China road”, Labor’s proposals are strikingly similar to those used in that country, as well as in Iran, Singapore, North Korea, Thailand and Burma, which prevent open access to the Internet.

A spokesperson for the minister told the *Australian* newspaper last week that the ACMA would conduct filtering trials to test “the best overseas models, the best advice and the best new technologies.” But one of the “best overseas models” for Internet control is the regime implemented by the Chinese Stalinists.

According to Reporters Without Borders, China is “the world’s most advanced country in Internet filtering”, securing the agreement of Google, Yahoo! and Microsoft to censor their Chinese search engines.

The journalists’ lobby group also noted that at least 60 Internet users have been imprisoned around the world—50 of them in China. None of these individuals has been jailed for child pornography or X-rated violence, but for posting websites, writing blogs or sending emails deemed to be anti-government or subversive.

Opposition

Labor’s Internet censorship proposals have been widely condemned by the Information Technology industry, civil liberties organisations, scientist and sections of the media.

Corporate media journalists and IT industry critics have pointed out that mandatory filtering of child pornography from the Internet will be costly and dramatically slow Australian broadband speed, already regarded as substandard by current international standards. It will also, they say, be ultimately ineffective.

The ACMA conducted three trials—in 2001, 2003 and 2005—and discovered that it was unable to establish “clean feeds”, that legitimate content was wrongly blocked and that network speeds were drastically slashed, in some cases by as much as 78 percent. Experts also claim that it is all but impossible to block child pornography and X-rated violence because of the massive scale of such content.

The ACMA currently has a list of 1,000 banned child pornography websites. But according to anti-child-abuse groups there are more than 100,000 commercial websites offering child pornography, and more than 20,000 images of child pornography are posted on the Internet every week. Some organisations estimate that child pornography websites number in the millions.

Local scientists have argued that any further reduction in Australian broadband speed will seriously jeopardise their research in the areas of astronomy, physics and biochemistry because high-speed exchanges of scientific data will become impossible.

Australian Privacy Foundation spokesperson Roger Clarke has also denounced Labor’s plans, stating that parents and guardians, not the government, had responsibility to protect children from inappropriate material. “It’s not the government’s business to control information flows,” he said.

Clarke warned that mandatory filtering would not only be ineffective but could have substantial side-effects. “Many pages will end up getting blocked that shouldn’t be blocked,” he told the media.

One of the political factors motivating Labor’s attempts to control local internet access is the party’s concern to curry favour with right-wing Christian forces, such as Family First Senator Steve Fielding. Fielding was among several right-wing formations that denounced the former Howard government’s Internet censorship regime as inadequate and demanded mandatory internet filtering measures.

Labor does not have an outright majority in the Senate and will need the backing of Steve Fielding or independent South Australian anti-gambling senator, Nick Xenophon, to pass any future legislation. Conroy’s announcements are aimed at securing the support of this constituency. They are also related to more long-term political considerations.

The Rudd government will not protect children from pornography and X-rated violence by censoring the

Internet. The circulation of this material by adults to children is already illegal under Australian law. The government’s real concern, like that of its counterparts in China and throughout the world, is that masses of people have begun using the Internet to access alternative news and independent information, rather than the corporate-controlled media. The medium also provides the means for genuinely democratic discussion and internationally-coordinated political campaigns.

Labor’s measures would establish the means to suppress any material it deems politically “inappropriate”. And once in place it will not be difficult for this or any future government to apply its censorship measures to the Internet sites of its political opponents.



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