

Australian government exploits fascist atrocity in New Zealand to push online censorship

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The Liberal-National Coalition government, along with Labor, the Greens and the entire Australian political establishment, is cynically using the March 15 fascist massacre in Christchurch, New Zealand to escalate long-standing moves to censor social media and suppress political discussion.

On Tuesday, Prime Minister Scott Morrison summoned the Australian representatives of major social media companies, including Facebook, Google and Twitter, to a meeting in Brisbane, where he outlined a series of draconian measures aimed at forcing them to rapidly remove content.

Morrison flagged legislation that would compel the platforms to delete whatever the government deems to be “abhorrent violent material.” It would be a criminal offence for the companies to fail to comply with a government directive, punishable by massive fines. Financial penalties would increase, based on the length of time that the material was publicly viewable.

In an unprecedented move, the government has also stated that the legislation, which is still being drafted, will contain provisions for the criminal prosecution and potential jailing of social media executives and office holders who do not obey its dictates.

Following the meeting, Attorney-General Christian Porter declared that the response of the social media representatives had been “thoroughly underwhelming.” “There was unfortunately nothing in that room that would discourage the government from looking at a legislative solution to try to ensure that much, much quicker action is taken,” Porter stated.

Labor leader Bill Shorten has declared his support for the proposed legislation. The Greens have hysterically denounced “fake news” and called for an inquiry into social media.

Labor and the Greens, no less than the Coalition, have overseen the build-up of police state measures over the past two decades. They are making clear that if a Greens-backed Labor government is installed in this year’s federal election, it will deepen the assault on democratic rights.

All of the official parties and the corporate press have presented the proposed measures as an attempt to stop “hate speech” and prevent the public being exposed to “offensive” and “violent” material. They have cited the dissemination on social media platforms and websites of the Livestream video of the shooting produced by the fascist terrorist Brenton Tarrant.

These claims are a lie. They are aimed at covering up the responsibility of the political establishment and all of the major parties for the Christchurch attack and utilising the massacre to crack down on the democratic rights of ordinary people.

Tarrant’s attack was not the product of free speech or the internet. The Australian-born fascist was a highly conscious political operative with links to extreme right-wing networks in Australia and across Europe. His political outlook, based on murderous hostility to immigrants and an intense hatred of socialism, mirrors the nationalism and jingoism that has been promoted by Australian governments and all of the official parties for decades.

For the past 30 years, Labor and Coalition governments have transformed Australia into a world model for the persecution of refugees fleeing imperialist war and oppression. They have vilified asylum-seekers, while detaining them indefinitely in concentration camps in the Pacific.

The major parties and the press have demonised Muslims since 2001, as part of the bogus “war on terror,”

aimed at legitimising predatory US-led military interventions and erecting the foundations of a police state. They have stoked nationalism and anti-Chinese xenophobia to divide and disorient the working class amid a deepening social crisis produced by their pro-business policies, and to legitimise Australia's integration into US preparations for war with China.

Morrison himself was installed as prime minister in a political coup within the Liberal Party last August, spearheaded by far-right forces. He and his colleagues have sought to transform the Liberal Party into an alt-right-style movement, modelled on Trump and based on extreme nationalism, xenophobia and populism.

In reality, the calls for a crackdown on social media are directed against the mass opposition of workers, students and young people to the ruling elite's agenda of war, austerity and authoritarianism.

Since 2017, the major social media companies, working in collaboration with the US intelligence agencies, have introduced a series of algorithms to dramatically reduce traffic to socialist, progressive and anti-war websites. Facebook and Twitter have deleted hundreds of pages and accounts exposing US wars and military intrigues, and the domination of official politics by the banks and corporations.

Morrison has made clear that his government's measures are of a piece with these international efforts to suppress freedom of speech online. In the immediate wake of the Christchurch attack, he floated the possibility of a ban on all social media livestreaming.

This would prevent ordinary people from broadcasting significant social and political events and airing their views to a live audience online. Livestreaming has been used in the US, Australia and internationally to document police violence and state attacks on protests and to broadcast political demonstrations to a global audience.

Even if the government legislation does not ban livestreaming, statements by senior Coalition ministers have signalled that it will be used to crackdown on political opposition. It is entirely possible, for instance, that footage of police attacking ordinary people or prison guards brutalising detainees could be deemed "abhorrent violent material" and proscribed.

Moreover, the threat of financial and legal penalties is clearly intended to pressure the social media companies, which are already implementing online censorship, to carry out the broadest removal of content, including to protect their own lucrative operations.

Already, in the immediate aftermath of the Christchurch

attack, major Australian internet service providers blocked access to websites which had hosted Tarrant's video, even if they had subsequently removed it. Facebook has begun a purge of pages associated with the Australian far-right.

These measures will inevitably be followed by attempts to suppress left-wing and progressive pages and opposition from the working class. Morrison, and Peter Dutton, the minister for home affairs, set the stage for this, by declaring last week that it was necessary to oppose "extremism" of the "left" and the "right."

A federal Senate hearing on social media in November last year underscored the real target of online censorship.

Journalists from corporate media outlets, including Chris Zappone, the online foreign editor for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age*, warned that social media threatened "social cohesion" and was fuelling "growing distrust between the population—the citizens—and the leaders of that country."

Dr Michael Jensen, of the Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis, a government-funded think tank, said that online discussion would likely be used to weaken "the Five Eyes alliance"—the international surveillance network led by the United States, which monitors the communications of millions of ordinary people and is integral to the preparations for war. He warned of online support for Julian Assange, who is being persecuted for his role in WikiLeaks' exposure of US war crimes, mass spying and illegal diplomatic intrigues.

At the hearing, representatives of the Coalition, Labor and the Greens all expressed support for measures aimed at suppressing anti-war and progressive sentiment online.

The drive by the entire political establishment, in Australia and internationally, to social media censorship and other authoritarian measures, underscores the importance of the International Coalition of Socialist, Antiwar and Progressive Websites, initiated by the *World Socialist Web Site* in 2018 to fight back against these attacks on freedom of speech and democratic rights.



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