# Australian PM calls for new internet censorship measures at G7

**Oscar Grenfell**
**27 August 2019**

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison used a trip to the G7 international summit in France over the weekend to aggressively push for an escalation of online censorship, on the pretext of combating "violent" and "extremist" material.

Morrison's proposals were part of a months-long campaign that his government has waged to exploit the fascist terrorist attack in Christchurch last March to erode online freedom of speech.

While Australia is not a member of the G7, Morrison was invited to attend the summit and took part in a series of sideline meetings, including with US President Donald Trump. Morrison's performance underscored Australia's central role as a loyal ally of the US, and an attack dog of its global Five Eyes spying and surveillance network, which has been intimately involved in online censorship.

The centrepiece of Morrison's intervention was a call for the adoption of an international agreement that would pressure the major social media companies to report on their response to "extremist" and "terrorist" content on their platforms.

According to the Australian Associated Press, this would establish protocols for the social media corporations to regularly issue public reports on "how many attempts there were to upload violent or extremist content, how many the platform stopped before they went up, how many were posted for more than an hour, how many downloads there were, and how the company dealt with the material that was downloaded."

As in previous calls from the Australian government for more stringent regulations, the terms "violent" and "extremist" are undefined. They could include exposures of police and state violence, footage or images from demonstrations or virtually any controversial political content.

In the wake of the Christchurch attack, senior government ministers warned against "right-wing and left-wing extremism," signalling that mounting popular opposition to war, social inequality and authoritarianism is a central target of the censorship drive.

While the reporting regime would be voluntary, Australian government representatives said they anticipated that the social media companies would come under "pressure" to comply. Like other measures floated by the Morrison government, this is aimed at compelling the platforms to more aggressively remove content, lest they come under public attack from the authorities.

Significantly, Morrison's policy has been backed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which announced prior to the G7 that it would provide an unspecified funding package to facilitate its roll-out.

At a one-on-one meeting with Morrison on Sunday, OECD head Angel Gurria reportedly gushed that the Australian prime minister had played the central role in a global crackdown on the internet since the Christchurch attack.

"But then somebody has to lead the charge, to make this have staying power, to make this stick in a way. And that was your role," Gurria reportedly told Morrison, adding, "What happened then is that the idea caught fire."

Morrison's proposals have met with an enthusiastic response, because they dovetail with an attempt by governments throughout Europe and internationally to create a legislative framework for the suppression of political speech on the internet.

In March, the European parliament voted in favour of a directive which, under the guise of copyright reforms,

would enforce the use of so-called upload filters in social media. This is aimed at ensuring that all content uploaded to YouTube and other platforms is scanned in advance by powerful computer censorship programs.

Similar measures have been taken by individual European states. In January 2018, the German Network Enforcement Law came into effect, requiring operators of internet platforms with more than two million users to remove or block access to "obviously illegal content within 24 hours of receiving the complaint."

Last May, French President Emmanuel Macron called an international meeting, along with the New Zealand government, to call for social media corporations to prevent the sharing of "terrorist and violent extremist content." Macron's government has also been implicated in attempts to censor social media associated with mass "Yellow Vests" protests against social inequality and austerity.

In addition to furthering these international efforts, Morrison's intervention over the weekend was aimed at providing even more draconian measures his government is preparing to implement domestically, with a veneer of global legitimacy.

The Australian prime minister reiterated plans his government first announced in June to allow telecommunication companies and Internet Service Providers to block access to websites that host "harmful" or "extremist" content.

A spokesman for federal Communications Minister Paul Fletcher told the *Sydney Morning Herald* on the weekend that "the new blocking arrangements would give telcos the legal backing to address fringe websites that wilfully host abhorrent violent material and refuse to engage constructively with government."

The government has not specified what role it would play in determining which websites are blocked. Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, however, signalled that the police and intelligence agencies would be intimately involved, declaring in a statement: "This new protocol will better equip our agencies to rapidly detect and shut down the sharing of dangerous material online, even as a crisis may still be unfolding."

Dutton's comments raise the spectre of the government shutting-down political and news websites in the event of civil unrest or the emergence of mass oppositional movements.

In 2009, WikiLeaks published the then federal Labor government's secret list of blacklisted websites. While Labor ministers had previously claimed that targeted sites shared illicit content, such as child pornography, WikiLeaks revealed that many of the blacklisted domains were law-abiding.

The move to again ban websites follows the bipartisan passage of online censorship laws in April. The legislation makes it an offence for social media platforms not to "expeditiously" remove "abhorrent violent material," punishable with up to three years' imprisonment or fines of as much as 10 percent of the platform's annual turnover. It also compels them to report the sharing of prohibited material to the Australian Federal Police "within a reasonable time," or face massive fines.

At the time, the *New York Times* noted that the bill was establishing a new global precedent for online restrictions, declaring: "No established democracies have ever come as close to applying such sweeping restrictions on online communication."

These attacks on democratic rights are above all directed against growing social anger within the working class against militarism, inequality and authoritarianism.

Governments and the intelligence agencies are deeply fearful that social media via the internet provides the means for these sentiments to coalesce into powerful movements of opposition, by facilitating the organisation of protests, demonstrations and political gatherings. Above all, they are concerned that online platforms enable workers and youth to access genuine alternatives to the lies and government propaganda of the corporate press.

In April 2017, Google, in collaboration with the US intelligence agencies, introduced a new search engine algorithm aimed at reducing traffic to progressive, left-wing and anti-war websites. The *World Socialist Web Site* was among the hardest hit, with a 74 percent decrease in Google search referrals within months of the policy being implemented. Facebook and other social media platforms have adopted similar measures.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**wsws.org/contact**