

Australian government introduces spying app as part of back-to-work push

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Federal Australian authorities yesterday rolled-out “COVIDSafe,” a mobile phone tracking application produced by the Liberal-National Coalition government with the support of the Labor Party opposition and state and territory governments.

The app is a central component of the ruling elite’s drive to force workers back onto the job, under conditions in which the coronavirus continues to circulate within the community.

At a press conference after a meeting of the expanded national cabinet on April 16, Prime Minister Scott Morrison touted the app as one of three policies that will enable the easing of social distancing measures. The other two were an expansion of testing, which has been severely restricted since the pandemic began, and military-enforced lockdowns of local areas where outbreaks of the virus occur.

The stated purpose of the program is to enable health authorities to track the spread of COVID-19. It will supposedly do this by logging the mobile phone details of individuals with whom registered users are in close proximity for 15 minutes or more. If somebody contracts the virus, the records of those they have been near for a quarter of an hour or longer will then be scoured by state medical officials, as part of contact tracing.

As numbers of commentators have stated, even if taken on face value, the application is destined to fail its purported mission. Because of its highly contagious character, COVID-19 can be spread between people who have only the most fleeting contact.

The application would do nothing to trace the spread of the virus from an individual who coughs as they walk by several people in a supermarket, for instance. Medical experts have stated that the virus can be transmitted through surfaces and inanimate objects and

that it appears to stay in the air longer than was previously known.

The real purpose of COVIDSafe is to legitimise the profit-driven suspension of lockdown measures and to exploit the crisis to dramatically escalate state surveillance of the population. Significantly, the application is modelled on similar programs introduced by authoritarian governments in a number of Asian countries, particularly the police-state regime in Singapore.

In response to widespread public skepticism, federal government ministers have claimed that the data collected by COVIDSafe will be encrypted, stored securely. They have said that it will only be accessible to state health authorities and will not be shared with the police or any other branch of the state. Federal officials were forced to backtrack on suggestions that the application could be made compulsory, after it provoked substantial opposition.

The dubious character of the government claims that privacy will be respected are epitomised by its decision to hand control of all of the data to Amazon. There is no indication that any tender or bidding process was conducted before the massive US corporation was given the government contract.

Aside from operating a global network of warehouses, whose labour practices harken back to the dictatorial factory regimes of 19th century Britain, Amazon is known for having the closest ties to the American state apparatus. The US intelligence agencies are feared throughout the world for their mass spying operations, targeted assassinations and other violations of international law.

In 2013, Amazon secured a US government contract worth \$600 million to build and operate a private computing cloud for all 17 American intelligence

agencies. This year, it has been involved in a bitter court battle with Microsoft, over which company will receive a \$10 billion contract to manage cloud services for the Pentagon.

Under American law, US police and intelligence agencies are able to obtain information from US-registered companies, regardless of its origin. After this was widely reported, the Australian government absurdly claimed that those provisions will not apply to COVIDSafe, because it is being operated by Amazon's Australian brand and the data will be stored within Australia.

Amazon's intimate ties to the US state, however, render these assurances completely worthless. Central to the company's success, moreover, is that it constantly operates in conjunction with the US government. Moreover, the various branches of its business are globally-integrated and interconnected.

On Saturday, a group of more than 75 Australian academics and computer experts issued an open letter, demanding "transparency" from the government regarding the app.

They called for the government to release its source code and design specifications prior to its public release; for technical experts at universities and in industry to be given at least five days to examine its privacy provisions; and make expert recommendations to be adopted.

The appeal was answered by the government's hurried release of the app yesterday, before it had been subjected to any independent scrutiny.

This is of a piece with a broader assault on civil liberties, conducted by Labor and Liberal-National Coalition governments over the past two decades.

During the past several years alone, Labor and the Coalition have come together to pass legislation empowering law enforcement to break encryption. They have imposed "foreign interference" measures which provide for the illegalisation of anti-war activities and organisations, along with extended prison sentences for whistleblowers and anybody who receives or publishes classified information.

The government, with the tacit support of Labor, has spearheaded the prosecution of whistleblowers who have exposed wrongdoing by the military, tax agencies and other branches of the state. It oversaw a police raid against Newscorp political editor Annika Smethurst last

year, who was targeted for revealing government plans to formally enable the Australian Signals Directorate to conduct mass spying on the population.

The government, with the support of the Labor Party and the media, are exploiting the present crisis to escalate those plans. If the application is widely taken up, there is every reason to suspect that it will be used by the police and intelligence agencies to map social interactions as part of the preparations to suppress widespread social and political opposition.

The app has been hailed by publications that function as the mouthpieces of the financial elite. The *Australian* and the *Australian Financial Review* both published editorials this morning championing the program, and dismissing any concerns about privacy and democratic rights.

The *Australian* was particularly forthright, declaring that the app would "open the economy." It stated that the "prerequisites" for "winding back restrictions are now in place." The editorial was a crude expression of the motives of the "back to work" campaign, providing detailed financial calculations about the impact of lockdown measures on economic growth.

In reality, the government and the ruling elite are seeking to force workers back onto the job in unsafe conditions. Their sole concern is to ensure the resumed flow of corporate profits, and to use the crisis to intensify a decades-long assault on workplace rights and conditions.

That the government's useless and intrusive app is a centrepiece of this campaign underscores its fraudulent character and the fact that it is indifferent to the health, safety and rights of working people.



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