

Australian government prepares assault on privacy for under-16s social media ban

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The Australian Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is reviewing the means by which it will implement a social media ban for children under the age of 16, including the possible use of technology which severely curtails the privacy of children and other social media users.

The legislation was first announced in November last year with bipartisan support and is set to come into effect this December.

Because official identification documents such as passports cannot legally be used to check online users' ages and track individuals, the government commissioned in November 2024 a trial of different technologies to "assure" an online user's age. More than 50 companies entered the trial. The government is expected to reveal its conclusions by the end of July.

This will lead to a major attack on individual privacy forced on all Australian social media users as a result of the anti-democratic ban.

Proposed techniques for age estimation of social media users include facial analysis or tracking individuals' online metadata to determine if a user is under the age of 16. In other words, the government is preparing to grant permission for tech giants to have access to every person in Australia's personal information, track their online activity and image their faces every time they log onto social media.

In fact, facial recognition systems are so poor at estimating age that improving these tools would require a massive collection of children's facial images—something which is illegal.

Current technologies on trial include facial recognition tools which use "selfie-based" age checks and hand movement technologies. They claim that sensitive information will be stored securely on block chains.

An analysis in the *Conversation* published in May highlights that the proposed social media ban "marks a

significant shift in internet regulation. Rather than age-gating specific content such as porn or gambling, Australia is now targeting basic communication infrastructure—which is what social media have become."

Albanese's initial announcement of the proposed legislation was made on the baseless claim that "social media is causing social harm." The real purpose of the ban is to restrict access among children and teenagers to information, above all increasingly anti-establishment commentary amid a massive political crisis and explosion of militarism overseen by governments around the world.

Now the unfounded justifications for the suppression of social media access for young people is being used to call for the legislation's deepening nearly six months before it has even been implemented.

Last month, Australia's eSafety Commissioner, Julie Inman Grant, wrote an official advice to the federal minister for communications Michelle Rowland in which Grant called on the government to expand its blacklist of social media platforms to include YouTube. The original proposal included the platforms X, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and Reddit.

Inman Grant's advice to include YouTube in the list of banned platforms is based on the flimsy reasoning that 37 percent of 10- to 15-year-olds who had seen unspecified "online hate" had seen it on YouTube according to a survey conducted by the commissioner's office. According to eSafety, 21 percent of children reported their most "recent" or "impactful" experience of "online hate" occurring on YouTube.

The advice from Inman Grant has been immediately seized upon by the federal opposition Liberal-National Coalition whose shadow cabinet secretary Andrew Wallace urged that the Labor government "needs to listen" to the recommendation.

The concern around YouTube—a platform with a well-known emphasis on curating both educational and

entertainment content for children—highlights that the legislation's real aim has nothing to do with alleviating mental health problems or improving social interactions of children.

In fact, children's charity UNICEF and Australian youth mental health foundation Headspace have both raised concerns that the ban will affect the ability of youth to stay connected with family and friends.

Labor's proposed proscription on social media use for an entire cohort of the population is the first of its kind by a government in any so-called democratic country. It has been followed by similar initiatives in Britain, Ireland, Singapore and Japan.

Any claim that the attempt to prevent children and teenagers from accessing social media is bound up with mental health is a cynical fraud.

Youth mental health issues are on the rise not because of social media, but because of the destruction of social and living conditions, which are being exposed through social media.

Young people today are far worse off than their parents' and grandparents' generations. The future they face is one of joblessness, soaring living costs, lack of housing, environmental collapse, war and dictatorship.

What the ruling elite in Australia fear above all is that social media, by exposing the immense social crisis that is unfolding, is playing a critical role in radicalising an entire generation. Youth are bypassing the mainstream media outlets to find their news on social media. While there, they are also encountering new ideas and perspectives which are anti-establishment, anti-war and opposed to the interests of the ruling elite.

The attempt to ban social media access for under 16s is intended to neuter that growing radicalisation and prevent the spread of oppositional, above all left-wing sentiment.

This comes amid a broader imposition of sweeping anti-democratic legislation in Australia aimed at suppressing basic democratic rights. The initial target of this has been the protests against the US-Israeli genocide against the Palestinians, which has sparked outrage globally, particularly young people who have joined demonstrations and other actions calling for an end to Israel's ethnic cleansing and the support it enjoys from the major imperialist powers including Australia.

In Australia, young people have been at the forefront of the assault by the government on the basic right to protest and political speech.

The University of Melbourne has expelled two students and suspended two others for their involvement in pro-

Palestinian protests on campus. This followed the expulsion of pro-Palestinian students at the Australian National University, before their enrolments were reinstated after widespread opposition to the university management's move.

Management at the University of Melbourne has already been exposed for tracking its students' movements through the university Wi-Fi network as part of its investigations to identify and discipline anti-genocide protesters.

More broadly, opposition to the Gaza genocide is being smeared as antisemitism in a government-led crackdown on anti-war speech. State and federal Labor governments are employing ever more brutal methods to suppress growing opposition, as evidenced by the police assault on a pro-Palestinian protest in Sydney last month, which saw a young woman suffer horrific injuries that could see her lose sight in one eye.

Defeating the anti-democratic legislation to ban children from social media, therefore, must be seen as a part of the broader struggle to defend freedom of speech and expression, which is itself part of the fight of young people to secure their very right to a future being robbed from them by the decaying capitalist world order, which is leading to world war and dictatorship.

To find out how you can join this struggle, contact the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) today.

Email: iysseaus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/IYSSEaustralia

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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