

Australia: Police raid Canberra bar, seizing anti-fascist artwork under Labor's new "hate speech" laws

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The police raid on a Canberra music venue last week for displaying anti-fascist artwork is one of the first major enforcement actions under the Albanese Labor government's "hate speech" laws. The real target of its laws are not fascists or antisemites but those opposing Israel's genocide in Gaza and voicing hostility to extreme-right political figures.

On the evening of February 18, three uniformed ACT Policing officers entered the Dissent Cafe and Bar after an anonymous Crime Stoppers complaint about five satirical posters in the venue's windows. The works, by British-based protest art collective Grow Up Art, depict Donald Trump, Elon Musk, Benjamin Netanyahu, JD Vance and Vladimir Putin in Nazi-style uniforms under the title "The Turd Reich," next to signs reading "Sanction Israel" and "Stop Genocide."

When owner David Howe refused to hand over the posters, officers declared the premises a crime scene. The bar was shut for more than two hours, cancelling a scheduled performance. Detectives from the Major Crimes Unit were later dispatched to seize the posters.

The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) is administered by a minority Labor government with backing from the Greens.

ACT Policing Deputy Chief Paula Hudson announced that the posters were being assessed under the Combatting Antisemitism, Hate and Extremism (Criminal and Migration Laws) Act 2026. She said that if the posters were found to breach the Act, a prosecution would follow, carrying a maximum penalty of five years' imprisonment.

Hudson declared that police would "not apologise for responding appropriately to racism, hate crimes and antisemitic behaviour"—in other words, opposition to fascism and a genocidal war is being treated as a form of "hate crime."

The posters are openly anti-fascist, attacking right-wing political leaders by portraying them as Nazis. The Albanese government's hate speech laws contain exemptions where symbols are shown for "academic, educational, artistic or scientific" purposes or for the purpose of "opposing Nazi ideology, fascism or a related ideology."

The Dissent posters fall squarely under both categories. Labor's ACT government ignored these provisions, signalling

that political expression deemed unacceptable by the state will be treated as a criminal matter and forced into drawn-out legal battles.

Athol Morris, president of the Canberra Jewish Community, publicly rejected claims that the works are antisemitic, stating that the image of Netanyahu attacks his policies, not Jewish people, and asking when society had become so "glass-jawed" that it could no longer tolerate criticism of those in power.

Dissent owner David Howe, speaking yesterday with "The Sunday Shot," a YouTube program, explained that the bar had received complaints from some pro-Zionist patrons but said that these were far outweighed by popular support for the satirical posters.

Stressing the raid's connection to anti-genocide dissent, he said: "The law has been basically set up to allow for anonymous complaints to get the police to act in this way to achieve some kind of impact on businesses and people that express vaguely offensive views for the Zionists."

He added, "It seems unreal ... [with] police beating protesters to protect the travelling head of a Zionist state, and they're taking posters down simply on the basis of an anonymous complaint because they think it will offend somebody ... We are marching slowly but surely into an authoritarian regime."

The raid is the first known enforcement action in the national capital under the Commonwealth hate-symbol provisions and is being treated as a test case. It is a direct product of the framework rapidly constructed after the December 14, 2025, Bondi Beach attack.

Seizing on that tragedy, the Albanese government recalled parliament for an emergency two-day sitting on January 20–21 and rushed through the Combatting Antisemitism, Hate and Extremism Act with Coalition support.

Attorney-General Michelle Rowland boasted at the time that Labor had delivered "the strongest laws in Australia's history to combat antisemitism, hate and extremism." The legislation, in fact, arms the state with unprecedented sweeping powers: criminalising the display of "prohibited symbols" with prison terms of up to five years; allowing ministers to ban political organisations and proscribe "hate groups" by decree, and

empowering the deportation of non-citizens for loosely defined “associations.”

From the outset, it was clear these powers were aimed at opponents of genocide, not its perpetrators. In a television interview, Rowland was asked whether the new banning powers could be applied to Palestine solidarity groups that state Israel is committing genocide in Gaza. She refused to rule it out, finally admitting that if officials decided the criteria were met, “then that is the case”—that is, organisations opposing war crimes and genocide could be outlawed under so-called anti-hate laws.

The Canberra raid shows this is no longer hypothetical. It occurred not long after Israeli President Isaac Herzog left Australia following an official four-day visit. Herzog has been identified by a United Nations Commission of Inquiry as one of the Israeli leaders who incited genocide in Gaza.

The Labor government has fully backed Israel’s US-sponsored genocide in Gaza, providing military, intelligence and diplomatic support, and lining up with Washington to shield the Zionist regime at the United Nations.

Following the Bondi terror attack, it invited Herzog—an architect and public defender of the Gaza genocide—as an honoured guest and armed the state with “hate speech” laws that are now being used to criminalise art denouncing fascism and genocide, rather than those responsible for them.

Herzog’s visit itself saw thousands of police mobilised, special stop-and-search powers enacted, violent attacks on pro-Palestine protesters by NSW police at Sydney Town Hall on February 9, and more than two dozen arrests at demonstrations nationally.

The weaponisation of “hate speech” legislation has dire consequences for artists, writers and cultural workers producing satire of political leaders. The precedent established in Canberra threatens anyone who mocks fascism or imperialism with raids, seizures and prosecution.

The same reactionary logic underpinned pro-Zionist attacks on Roger Waters, who in May 2023—during a Berlin concert on his *The Dark Side of the Moon* tour—satirised Israeli settler-colonialism and Gaza ethnic cleansing by donning a Nazi-style uniform, mask and armband. Pro-Israel lobby groups and German authorities branded it “antisemitic blood libel,” triggering concert cancellations in Frankfurt and Vienna. Waters’ performance, like Dissent’s posters, mocked fascism—not Jews.

Responsibility for this attack on democratic rights rests squarely with the Labor and Greens government in the Australian Capital Territory. The territory is governed by a Labor-Greens coalition under Chief Minister Andrew Barr, which directly oversees ACT Policing. ACT Police Minister Marisa Paterson responding with deliberate evasion and saying only that she would “seek further clarification” from ACT Policing. She refused to invoke the artistic and anti-fascist exemptions, refused to question the deployment of the Major

Crimes Unit against a small bar, and refused to instruct police to halt the operation.

ACT Greens MLA Andrew Braddock has denounced the raid on the Canberra bar. Braddock called the raid “an alarming consequence of Labor’s rushed and harmful hate speech legislation.” This is not opposition, but political posturing.

Although the ACT Greens are no longer in a formal coalition with the minority Labor government, they have an official agreement to back Labor on all key legislation and therefore share responsibility for the raid and for enforcement of the hate-speech regime.

Last week’s raid is part of a coordinated and escalating assault on basic democratic rights by Australia’s political elite. This includes:

- Far-reaching measures by the NSW Labor government to ban protests and a new code of conduct empowering principals to sack teachers for anti-genocide statements, including social media posts made in their own time.
- The Albanese government’s Antisemitism Education Taskforce preparing university “report cards” designed to brand campuses as “unsafe” unless they purge pro-Palestinian sentiment and discipline staff and students.
- In Queensland, the Liberal National Party government introducing its own law enabling ministers to ban “prescribed phrases” at protests by executive fiat.

These measures are just a sample of a nationwide framework of repression. Laws enacted under the banner of combating “hate” and “antisemitism” are being wielded directly against those who oppose the genocidal policies of imperialism, while the forces responsible for war crimes and the promotion of fascism are shielded, protected and encouraged by the entire political establishment.



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