



Australian Citizens Party

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MEDIA RELEASE

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Labor and Greens should beware double-edged sword of censoring social media

Call Greens and Independent Senators to oppose the MAD (mis- and disinfo) bill (see below).

The Australian Citizens Party (ACP) emphatically opposes the Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2024, on the free speech principle that the dangers of a government regime controlling information far outweigh the dangers of false information.

False information can only be combatted with better information, whereas suppressing information a) only drives suspicion that it may be true; and b) creates scope for *any* information to be suppressed if it is inconvenient to those who wield the power to suppress it.

Furthermore, governments that attempt to control information claim their motivation is community safety, but they usually have an ulterior motive: the ulterior motive for this bill is to lock Australia into an expanding Five Eyes-overseen system of essentially *wartime* censorship.

This is evident in the fact that the Liberal-National Coalition, which now opposes this bill (but only due to the scale and intensity of the public backlash), actually initiated it when in government: on 21 March 2022, then-Communications Minister Paul Fletcher announced in a press release that “The Morrison Government will introduce legislation this year to combat harmful disinformation and misinformation online.”

Under the Morrison government, Australia had radically shifted its foreign and defence policy positions to align more closely with the United States’ open hostility towards China—even though China is Australia’s biggest trading partner—and more closely integrate with the US military, not only in the Asia-Pacific, but also in partnership with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

On ANZAC Day (April 25) 2022, then-Defence Minister, now Opposition Leader Peter Dutton declared, “Australia must prepare for war”.

Julian Assange and WikiLeaks

This is relevant to this bill because the entire official narrative of concern about mis- and disinformation has its origins not in claims made during the COVID pandemic starting in 2021, but in claims made during the 2016 US Presidential election regarding Julian Assange and WikiLeaks exposing embarrassing foreign policy and war secrets.

WikiLeaks has a reputation for 100 per cent accuracy, because it publishes leaked documents, not opinion. In 2016, WikiLeaks published leaked emails from the Democratic National Committee and Hillary Clinton’s campaign chairman John Podesta, which included, for instance, that in 2014 Clinton knew America’s ally and partner in the “war on terror” Saudi Arabia was funding the terrorist monsters ISIS then rampaging across Iraq and Syria. The Clinton campaign wouldn’t confirm or deny the emails, but claimed WikiLeaks was connected to an alleged “sophisticated Russian misinformation campaign”.

This grew into the narrative that Russia “hacked”, and otherwise influenced the US election, and that Assange and WikiLeaks were agents of Russia’s foreign interference campaign, which Assange denied and which two subsequent inquiries found no evidence for. But Assange had to be stopped: in April 2017, CIA Director Mike Pompeo—a fanatical warmonger infamous for boasting of the CIA “we lied, we cheated, we stole”—used this narrative to declare WikiLeaks a hostile intelligence agency aided by Russia, and in 2019 the Trump administration indicted Assange under the *Espionage Act* and sought his extradition from the United Kingdom, leading to him spending nearly four years in prison.

While the Morrison-Dutton government supported the US government’s persecution of Assange, majority Australian and world opinion now recognises that Assange was unjustly persecuted, and celebrates his freedom; however, the travesty he endured stemmed from the weaponisation of discredited claims of foreign disinformation, which has grown into a major international agenda that motivates this bill, evidenced in Section 13 and Section 44c.

Wartime censorship

The Assange case illustrates the self-serving nature of a law that enables the government to suppress information they can label foreign disinformation: the US government (supported by pro-US Australian politicians) has a bipartisan hatred of Assange and WikiLeaks not because they disseminated foreign disinformation, but because they exposed the lies of successive US governments, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and their allies including Australia, in relation to their wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria.

Those wars, and the truth revealed by WikiLeaks, have provoked growing anti-war sentiment and domestic political debates about regime change, the growing US military presence in Australia and AUKUS, and NATO enlargement, which challenge the Five Eyes governments' official positions at a time when they are all involved in supporting wars in Ukraine and Israel, and confronting China.

Social media has facilitated those debates, but our governments want to shut them down.

Disturbing developments in the UK illustrate the direction this desire to censor social media is heading, which should concern Australians given Communications Minister Michelle Rowland has:

- called the UK "like minded";
- signed an Online Safety and Security Memorandum of Understanding with the UK government in February 2024; and
- said on Sky News on 22 September 2024 that her misinformation bill "has been done in a way that *corresponds with our international obligations*, recognises the fact that harmful mis- and disinformation is actually having an impact on ... *Australian democracy*". (Emphasis added.)

In 2019, the UK government established a Countering Disinformation Unit (CDU), which has collaborated with intelligence agencies to "counter" disinformation, including directing social media companies to remove posts.

The CDU works in tandem with the UK Military's psychological warfare unit the 77th Brigade, which, despite government assurances to the contrary, targeted the British public during the COVID pandemic, as the British Army confirmed in June 2020.

In April 2024, the UK Parliament's Culture, Media and Sport Committee's report, *Misinformation and trusted voices*, scathingly criticised the CDU as "one of the most opaque ... in government outside of the security services", and declared: "We are concerned about the lack of transparency and accountability of the CDU and the appropriateness of its reach."

An August 2021 CDU presentation to the US National Security Council named Australia alongside the United States and Canada as countries working with the CDU.

All Australians should be extremely concerned that the mis- and disinformation bill will be used to suppress debate and the dissemination of information critical of Australia's military decisions and alliances, at a time when those issues are the subject of intense domestic debate.

Under Labor, Australia has stepped back from Peter Dutton's 2022 rhetoric about preparing for war with China, but the USA has not, and by their actions both major parties continue to support the US military build-up that is taking over Australia. This is hardly getting the attention it deserves in the "professional" media (that is excluded from being considered mis- or disinformation in this bill) unless someone like Paul Keating denounces it, but many Australians are being informed via social media, including by the ACP.

The question for the Greens, who supported Assange and whose vote Labor needs to pass this bill, is how would Dutton use this power if he was prime minister, especially if tensions with China escalate? This question illustrates why censorship is a double-edged sword.

The Greens have not opposed this bill yet—Australians should call the Greens Senators and ask them this question.

What you can do

The government can't pass this bill without the Greens and three Independents in the Senate. Call and/or email the Greens and Independent Senators (except Senator Rennick, who is a firm no vote) in your state and ask them to oppose this bill.

Click here for the list of Greens Senators:

https://www.aph.gov.au/Senators_and_Members/Parliamentarian_Search_Results?q=&sen=1&par=295&gen=0&ps=12

Click here for the list of Independent Senators:

https://www.aph.gov.au/Senators_and_Members/Parliamentarian_Search_Results?q=&sen=1&par=290&gen=0&ps=12

