



**The Hon Michelle Rowland MP**  
Minister for Communications  
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# Interview with Greg Jennett, Afternoon Briefing

**GREG JENNETT, HOST:** Behind the Treasurer and the Prime Minister, Communications Minister Michelle Rowland didn't capture headlines in Budget week last week, but within her portfolio there were significant new funding announcements, especially in the growth area of policing offensive and abusive online material. On the role of the eSafety Commissioner, Michelle Rowland is out and about explaining what \$42 million in annual funding will mean for them. She was in our Melbourne studios.

Michelle Rowland, welcome back to Afternoon Briefing. Now, you're announcing today a Budget measure, I suppose, that was foreshadowed last week - the eSafety Commissioner is getting the office's funding quadrupled. What exactly will that buy them?

**MICHELLE ROWLAND, MINISTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS:** Greg, the first priority of the Albanese Government is to keep Australians safe, and that includes in the online environment. We very much value the important work that is being done by the eSafety Commissioner but, more importantly, we recognise that not only do we have these existing harms but also emerging harms in the online space. This additional \$132 million over four years is, as you say, a quadrupling of their funding. It will enable the eSafety Commissioner to have that certainty for the office, in particular in terms of staffing. They have a very significant investigations unit in particular and a high number of very skilled staff who are performing what can often be work that is quite tortuous, which actually goes to some very distressing content. But it does enable that work to be expanded. In addition to that it means providing some certainty to a large number of people in those various areas who were on contractor status, so giving them that certainty is really important.

**JENNETT:** Right. So in relation to public service, I think the most recent annual report said they had 166 permanent staff – well, actually they work for the Communications and Media Authority – then another 70-odd contractors. I assume with the quadrupling of funding you get growth somehow commensurate with that on the numbers I just quoted?

**ROWLAND:** That is true. It also means that those people who have not had that certainty of employment do have that certainty now. More importantly than that, it means that the expanded powers that the eSafety Commissioner has had for the past year or so under the Online Safety Act, can actually be planned for with greater confidence. It also, unfortunately, reflects the fact that we have an increasing number of people who are utilising the cyberbullying scheme and the takedown requests. Those investigations personnel are continuously responding to notices. It also means that part of this branch is able to anticipate new and emerging harms. Some of those are coming in the area of AI and deep fakes, for example. We've seen very worrying trends, including the younger male cohorts that are being targeted by extortion, which is alarmingly high.

We've got those existing pressures but also these emerging harms. We want to ensure that the eSafety Commissioner has the resources that they need right across the board to keep Australians safe.

**JENNETT:** As you say, the growth in demand or growth in complaints is huge - probably even exponential. I wonder if there needs to be some further refinement in the powers here for the Commission, though. In the area of adult serious cyber abuse, I note that the number one category of harm complaint remains defamation, which was never actually intended to be covered by the eSafety Commissioner at all. Is it clogging up the system? Does it need to be filtered out?

**ROWLAND:** As you say, a lot of these complaints and a lot of the role of these investigators is to ensure that they are focusing on those areas that fall within the remit of eSafety and the definitions within the Online Safety Act. The definition is actually very clear, and it's been well understood for some time. It's about utilising a carriage service to threaten, menace, harass or otherwise harm. But investigators take every complaint seriously. The fact that some of those fall outside of that scope does not negate the need for those investigators to respond to that.

I think beyond that, it's important to understand the scale of the complaints that are coming in. One of these other aspects is ensuring that the existing resources, the awareness of eSafety and the willingness of people to utilise those and report when they do experience those harms, is maintained. We certainly don't want to discourage people. In fact, we want more people to understand the role of eSafety.

You asked earlier about some of the measures that will be used to improve eSafety's functioning as a result of the Budget last week. One of those really important areas and a focus of eSafety is outreach. That includes to regional areas, to particular cohorts that might be especially vulnerable, but getting people to understand that eSafety is there, that the resources are there and utilising those is also a huge focus.

**JENNETT:** Can I take you to a related area of your portfolio but not necessarily the eSafety Commissioner directly, Michelle Rowland? Recent reporting on pervasive online porn, particularly accessed by children, where is Australia up to on consideration of age verification to access those sites?

**ROWLAND:** Well upfront, I think I speak for across the Parliament when I say no-one wants inappropriate access to pornography or other content that is not suitable, especially for children. The eSafety Commissioner currently has powers to investigate what the various platforms are doing in order to meet their own standards. In fact, the next round of codes we have been focusing on particularly is violent, abhorrent content. But the next round will be specifically looking at pornography.

Again, I would urge your viewers to understand that there are a lot of resources currently available about limiting access. But this is a massive piece of work that's been going on for years by the eSafety Commissioner.

They have provided a report on an Age Verification Roadmap to government recently that we are considering very closely. We are also examining where this fits within other initiatives being conducted across government. They include in relation to digital identifiers, the Privacy Review that's currently being undertaken by the Attorney-General and also the operation of eSafety itself.

**JENNETT:** So, you acknowledge that privacy would be a major concern if you moved down this path, yes, with some verified digital ID system, there's still some major hurdles to overcome around privacy here?

**ROWLAND:** There certainly are. Australia is unfortunately not alone in this. When you look around the world, France, for example, is implementing a form of age verification, but the status of their legislation still remains unclear. The actual effectiveness of the proposed scheme remains unclear. I think to summarise, it would be – we would have just about every country that's concerned with this having implemented some form of age verification if there was a simple way to do it. But the reality is we need to weigh up all these concerns. At the heart of this, of course, the Albanese Government is focused on harm minimisation. We understand that unfortunately as one funnel for content might close down, another one emerges. So there's that whack-a-mole situation we have there.

There's also a situation where if you hypothetically shut down part of the internet and access to particular content, there are mechanisms for getting around that. So we want to ensure that we have a whole-of-government approach to this, that it is one that is effective but at its heart is about effective harm minimisation.

**JENNETT:** All right. And on Peter Dutton's proposal around – which he made in his Budget Speech In-Reply last week – Michelle, banning an hour either side of sporting fixtures to broadcast advertising for sports betting. Have you received any representations from the TV industry or others encouraging or discouraging, I suppose, the Government itself going down that path?

**ROWLAND:** We are as a parliament conducting an inquiry at the moment which is very wide-ranging into these very issues. I should stress that this is an inquiry of the parliament, not of the Government itself. So we will take those recommendations. It's very important to have not only the evidence base, but also to recognise that there have been changes in community standards. There have been advances in technology and the way in which people conduct these activities, including gambling and the way that it's advertised. So this wide-ranging inquiry is very timely. There hasn't been one of this scale at least in the last 10 years. We await the findings of that. Certainly, the broadcasters have made representations that have been widely reported, as has sporting codes. We will consider this as a government.

Between myself and Minister Amanda Rishworth, we have been implementing the remaining stages of the National Consumer Protection Framework. We've got other policies that are being implemented, including banning credit cards and re-looking at the Classification Scheme as it applies to simulated gambling in games. We are taking very much a whole-of-government approach, very much to this issue of minimising harms.

**JENNETT:** Yeah, a fair bit piling up in your portfolio. If I can tempt you into one other broader political question before we let you go, Michelle Rowland. On housing, are the ALP rank and file mounting some sort of uprising here against negative gearing in advance of national conference this year? There seems to be great unrest about the Albanese government's set of policies at present.

**ROWLAND:** In the lead-up to any national conference, of course, the views of the rank and file are made known. But we have made it very clear as a government that we are focused on delivering on our housing policies that we have. The best thing that we can do is ensure that the Parliament passes that. My very excellent colleague, Minister Julie Collins, has been working very hard in this area, and we intend to prosecute that case.

**JENNETT:** All right. Well, we'll keep across that with you and others in the uncertain weeks that lie ahead in the parliament. Michelle Rowland, really appreciate your time today. Thanks for joining us.

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INTERVIEW

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**SUBJECTS:** Albanese Government quadruples funding for the eSafety Commissioner;  
eSafety Commissioner's powers; Age Verification Road Map; gambling advertising; housing