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Digital law 'to silence debate', says Coalition

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The Coalition says Labor's rejigged misinformation bill will "have a chilling effect on political speech", saying the legislation clearly states the laws will apply to "information about electoral candidates or referendum proposals".

Opposition communications spokesman David Coleman, who last week accused Labor of seeking to "ram its legislation through" by the end of the year, said the areas of public speech and information sharing that would be captured by the bill were "extremely broad".

He pointed to elements of the bill that stated something was "misinformation" if it was "reasonably verifiable" as "false, misleading or deceptive" and "reasonably likely to cause or contribute to serious harm".

The bill states such harm could include "false, misleading or deceptive information about electoral candidates or referendum proposals which could have the effect of denying Australians the right to have a say in the conduct of public affairs based on informed choice".

Mr Coleman said he was concerned the bill's broad remit went to the heart of the democratic process.

"The government's own documents show that this bill would have a chilling effect on political speech in Australia," he said.

"By stating in black and white that 'information about electoral candidates or referendum proposals' can be captured as misinformation, the government is making clear that this legislation will go to the core of our democracy.

“For digital platforms to be deciding – under the threat of heavy penalties – what Australians can and cannot read about elections and referendums is completely incompatible with the basic principles of democracy.”

However, Communications Minister Michelle Rowland said misinformation was “threatening the safety and wellbeing of Australians” and warned there would be devastating consequences should her rejigged legislation not be passed by the end of the year.

“Doing nothing is not an option – and 80 per cent of Australians agree on the need to act,” she said.

“The new laws will increase transparency and hold digital platforms to account.”

Ms Rowland blasted accusations from the Coalition over her desire to pass the bill by the end of the year, and said the past government had given far shorter timeframes for similar legislation.

“The Senate inquiry process for the Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation Bill will run for nine weeks, inclusive of public submissions and hearings. This is a far greater timeframe than the two-week Senate inquiry into the Online Safety Bill that was run under the Coalition,” she said.

“It is now time for parliament to focus on getting the job done to keep Australians safe online because the majority of Australians are concerned about mis- and disinformation.”

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