

VICTORIAN LABOR

INQUIRY INTO THE IMPACTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON ELECTIONS & ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATION

Submission by the Australian Labor Party, Victorian Branch

Social media has significantly altered the volume, frequency and tone of political discourse and the sharing of news and information. We are pleased to respond to the inquiry and thank you for the opportunity to do so.

SUMMARY

Victorian Labor does not resist any regulation which helps improve truthful and respectful expression on social and political issues. It is incumbent upon all political parties and indeed citizens to ensure that the meeting place of political debate and discussion that social media has become does not become an unsafe, unfriendly or intimidating environment for individuals.

While intense political debate is commonplace and heightened emotions have always been on show in political contests, social media platforms cannot always be said to have fostered healthy and measured debate. The opportunity to unleash comment on any topic from the protection of anonymity has made political comment at times aggressive and intemperate. This will be one focus of our submission.

On the topic of authorization of political content Victorian Labor takes the position that verification of political parties isn't unwelcome; that elected representatives and the political parties of which they are a part should be conducting themselves with dignity and accountability as elected servants to their communities; but those authorization requirements fall heavily on registered political parties, while unchecked falsehoods are spread by groups that are not required to prove any legitimacy. This will also be a topic of our submission.

CIVILITY IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

One doesn't have to look very long to find abusive language or aggressive behaviour in online political discussion. Politicians and political activists confront some of the worst excesses of abusive language, intimidation and even threats. It is an occupational hazard, and one suffered by journalists, public figures and sportspeople as well as anyone making comment online. It is not simply a product of human behaviour and the political environment, but is aided and facilitated by several factors: anonymity of users online; no consequences for threatening or abusive behaviour; and publishing platforms disinclined to moderate the behaviour of their users or the truth of their claims. While individual users at the receiving end of an abusive comment will personally feel the effects of bad online behaviour and that their distress is lamentable, the greater impact is on our fundamental capacity as a society to engage in civil debate on critical issues. If we can't discuss

and share in public debate without devolving into a purely binary, aggressive and demeaning exchange we lose the ability to compromise, and we divide our political audiences into supporters versus enemies. Further to that the patterns of abuse and intimidation felt in the public sphere threaten to silence certain voices. Women, BIPOC, LGBTIQ+ and people living with disability can find their presence online greeted with the worst excesses of personal abuse, which targets them personally and is coupled often with threats against their physical safety. Women as a group in our society can already face physical harm and these digital threats amplify that threat, using the suggestion of physical harm against women as a weapon. Deliberately harmful language against people from politically marginalized communities keeps people from feeling empowered to come forward, thus suppressing the voices of those communities in the process. Victorian Labor has found it necessary to provide particular protection and pastoral care to women candidates for public office who experienced gendered abuse simply for being online, which is noticeable to campaign professionals.

We would welcome the inquiry's examination into the promotion of healthy and genuine debate, in ways that invite Victorians to take part. Providing sufficient privacy for users, ensuring safety from intimidation or threats and preventing the domination of the platforms by anonymous forces of disruption would serve to enhance the ways in which Victorians can engage in social debate online. The online conduct of users is something that the platforms themselves must take responsibility for, and must be seen to enforce community standards in a fair and balanced manner.

GENUINE ONLINE IDENTITIES

The timbre of online conduct and the verification and authorization of groups and parties online are symbiotic – the more anonymity and informality there is online the less measured the debate. Political parties and their public representatives are verified by several mechanisms and comprehensively scrutinized on their use of platforms. They must verify their identity to place paid advertising, and are judged on their use of language, and how public resources are spent. As stated in the preamble Victorian Labor doesn't bemoan the regulation of political expenditure and verification of identity, however it must be mentioned that baseless claims and outrageous slander against organisations and individuals usually don't come from identified candidates, parties or organisations. It increasingly comes from wholly unidentifiable sources, bots, trolls and suspiciously well-organised groups that do not have genuine public following but are manufactured to appear as genuine. Political parties and social movements across the world are increasingly the targets of organised but anonymized online disruption campaigns designed to spread misinformation. Some of the misinformation is barely disguised nonsense, but it is planted to reduce public trust in institutions, prevent genuine online engagement and damage reputations, all without accountable or genuine actors. Australia and Victoria are yet to experience the full extent of organised online disruption executed by unidentified groups masquerading as citizen activists, however the signs are there and significant episodes have already occurred, and there are disturbing examples overseas. Registered political parties and genuine independent candidates are accountable for the content they produce and have published in their name, but it is the mysterious sources of calculated untruths that publishing platforms have so far proven incapable of regulating.

Any regulatory initiative from legislators must of course balance freedom of expression alongside any desire to moderate marginal groups, but parliaments and governments around the world must

still recognize the enormous and unequal power now placed in the hands of online publishers and those exploiting access to data to achieve their outcomes without respect for truthfulness.

We would welcome the inquiry's examination of, among other things, laws to require truth in political expression online; laws which require greater transparency and publication of associate entities and their funding relationships; and a requirement of online publishers and social media platforms to put more resources into maintaining community standards which prevent the exploitation of the medium by undeclared interests.

In solidarity



Chris Ford

ACTING STATE SECRETARY

▪ **Victorian Labor**