Social insecurity:

Cohesion, outrage economics and national resilience in Australia

REPORT

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Executive summary

Australia's social cohesion is under sustained pressure. The December 2025 Bondi Beach terrorist attack was not the cause of Australia's social-cohesion challenges, but it was a catalytic moment that forced a national reckoning. Likewise, the 7 October 2023 attacks on Israel didn't create anti-Semitism or communal hatred in Australia, but they acted as an accelerant, intensifying existing fractures. Covid-19 was equally decisive, eroding trust, normalising grievance and reshaping how Australians relate to authority, expertise and each other. Across this period, social media have turbocharged outrage, normalised aggression online and collapsed the space between online hostility and offline harm.

In response to Bondi, the federal and New South Wales parliaments swiftly developed new gun-control and hate-crime legislation. That action reflected government responsibility to restore public confidence and order. Legislation has its place in setting criminal 'red lines' and instilling law and order, but it is not, on its own, a solution for social order, cohesion or national resilience, which rise and fall through the combination of enforceable laws with shared principles, values, norms and institutions that guide behaviour even where people disagree.

What Australia now requires, as individuals, communities and a nation, is a strengthened capacity to hold multiple, sometimes uncomfortable, beliefs simultaneously. The 7 October attacks were a horrific act of terrorism that deliberately targeted civilians and should be condemned without qualification. It's legitimate to peacefully protest for an end to the war in Gaza and to disagree with the policies of any government. But it's not legitimate to advocate violence, promote terrorist organisations (such as by carrying terrorists' flags), or chant slogans such as 'Death to the IDF', which should not be protected by freedom of speech or political expression. Symbols such as inverted red triangles, used by Hamas to mark Israeli military targets, don't advance peace or a two-state solution when reproduced in Australia's civic space; they import the language of intimidation and threat into domestic debate. A democratic society must be capable of condemning terrorism, criticising state conduct, encouraging policy debate and protecting minority communities simultaneously, without collapsing into moral absolutism or grievance-based justifications.

Differences of views and diversity of thought are national strengths, but only when people expressing them do so in ways that recognise the binding principles and rules to which their society has signed up. A democratic system doesn't promise consensus or universal satisfaction. It guarantees freedoms of thought and speech, and the right to protest, but not the right to intimidate, coerce or always get one's way. Democracy is an exercise in living with disagreement and compromise, underpinned by the rule of law and the shared understanding that responsibilities, including self-restraint, must sit alongside rights. Without a framework of rules, norms and principles, a society doesn't live in freedom but in anarchy.

That balancing act requires clarity about institutional roles. It isn't the function of security and law-enforcement agencies to investigate extreme but non-violent beliefs. The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) is Australia's security agency, not its social services one, while the federal and state police forces must protect citizen safety but not be the moral or thought police. Managing debate is the job of everyone, especially our political and community leaders. Approaching every societal problem with only a security response evades civic responsibility and makes the community neither safer nor freer.

This is why—despite the need for a framework of rules—social unity and cohesion shouldn't be pursued through a default of prohibition. Crucially, refraining from banning words or conduct doesn't mean silence and tolerance in the face of extreme beliefs. It means encouraging respectful debate and winning an argument through facts and persuasion. Political leaders and institutions have a range of tools, from education to public statements. Fostering unity by ensuring that individuals and groups know their sense of safety is not limited to the gaoling of convicted criminals but rather bolstered by living in a society that values and stands up for the freedom to be oneself.

In other words, the 'awful but lawful' should not be banned, but it mustn't be ignored either. Setting a red line for taking action only once a crime has been committed allows lawful-but-awful beliefs to go unchecked, to fester, to grow out of the dark corners of the internet and be amplified in mainstream social-media feeds and then normalised in society. This is the permissive environment in which intimidation, radicalisation and eventually violence become easier to justify and harder to constrain.

This means that a successful, cohesive democratic society must be able to live with disagreement, with tension and even with extreme beliefs while prohibiting aggression, coercion or violence against individuals. Weakened resilience to different views, along with a normalisation of violence online and off, are among the defining features of Australia's current cohesion challenge.

Navigating this moment demands courage from political and community leaders. Imagine the public signal if elected representatives and community leaders participating in pro-Palestinian protests had chosen to visibly walk away the

moment chants of 'Death to the IDF!', terrorist flags or portraits of Iran's supreme leader emerged, demonstrating that protest is legitimate, but that calls for violence are not, and that intimidation that might not be unlawful will still be called out as unacceptable.

This report is designed to spark discussion, and debate, about how to rebuild social cohesion without silence or disengagement. Longstanding advice to ignore trolls may no longer be sufficient. Cohesion is shaped as much by what individuals walk past as by what governments regulate. There's now a social responsibility to remind ourselves that democratic values and principles serve the public well, even where imperfect, and to say that we don't accept intimidation or the promotion of violence. When children require additional protection to attend school, something has gone profoundly wrong.

The authors argue that a united society, and resilient nation, reject both silence and violence, and invest in civic awareness by increasing access to credible information to rebuild trust and reduce manipulation, foreign or domestic. Social cohesion should be treated as a core pillar of national security, aligning leadership, policing, education, regulation and community investment around three objectives: protecting freedom while maintaining order; enabling disagreement without disorder; and rebuilding a shared sense of belonging.

The report argues for practical steps that government, platforms, civil society and communities can take together to rebuild a culture in which disagreement is legitimate, debate is possible and institutions are trusted enough to carry us through shocks. Australia has navigated challenging moments before. It can meet this one, too—if we accept that resilience is built not just by laws passed, but by norms defended, institutions trusted and open governments confident that the public is capable of handling the truth about security threats and debating the best way to counter them, because we're fighting for each other, not against ourselves.

Readers don't have to agree with everything in this report. That's the point. We share a mission of achieving a prosperous, safe Australia in which individuals are united by the freedom to disagree on the best path to get there.

Key findings

- *Trust deficits are widening:* Australians' trust in government, media and institutions has slipped, and grievance and disinformation are filling the gap.[1] The legitimacy costs are evident on the street and online, in the form of cynicism towards expertise and a readiness to substitute influence (and influencers) for evidence and analysis.
- *The 'outrage economy' is now a strategic risk:* Engagement-optimised platforms reward speed, certainty and spectacle over nuance. That devalues strategic thinking and crowds out pragmatic problem-solving, which recognises that real-world challenges are rarely binary.[2]
- *Protest ecology has changed:* Demonstrations are more networked, less centrally led, and more likely to draw together disparate causes through single-issue outrage frames. Marginal elements within otherwise peaceful movements are increasingly comfortable with confrontation, creating complex public-order dilemmas.
- *Politically motivated violence (PMV) risk is elevated and complex:* Radicalisation pathways are now faster and more individualised and span a wider ideological spectrum. Threats don't map neatly to traditional 'left' or 'right' political ideologies. International flashpoints, including in the Middle East, continue to energise local grievances and bring together both individuals and groups who would historically have been seen as non-aligned.
- *Policy responses are often symbolic:* Weapon-specific bans and reactive law changes have necessarily targeted urgent threats but struggled to address the underlying risk drivers. Without complementary prevention, communication and legitimacy strategies, short-term responses are unlikely to result in long-term success but merely in shifts in the modality of distrust and violence.
- *Foreign interference thrives in division and silence:* Social fractures provide fertile ground for manipulation, from diaspora intimidation to influence operations targeting trust in institutions and electoral processes. Foreign influence and online disinformation operations need to be countered by increased information to empower the public—both debunking false information as well as 'pre-bunking' to get ahead of known or likely threats to public order.

Recommendations

1. *Appoint a 'national resilience communications lead' in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet* to coordinate the design and delivery of a whole-of-nation social cohesion communications strategy: Australia's modern 'Life. Be in It' campaign for democratic trust and national pride.
2. *Bipartisan compact on PMV:* Cooperate to prevent PMV and protect police neutrality, including by joint statements on matters of national importance and joint attendance at events.
3. *Parliamentary support for the eSafety Commissioner role:* Under the bipartisan compact, the Australian Parliament should express support for the eSafety Commissioner role, which is suffering online and international abuse, harming public trust in the position as an institution protecting Australians. That doesn't mean unconditional support for each decision of the commissioner, but advocacy for the role itself.

4. *Create a Digital Outrage Risk Index (overseen by the eSafety Commissioner):* Online platforms should monitor hyper-virality events and enable proportionate, transparent friction measures. A friction measure is a temporary, non-punitive platform intervention, such as a pause, prompt or additional verification step, that modestly slows the sharing of content once defined risk thresholds are met, without removing lawful speech. These measures function as civic 'speed bumps', momentarily reducing the velocity of demonstrably harmful or high-risk content, including coordinated doxxing or credible incitement. Triggered through pre-declared and publicly documented criteria, such as verification prompts or fact-checking delays, transparent friction allows facts to catch up with emotion and helps prevent online outrage from cascading into offline disorder. The objective is to strengthen national resilience by reducing manipulation while maintaining public trust through openness and proportionality. Should this recommendation be accepted, the Office of the e-Safety Commissioner would require additional resources.
5. *Targeted prevention investment:* Scale up credible messenger programs, early-intervention pathways and local resilience hubs in at-risk communities.
6. *Civics, media and digital literacy renewal:* Embed critical thinking and respectful debate in school curriculums and adult education. Government should support university, TAFE and community partnerships that include formal and informal mechanisms that teach debate by listening, negotiation and persuasion. This should extend to practical modules on identifying emotional manipulation, algorithmic bias and misinformation tactics, equipping citizens to recognise and resist outrage-driven narratives.
7. *National Social Cohesion Dashboard:* Publish measures of trust, protest polarisation and resilience—tracked twice a year for accountability. The dashboard would operate like the national terrorism threat level announced by ASIO or the fire danger rating system, providing a clear public indicator of Australia's social temperature. The aim is analytical rigour and public trust, and it could sit jointly with the Department of Home Affairs (for national resilience policy) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (for data integrity), with advice from an expert social-cohesion advisory panel comprising representatives from academia, civil society and law enforcement.

Australia's social cohesion: stable, but under strain

Longitudinal surveys show that Australians retain high levels of mutual respect, multicultural acceptance and everyday cooperation.[3] Yet underlying cohesion has slipped below long-run averages, and trust in institutions has fallen into 'distrust'.[4] The 2024 *Mapping social cohesion* report found that while 84% of Australians agree that multiculturalism has been good for the country, the national Social Cohesion Index fell to 78—its lowest level since the survey began in 2007—and only 33% of Australians say they trust the federal government to do the right thing 'most of the time,' down from 44% in 2021.[5]

People feel economically squeezed and information-overloaded. The emotional economy of grievance, in which more people feel like they're losing in a system being gamed by others, is ascendant. Moreover, there are increasing numbers of individuals and groups willing to feed and leverage those grievances for personal and ideological gain.

Four features of today's environment matter for security policy:

- *Information asymmetry and fatigue:* The public is saturated with conflicting claims, and the online-to-offline loop now moves in hours.[6] Some people opt or phase out in a form of desensitisation, and others double down on identity-aligned narratives; both paths erode shared facts and blunt corrective messaging. A clipped video with emotive captions can trigger intimidation at a council meeting or school before authorities have established basic facts. Encrypted chats and influencer broadcasts accelerate flash mobilisation with minimal formal organising. We're seeing people reading more viral threads than peer-reviewed papers.
- *Cynicism towards authority and expertise:* When public debate frames institutions as self-serving and knowledge as partisan, legitimacy is called into question in ways open to exploitation.[7] Mainstream media, academia and others should all be subject to critique and counter-evidence, but fringe political actors can now dismiss authority and expertise by attacking the categories themselves. That's resulting in peer-reviewed papers and viral threads appearing to be equivalent.[8]
- *Economic stressors:* Cost-of-living pressures and associated perceptions of unfairness are simultaneously straining social cohesion and reducing the social licence for government spending on defence and security. Campaigns against specific infrastructure or resources projects can evolve into broader anti-system movements. Pseudo-legal myths also

provide a vocabulary for resisting fines, compliance, or court orders. Instead of economic security, the perception is of economic insecurity.

- *Foreign adversaries and influencers:* Adversaries and influencers are increasingly identifying and exploiting opportunities to distract governments and splinter communities. Through targeted online influence campaigns, coordinated inauthentic behaviour and the amplification of divisive domestic issues, they inject disinformation designed to erode social cohesion, inflame grievance and undermine trust in institutions. Those actors often mask their origins behind proxies, memes and localised narratives that weaken Australia's ability to respond cohesively to national and regional challenges.[9]

In this strategic context, in which economics, technology, foreign affairs and domestic security are all intertwined, government policy should pivot from a reactive posture to environment shaping, in which legitimacy, speed and clarity are protective factors. Vitally, such government involvement is fundamentally different from authoritarian intervention: it's not about controlling narratives or suppressing dissent but about strengthening the conditions in which free speech and democratic debate can thrive. Co-designing information with community intermediaries equips people to participate confidently in public life, rather than driving them to the margins (whether self-censoring or becoming violent).

Being proactive means not waiting for extremism to turn into crimes but identifying and measuring trust indicators so government actions can positively affect the social licence even where there's public disagreement on policy. Mapping local grievance entrepreneurs and their narratives becomes as important as tracking traditional risk actors, not to silence them but to narrow the space for manipulation by them. This social-licence approach would ensure that Australia continues to combine individual freedoms within a framework of laws, administered by authorities that are themselves subject to accountability. It doesn't guarantee absolute prevention but offers the most effective inoculation against corrosive narratives

The protest ecology: more frequent, more diffuse, more combustible at the edges

Protest remains a legitimate expression of democratic participation, but the ecology around it has shifted. Networked mobilisation now enables rapid, large-scale turnouts without gatekeeping organisations, letting disparate causes converge under a single outrage frame and turning local disputes into national flashpoints within hours. Coordination costs have fallen, reducing internal checks on rhetoric and behaviour so that marginal elements can more easily steer crowd energy towards confrontation, especially when live streams and influencer commentary reward escalation. Violence isn't necessarily condoned, but it's increasingly seen as justified in both rhetoric and action.

Policing becomes more challenging when rival groups occupy adjacent spaces or when online calls to action obscure intentions and locations, and police neutrality, which is central to legitimacy, is routinely attacked, even when officers are actively facilitating routes, marshalling traffic and protecting bystanders. The operational challenge is no longer just numbers on the street, but the speed at which online narratives mutate into offline action and then back again, shaping perceptions of fairness long before facts are established.

If policing is viewed as absent or tolerant of intimidation and harm, it can create grievance from those feeling that good governance and public order are lacking. Breaking that loop requires a legitimacy-centred strategy comprising proportionality, speed, open communication, strengthened de-escalation and post-incident transparency, plus investment in trusted community intermediaries who can translate complexity into practical guidance. Practical steps include proactively debunking common misinformation before major events, rapid myth-busting during peaks and visible facilitation, such as water stations and first-aid posts, as well as liaison officers in distinct vests, all of which signal the state's commitment to safe, lawful protest rather than either anarchy or oppression.

In parallel, legal and political responses are hardening as states update public-order and weapons laws and refine conditions for assemblies. Some measures are necessary to maintain safety and individual freedom. The aim should be to safeguard both community safety and the democratic right to dissent. A recent example is the October 2025 New South Wales Court of Appeal decision prohibiting a pro-Palestine march to the Sydney Opera House, after police raised concerns that the narrow foreshore precinct posed significant safety and crowd-control risks. Importantly, the court didn't ban the protest itself, only its proposed location—a reminder that maintaining the balance between public safety and the right to democratic expression often hinges on proportionality and procedural clarity.

Done well, this rules-based approach supports social cohesion and free speech by lowering the temperature without narrowing the space for dissent, preserving public confidence that authority is firm but fair and ensuring that the rights to both protest and safe movement remain living features of democratic life rather than points of recurring crisis.

The outrage economy and the rejection of expertise

The business model of attention prioritises content that's fast, emotive and certain, and it's largely indifferent to accuracy. Platforms monetise outrage and novelty because that's what keeps people scrolling; creators and outlets then chase those signals, optimising for velocity, virality and identity affirmation. In that environment, nuance appears as weakness, caveats seem like evasion, and an admission of uncertainty appears as incompetence. Politics and policy are recoded to fit the tempo and aesthetics of the feed.

Authority also migrates from institutions to personalities

Incentives shift accordingly. Politicians, advocacy groups and media outlets are rewarded for clips that perform rather than arguments that withstand scrutiny, so communications teams learn to script certainty and spectacle. Key performance indicators quietly shift from outcomes to engagements, focusing on views, mentions and spikes. Consultation becomes theatre if the cost of deviating from a pre-packaged message is online punishment. Bureaucracies, wary of reputational blowback, prioritise defensible processes over adaptive problem-solving, adding layers of approval that create lag but not necessarily better decisions. The policy cycle often revolves around subsequent controversy. At the same time, structural issues, skills pipelines, energy transition sequencing and population planning struggle to maintain attention long enough for honest choices.

Authority also migrates from institutions to personalities. Trust becomes personal, parasocial and portable across topics: a creator who gained an audience by analysing crime statistics now opines on interest rates, biosecurity or foreign policy, and the audience follows because credibility is conferred by vibe, not by domain expertise. A fringe party's 'research team' without peer review can outcompete a university lab in the marketplace of attention if it packages claims with certainty, emotional stakes and an invitation to belong. The performative rituals of proof, screenshots and gotcha clips replace real methodology. As the centre of epistemic gravity shifts, public debate treats evidence as interchangeable content rather than a discipline with rules, which in turn encourages officials to communicate in slogans that can survive hostile remixing. The result is mutual degradation: experts sound more political, and politicians sound more expert than they are.

Algorithmic mobilisation accelerates the jump from online outrage to offline confrontation. Hyper-targeted distribution can assemble large, ideologically mixed crowds around a single grievance frame before facts are established or context is added. Low coordination costs mean fewer internal checks on rhetoric or tactics; marginal actors can pull a crowd towards confrontation while mainstream organisers are still drafting a statement.

Emergency services, police and local officials now compete with live streams and influencer commentary that narrate events in real time, often penalising de-escalation because calm footage doesn't trend. Corrections and context arrive late and underperform because the emotional peak has passed. Meanwhile, institutions are judged by clipped moments rather than by the totality of their conduct, which further discourages the slow, unglamorous work of engagement that makes communities more resilient.

The net effect is a devaluation of strategic thinking. Defence debates often drift towards headline procurement numbers and personality conflicts, rather than force-design trade-offs, industrial depth, sustainment or even an explanation of the threats. Resilience policy focuses on the imagery of the last disaster rather than the untelevised labour of mitigation, standards, training and maintenance. Social policy is often pulled towards symbolic wins and punitive gestures that appear well on a tile but do little to shift actual outcomes. It sees immigration policy viewed as only of interest to extremists, with arguments absent any nuance. Australians are consistently revealed as positive about being an immigration nation but also having questions over the appropriate level. Yet there's little space to participate in a conversation about that because the extremes of open and closed borders dominate and the majority in the centre fear the risk of being immediately associated with, or accused of being part of, one extreme for daring to raise a question.

When noise overwhelms signal, governments overcorrect to visible levers, oppositions mirror the incentives, and the administrative state grows more procedural to survive. Strategic capacity erodes not because leaders don't care, but because the attention economy punishes the virtues that strategy requires: patience, proportion, transparency about uncertainty and a willingness to take short-term risk to deliver in the long term. That trend needs reversing—governments and institutions, including media, need to incentivise freedom of speech that's neither absolutist nor anarchic; that is, the freedom to disagree matched by the freedom to do so without intimidating or being intimidated.

Safe collisions of adverse opinion

It was philosopher, and in his day controversialist, John Stuart Mill, who wrote in his foundational essay 'On liberty' that freedom of opinion was necessary for 'the mental well-being of mankind (on which all their other well-being depends)' and that

it required not only a marketplace of ideas but one of contest. Mill wrote:

> [S]ince the general or prevailing opinion on any subject is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinions, that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied.

And that:

> [E]ven if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds.

That not only holds today but has been amplified by social media. The danger we've fallen into is that social media are indeed a modern-day marketplace of ideas but not one that supports contest and safe collisions of adverse opinion. Instead, the collision of extremes has resulted in cancellation, censorship and intimidation—a hole from which we can only dig ourselves out by returning to Mill's tenet 'that unity of opinion, unless resulting from the fullest and freest comparison of opposite opinions, is not desirable.'

Nuance as a democratic capability: disagree well

So, how do we return to the Mill principle of having adverse opinions while retaining unity? Nuance isn't a luxury; it's a democratic capability. Societies that can navigate complexity without collapsing into conspiracy or censorship are more resilient to manipulation, less prone to radicalisation, and better at preventing, solving or at the very least managing strategic problems and crises. Properly protected and supported, free speech strengthens social cohesion rather than tearing at it.

Currently, our information environment prioritises speed and moral certainty, so the policy task is to reintroduce time and context into how we communicate and make decisions. That starts with speaking in probabilities rather than absolutes and normalising the fact that some uncertainties or unknowns exist, even in major announcements. Being up front early eliminates or reduces the impact of a negative surprise later. It's why the ASIO-led national terror threat level is so effective—it doesn't try to guarantee against an attack or convince the public that there are no risks, but rather empowers the public by informing them that, while there are threats and some uncertainty, people can be reassured that the intelligence community is doing everything possible to keep them safe.

Keeping people informed, with a high level of trust, requires transparency that decisions have been made after factoring in all the available information, including alternative views. It means designing structured dissent into decision-making to encourage the surfacing of credible alternatives and trade-offs. Disagreement is a feature, not a failure. It also means adopting a slow-lane protocol for hyper-virality: hold definitive comments for a few hours while facts are verified, but don't allow a silent void to be filled by others. In the meantime, release plain-language context cards that explain what's known, what's being checked, and when the next update will be available. An example is the 2016 online census outage, when early speculation about a foreign cyberattack was met with a rapid, transparent response from officials who acknowledged uncertainty while investigations continued. That approach—communicating early, clarifying evolving facts, and later confirming the cause as a technical fault—showed how measured transparency can preserve public trust even amid confusion and online speculation. It meant some political embarrassment but also public reassurance.

A transparency cadence should accompany significant decisions, including backgrounders—comprising methods, data and uncertainties—published within 24 hours, so journalists, stakeholders and citizens can examine the basis of the call. Crisis communications require drills that rehearse slow-lane protocols and red-team integration; the best way to overcome the reflex to fill the vacuum is to practice a better response in advance.

And because habits form early, government policy should focus on teaching disagreement in schools, TAFE colleges and community forums using argument mapping, source evaluation and the practical skill of expressing understanding of other people's views, even when disagreeing, and being able to change one's mind in good faith.

PMV in Australia: diversified threats, faster pathways

PMV now sits alongside espionage and foreign interference as a principal security concern, but the ecology of risk has shifted. Ideological streams are plural and fluid: sovereign-citizen and broader anti-authority milieus merge into accelerationist ethno-nationalist currents and passions imported from transnational conflicts. Those aren't bounded movements so much as pick-and-mix belief packages assembled online. Attention-economy platforms reward speed, emotion and certainty, supplying ready-made frames of corruption, betrayal and moral urgency that can be easily applied to local disputes over fines, planning approvals or school curriculums. The effect is to convert routine friction into a story about illegitimate power and justified resistance, shortening the distance between grievance and mobilisation.

Actors emerging from that environment are increasingly self-directed. They radicalise in private feeds and small encrypted groups, with minimal gatekeeping. Distant audiences provide instant social validation. Because ideologies are mixed, traditional indicators, such as membership of a proscribed group or attendance at a known hub, are less predictive than behavioural cues, including sudden capability acquisition or target fixation.

Targets are increasingly symbolic and proximate. Harassment, doxxing and stalking bleed into physical intimidation in homes, schools and civic venues. That raises the premium on police neutrality and proportionate conduct under provocation, as well as on clear explanations of protective measures to ensure that they're not misinterpreted as hostility to dissent. The communications task is as important as the security task: providing timely, plain-English updates that distinguish lawful protest from criminal conduct, and setting out next steps, reduces the oxygen for grievance entrepreneurs who thrive on ambiguity.

A confident democracy should also navigate the hard edges of free expression. Much speech is awful but lawful: offensive, conspiratorial or bigoted views that most citizens reject yet remain inside the bounds of protected political communication and criminal law. Treating such content as a policing problem corrodes social licence and hands radicals the repression narrative they seek. The line should be drawn at conduct: true threats, credible incitement, stalking, doxxing that facilitates harassment, procurement or training for harm and coordinated intimidation of officials or communities. Holding that line preserves freedom of speech and keeps enforcement focused on behaviours and harms, not beliefs.

Holding an opinion, even if it's extreme or wrong, shouldn't be treated as illegal—opinions should be countered with more persuasive opinions, held up by facts. That boundary separates extremism from violent extremism and terrorism. 'Extremism' refers to belief systems inconsistent with liberal-democratic norms but not necessarily action requiring intervention; 'violent extremism' adds intent or advocacy to cause harm, which shifts a state's posture from counter-speech and civic resilience to disruption and prosecution. Where violence is intended to coerce the public or a government to advance an ideological cause, it may become terrorism. Transparent gateways between those categories, based on intent and capability, allow cases to escalate or de-escalate as evidence changes.

Policing in the crossfire: legitimacy as capability

Australia's policing model, which is characterised by impartial enforcement, minimal force and maximum facilitation, has served the nation well but is now operating in a harsher climate. Officers stand between rival groups that each claim moral authority and hunt for bias. Routine decisions about routes, buffers and timings for demonstrations are instantly narrated online as proof of partiality. The core dilemmas involve preserving the right to protest while preventing harm and intervening proportionately when a small minority escalates, without punishing a peaceful majority. Every choice is both operational and communicative. Police actions, explanations and reviews shape tomorrow's operating space as much as today's tactics.

Legitimacy is capability. Public consent isn't a soft extra, but a multiplier that makes low-visibility problem-solving possible, keeps crowds cooperative and protects officers when they must move decisively. Building that consent starts before anyone assembles, with a transparent doctrine for protest management that the public can understand and anticipate. On the ground, rigorous evidence capture and plain-English communication help to counter misinformation and explain why decisions were taken. After the fact, independent oversight and real consequences for misconduct sustain trust. Done consistently, that approach keeps officers safer by keeping communities invested in the fairness of their work. When people expect proportionate intervention, know the reasons for conditions and can see that complaints are heard, they're more likely to comply in the moment and less likely to be mobilised by

bad-faith narratives later. Legitimacy transforms de-escalation into a shared project, rather than a unilateral burden on police, and preserves the space for robust dissent while maintaining order and confidence in the rule of law.

Symbolic fixes versus risk-led policy: beyond 'Ban the thing!'

After high-profile incidents, the debate often swings to the object, not the behaviour. If knives are used, ban knives; if a platform hosts harmful content, ban the platform. Some targeted restrictions are warranted, but modality bans alone rarely touch the drivers of violence or the rapid substitution patterns of offenders who shift tools, venues or tactics as soon as a rule bites. The result is a cycle of visible action with minimal impact and a politics of initial soothing headlines without shifting long-term risk.

A risk-led approach begins with people and situations, rather than artefacts. It prioritises the identification and disruption of high-risk individuals through multiagency case conferencing, credible diversion pathways and proportionate monitoring. It addresses the online accelerants that convert grievances into mobilisation by dampening hyper-virality during spikes, while protecting lawful speech. That's achieved by pairing fast fact-checks and context with platform friction to identify demonstrably harmful calls to action.

The test for any new law or policy should be whether it measurably reduces risk drivers and harms while maintaining public legitimacy. Visible action with risk-led policy is what makes communities safer.

Foreign interference in a fractured landscape

Intimidation within diaspora communities, covert influence operations and manipulative information campaigns flourish when people doubt the fairness and competence of domestic institutions, because fear and cynicism make it easier to coerce, recruit and launder narratives. A recent example came in 2025, when the Prime Minister and the Director-General of Security publicly called out Iran for attempting to exploit divisions within Australian society linked to the Middle East conflict. Both warned that Tehran's operatives had identified local fractures—including public displays of allegiance and intimidation within diaspora communities—as vulnerabilities to be manipulated not only for Iranian gain but to deepen Australian disunity and social tension. Other countries, in particular China, seek to intimidate and silence their diasporas while sowing doubt about the Australian Government's ability to keep diaspora members safe.

The policy task is to shield communities while keeping civic space open, so that people can organise, speak and disagree without being pushed into silence by foreign pressure or domestic heavy-handedness. That means having the fortitude and messaging discipline to call out both a foreign regime and domestic individuals or organisations without casting aspersions on whole Australian communities. That balance starts with clear, confidential reporting and protection pathways for diaspora communities facing coercion, backed by practical support such as safety planning, victim liaison and secure evidence handling. Targeted enforcement should focus on networks and proxies that enable interference, finance, direction and tasking. New legal powers should be used in a measured and transparent manner, with narrow scopes, documented thresholds, independent oversight and timely public explanations of why action was taken and what safeguards were applied. That keeps the focus on conduct and foreign-state direction, rather than on identity or belief, and helps to protect objectionable but lawful speech and association, which are the lifeblood of a confident democracy.

> ***Visible action with risk-led policy is what makes communities safer***

The key principle is to advance and protect both individual freedoms and collective security—giving the public trust and confidence that they can freely move, speak and act, knowing that bad behaviour will be identified and prevented or prosecuted.

Strategic communications complete the picture. Authorities should actively reassure communities that participation is valued and protected, explain interference tactics so people can recognise and resist them, and provide plain-English updates when cases proceed. Partnerships with civil society, faith groups, community media and platforms can amplify accurate information during spikes and help distinguish between counter-speech and censorship in the public mind. Measured in those terms—more reporting without fear of backlash, faster support for those targeted, precise disruption and punishment of the actors responsible and sustained participation by diaspora communities—policy can reduce the oxygen for interference while strengthening the social cohesion that makes Australians harder to manipulate. Our freedoms shouldn't be unnecessarily constrained by laws, but laws should protect our freedoms.

A national story for hard times: communications as capability

Australia needs a unifying story big enough to hold disagreement—a narrative that not always seeing the world the same way is a strength, not a flaw. We've done this before; national campaigns have shifted norms without hectoring by meeting people where they live and inviting them in rather than talking down to them. With today's fragmented media, that lesson becomes strategy, as communications is a core capability of national resilience built on credibility, repetition and local relevance. The aim is to remind people that shared rules and institutions exist to keep space open for safe disagreement.

> ***Australians can be proud of their flag, service, place and story***

This isn't propaganda but civic maintenance. The tone should model respectful debate as a civic virtue, demonstrating how people can still be blunt and passionate. Patriotism should be a source of pride and distinguished from nationalism by reclaiming the space in which love of country requires neither hostility to difference nor sycophantic obedience. Australians can be proud of their flag, service, place and story without being cast as racists, and be able to see that pride reflected in everyday images of contribution across communities and professions. Spotlight the nurse in Tennant Creek, the SES volunteer in Lismore, the TAFE instructor in western Sydney or the artists' collective in Broome. Stitch those into a steady rhythm of stories that rebuild pride in the institutions and neighbours that carry the load. And equip citizens with media and digital literacy skills, including how to assess a source, spot emotional manipulation and remain open to changing one's mind.

This would require designing a permanent, ethical communications capability that works more like a public-service newsroom than a press office:

- Co-design content with local partners, councils, schools, libraries, sporting codes, faith networks and diaspora media, and produce short, consistent formats that can be translated and remixed without losing the core message.
- Use trusted messengers who carry credibility with different audiences, such as a farmer and a climate scientist or a police sergeant and a civil-liberties advocate.
- Run series that return to the same families and workplaces to show progress, struggle and compromise, along with 'how it works' explainers on institutions.
- Build a measurement loop that watches not only reach but whether sentiment volatility falls after flare-ups, whether corrections land faster, and whether surveys show people recalling the options considered, not just the slogans.
- Set ethical guardrails—plain-English disclaimers, evidence links and protections for lawful but unpalatable speech—to maintain trust.

'Life. Be in it' worked because it was positive and persistent. Today's equivalent for democracy and cohesion should feel the same: cheerful without being saccharine, plain-spoken without being crude, and relentless in its focus on everyday dignity. It should invite people to join the Australian project as something they do—arguing fairly while turning up for each other—not something done to them. Or, in the sports vernacular, compete hard but fairly.

Risks and mitigations

Programs to boost cohesion and safety need to manage five predictable failure modes.

The first is overreach. Aggressive content controls or heavy-handed public-order powers may appear decisive, but they can erode trust, fuel repression narratives and make future cooperation more difficult. The mitigation is legally bounded powers with transparency and proportionality tests, periodic review, accountability via reporting and independent oversight that shows how often powers are used, against what harms, and the outcomes. When the rules and results can be seen, and that they're protecting legitimate behaviour can be seen, people are more likely to accept firm action when it's needed.

Second, flowing from the first, is a chilling of lawful participation in diaspora communities if responses to intimidatory behaviour and foreign interference are either underplayed or overly blunt. People will step back from civic life if they fear surveillance by foreign actors on one side and either indiscriminate, or no, scrutiny at home on the other. A victim-centric approach helps by providing confidential reporting channels, guidance on how to document threats, practical protections for targets and their families, and prosecutions that focus on conduct and foreign direction, not identity. Outreach via trusted leaders and plain-English updates signals that the aim is to protect participation, not to police thought. Individuals should be reassured that authorities will protect them from foreign actors but that whole communities won't be blamed for the illegal actions of a few.

Third is narrative capture, in which well-intentioned campaigns are framed as partisan spin or elite propaganda. The antidote is to share authorship, whether by securing bipartisanship, if possible, or co-branding with civil society, local government, sports codes and community media. Government-led initiatives should be complemented by commissioning or encouraging community-led creatives that maintain the core

message while reflecting local voice and humour. Using a mix of messengers—faith leaders, unions, small businesses, teachers, SES volunteers—helps to own the narrative.

Fourth, online platforms may resist cooperation where commercial incentives reward engagement spikes, including those driven by harmful dynamics. A co-regulatory approach with staged obligations aligns incentives without turning every dispute into a brawl. Start with transparency requirements on reach, virality triggers and content provenance during declared civic-risk periods. Add friction obligations for demonstrably harmful behaviours, such as targeted doxxing or credible incitement. Reserve stronger measures for repeated noncompliance, overseen by an independent regulator such as the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), the eSafety Commissioner or a future independent digital integrity regulator. Publish compliance scorecards so users, advertisers and investors can weigh safety performance with growth. Digital resilience should be embedded in the broader national-security and social-cohesion frameworks. The rapid cross-pollination of online outrage and offline mobilisation requires digital regulation to be treated as infrastructure for civic stability, not censorship. Ongoing cooperation between government, regulators, civil society and industry is needed to ensure that interventions are proportionate, data-driven and independently verified. Embedding ACMA and the eSafety Commissioner within a formalised whole-of-government digital integrity architecture—linked to national crisis-coordination mechanisms—would enable real-time monitoring, consistent standards and escalation pathways when online harm threatens public order. The goal is to align commercial incentives with civic responsibility, rewarding transparency, accuracy and trust rather than speed, spectacle and division.

Fifth, the 'measurement trap' tempts governments to mistake dashboards for reality. Sentiment graphs and reach counts are helpful, but they flatten complex social dynamics and can drive performative targets. Measurement should guide learning, not replace judgement, and transparency about what can and can't be said should strengthen legitimacy, rather than gaming it.

Conclusion: Make disagreement safe

Australia's advantage has always been pragmatic pluralism. We argue fiercely, then get on with it—this can be seen with battles on the football field or cricket pitch being followed by a shared drink. That muscle memory has carried us through shocks before, and it can again. The outrage economy, online amplification, trust deficits and foreign manipulation are real headwinds, but they're not stronger than a country that comes together in times of fire and flood, that volunteers on weekends and that teaches kids to shake hands after the game. The answer isn't to suppress dissent but to rebuild the conditions that make dissent safe: legitimacy in how authority is exercised, transparency about trade-offs, the capability to manage fast, networked crises, and a unifying national story that treats citizens as adults and disagreement as a civic skill. If we can normalise respectful argument and show our work—why decisions were made, what was considered, what will be reviewed—then the temperature drops and space opens for solutions.

This is a national resilience task, and it's eminently doable. It requires prime-ministerial leadership that sets the tone, bipartisan discipline that maintains stability when tempers flare, and genuine partnerships with state, territory and local governments so that the 'last mile' is strong where people actually live. It expects platforms to be accountable partners during periods of civic risk. It invites civil society, faith groups, unions, businesses, schools and diaspora media to co-create messages and habits that stick. We can't police our way out of a legitimacy problem; we have to earn trust back by being predictable and proportionate, especially when things go wrong. That means facilitating protest while protecting safety, protecting awful-but-lawful speech while acting decisively on criminal conduct, and explaining the difference in plain language.

If we do those things consistently, communities become harder to manipulate and quicker to recover. Disagreement stops being a fracture point and becomes a source of innovation. Young Australians learn how to challenge ideas without writing off each other. Officials have the social licence to move fast when it counts and to admit uncertainty.

Australia has the character and the capability to revel in disagreement, renew confidence in our democracy and be best prepared for international instability and division beyond our control because our national resilience has unified and fortified us domestically.

Notes

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ACMA	Australian Communications and Media Authority
ASIO	Australian Security Intelligence Organisation
PMV	politically motivated violence
SES	State Emergency Service
TAFE	technical and further education

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