

Written by Graeme Dunne  
Wednesday, 12 May 2010 22:43

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On Tuesday night 11th May I attended the the Internet Censorship Debate organised by the St James Ethics Committee at the Sydney Recital Hall. The hall was near capacity with over 1,000 attendees.

The motion was "Governments should not censor the internet". The overwhelming result from a partisan crowd; For 70%, Against 20%, Uncertain 10%. We'll all be familiar with most of the ideas and positions put by the panelists.

The strange thing was that the three speakers against the motion took the view that this was a broad question and shouldn't include issues of political censorship in any country nor the ALP's proposed internet filter. Well that didn't work. In fact two of the three said they were against the filter and thought it wouldn't work. They also called upon familiar heart string tugging debates about protecting children from nasties and preventing access to child porn sites, especially their last speaker Elizabeth Handsley Professor of Law at Flinders Uni. As the only female panelist she began by saying only she had experienced the 24 hour pain of child birth and thus had a perspective of the need to protect children that the male panelists could never have. Fair enough but that doesn't help a filter protect any child.

David Marr and Antony Lowenstein who spoke for the motion were fabulous.

Marr warned of the possibility of bracket creep once such legislation was introduced. Today the government say they are protecting kids but who knows what this or another government might use the filter for in the future. Of course the lack of transparency in the filtering process loomed large. He also claimed it was a politically motivated policy in order to influence the middle ground of voters who warm to the idea of protecting kids, even though the filter would fail to protect children.

He also claimed the filter was definitely Rudd's policy, not Conroy's, and that as Rudd had been a vulnerable child he jumped on ideas associated with protecting vulnerable children.

Marr wondered why the ALP would persist with such a flawed technology when, assuming it is re-elected and the filter activated, the opposition could display a scan of a sex act from the web each day in parliament and claim the filter was another failed project and demand that the government fix it so these sex images couldn't be accessed. Marr has a good point. The opposition have been rabid and effective on the now defunct insulation scheme and problems with the schools building project etc etc.

He lampooned the Classification Offices (in)ability to classify the content of the internet, referring to 16 people in an office in Surry Hills trying to classify content when during the hour and an half of the debate 1,000 hours or so of new video content had been uploaded to tube sites.

Lowenstein closed with an observation that the filter policy was being ridden bare-back into parliament by the churches who had their hands all over it. Strangely no one thought to state that one very dangerous place for a child to be was in the care of certain priests, though I guess this is an aside to the motion debated.

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The audience was invited to speak once the panelists had finished. A woman from a child rape crisis centre spoke about her experience with child abuse victims and pointed out that the majority of child abuse occurs in the family home and is committed by a family member.