

# Don't let Canberra spy on its citizens

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I have always understood advocacy as working to bring about change for the better — defending the rights of the disadvantaged who have been impacted by poor policy.

But when is advocacy for change not good, and when should we rally against what will be harmful?

If we are prepared to accept the former head of Australia's Cybersecurity Research Centre, Rachel Falk's call to give government the ability to spy on Australians, then our rights to freedom will be severely compromised — we will have declared ourselves “fair and open game”.

It's a doorway to a passage we should never venture down, nor peek through the keyhole to see what may lay beyond. Alice would never have ventured down this hole — it's dangerous and filled with undeniable regret.

And that is exactly what Rachel Falk is asking of Australians. She is asking us to open that door and walk down a passage of no return — where government can spy without restriction and exercise disturbing control.

Last week, Falk wrote in *The Australian* a piece entitled “Encrypted messages favour the worst of the worst”. It's a piece that should have sparked concern for all who read it because of its very proposition.

Falk is one of Australia's most highly respected cybersecurity experts, a lucid thinker with great insight into cybersecurity, which in the past five years has exploded with such force it has blown the sides out to show how dramatically the world has changed since 2015.

The cyber world is an evolving realm, a phenomenon we are still coming to terms with, and yet, there are some who are prepared to hand over the farm because they are afraid of the unknown.

Falk's view is an interesting commentary by someone who should know better. What she proposes is a declaration of war against our freedom and our rights.

Handing over all that we value based on an argument full of fear and emotion, manufactured by government to give credibility to new potential legislative powers it knows won't see the light of day, is an old political ploy of "create fear to introduce a new law without backlash".

Rachel Falk is right when she says: "Criminality exists whether we can see it or not. Whether it occurs in the digital bad lands or over the back fence shouldn't make a difference to the protections we expect, and yet we wouldn't respect the privacy of a neighbour whose home was turned over to producing meth or child pornography, so we shouldn't respect the privacy of our digital neighbours, and therein lies the problem: we are naively asking the government and its agencies to behave and respect the privacy of all Australians."

That expectation is too far great a leap to take. Once government has legislative powers to monitor Australians, regardless of whether they are terrorists or not, Australians will always be under surveillance. No assurance can be given by government it won't use its powers to spy — the temptation to abuse is far too great to resist.

Past experience has taught us governments can't be trusted not to abuse the powers they have, so it is naive for Falk to suggest "It is possible to live in a safer world that gives you the same convenience without compromising on security, and without needing to give law enforcement agencies untrammelled authority to snoop."

Regardless of how Falk argues why it's important to give government greater monitoring powers, the reality is we are not living in a world where police are no longer patrolling the streets or where the city is the home of the worst of the worst ... we are in a world where the police, the people who are there to protect us, are using our information against us illegally.

Advocacy for change is good but not when it compromises the very basis of our freedom. Falk is invoking fear and the threat of the unknown. Government should never have legislative powers to spy on its citizens.

*Michael Connory is CEO of Security In Depth.*