

Good morning.

An intriguing video on the BBC website shows a group of teenagers discussing the Australian ban on social media for under 16s. As you would expect there are a range of reactions. But there are also plenty of tips to get round the legislation which left me wondering if the lawmakers have catered for the infinite ingenuity of the teenage mind. As someone who has spent thirty years working with young people, I know it's near impossible to enforce bedtime, never mind a social media blackout.

A number of strong arguments have been made for the legislation passed in Australia. There is particular support amongst parents, many of them concerned about the mental wellbeing and safety of their children. Whilst some worry about the restrictions to children's rights, the experiment will be monitored closely around the world where plenty of people are calling for similar action.

For me though, before rushing to legislation, there is another question to address. If adults stop young people from accessing social media, what will they offer in its place? Recent decades have seen an erosion of opportunities for the young. Youth centres have been closed down, sports activities have become increasingly pricey and a narrowed curriculum leaves little space for music, arts and other activities that allow for association. Meanwhile fears around safety mean that a lot of children rarely leave their home. I suspect a lot of young people spend so much time on their mobiles because there is now so little else to do.

Central to the teaching of Jesus Christ was a broader vision of human flourishing. For example he spent much of his public ministry in dialogue with the pharisees, a group whose interpretation of the scriptures led to harsh restrictions on the people. Jesus did more than just criticising them for, as he saw it, missing the spirit of the Law. He also offered a whole new narrative for being alive, one defined not by restrictions, but by possibilities and opportunities. He set before people a vision of a life lived in all its fullness.

And surely that vision is relevant to this debate. If all that adults do is ban activities and close down opportunities, then young lives risk becoming so restricted that something of their humanity is lost. People of all ages need spaces to create, to imagine, to play, to be with friends. A social media ban could well be a sensible step, but it is crucial that we also ask, 'What else instead?' Because wouldn't it be great to have a society in which young people have so much else to do that phones just seem boring.

The Rt Revd Philip North (10<sup>th</sup> December 2025)