

Support builds for Julian Assange in Australia

James Cogan
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The Australian Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard is becoming increasingly isolated in its support for the US-led persecution of WikiLeaks and its editor and Australian citizen Julian Assange. Gillard has publicly labelled Assange's actions as "illegal", while figures from across a broad spectrum of the political, legal and media establishment are speaking out in his and WikiLeaks' defence.

This opposition is both a response to the outrage among ordinary people at the crimes exposed by WikiLeaks and the persecution of Assange, and an expression of concerns in ruling circles over the slavish response of the Gillard government to the demands of the US.

The divisions within the ruling elite are most clearly expressed in the rift within the government itself. On the one hand, Prime Minister Gillard and Attorney-General Robert McClelland continue to insist that WikiLeaks has carried out an "illegal" act, on the other, Foreign Minister Rudd has declared that Assange is not to blame for the leaks, but the Americans.

Popular opposition to the witch-hunt has been growing from November 30 when the leaks began to be released. Thousands of Facebook comments, Twitter posts, letters to newspapers and websites and calls to talk-back radio have expressed support for WikiLeaks.

More than 4,000 people have now added their names to a December 6 letter of protest to Julia Gillard over her statements against Assange. The letter was initially published with the signatures of some 200 politicians, academics, lawyers, artists and journalists.

Within 48 hours, over 45,000 people have anonymously signed an online letter published on December 8 by the organisation GetUp!, which calls on US President Barack Obama and Attorney General Eric Holder to "stand up for" the "presumption of innocence and freedom of information" in the Assange case. The statement is being printed as an advertisement in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Times*.

Leading right-wing journalist Miranda Devine, who is generally renowned for her support of political reaction, published a column in the Murdoch press on December 8 defending Assange and detailing the specious character of the allegations against him in Sweden.

Devine wrote: "No one believes Julian Assange is now sitting in a British jail cell because he is a rapist. The Swedish charges have been a convenient way to shut up the Australian-born founder of WikiLeaks, who keeps embarrassing the powerful by publishing details of 250,000 secret US documents on the internet."

Laurie Oakes, one of the most prominent political commentators in Australia, denounced Gillard last night as he accepted the 2010 Walkley Award for outstanding journalism.

After describing both Gillard and conservative opposition leader Tony Abbott as "political pygmies" and labelling Gillard's statement on Assange as "ridiculous", Oakes said: "To brand what the WikiLeaks site has done as illegal when there's no evidence of any breach of the law, I think is demeaning.... I think as journalists we should make that our view."

Oakes won the Walkley award for publishing leaks during the recent Australian election that exposed deep divisions within the Labor Party in the wake of the June 24 coup against former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. His statement on Assange was given loud applause by the assembled audience of journalists.

Independent member of parliament Andrew Wilkie, whose vote helps keep the minority Labor government in power, told journalists yesterday: “I believe the prime minister is showing a contempt for the rule of law—the way she has ruled out the presumption of innocence and instead there seems to be a presumption of guilt when it comes to Mr Assange... I believe also she’s shown a complete contempt for Australia’s sovereignty—the way she has defaulted to the interests of the US, instinctively it seems, rather than the interests of an Australian citizen.”

Wilkie came to national prominence in 2003 when he resigned his position as an intelligence advisor and revealed that the Australian government’s claims to have evidence that Iraq possessed “weapons of mass destruction” were exaggerated or false.

Criminal lawyer Peter Faris, who represented Assange in a computer hacking case in 1995, told the *Australian* on Wednesday: “You have to say, why are they (Sweden) pursuing it? It’s pretty obvious that if it was Bill Bloggs, they wouldn’t be going to the trouble. Obviously, these sexual offences are pretences and the Americans—if they are getting co-operation from Sweden—may well want to have him extradited.”

Lawyer Stephen Keim, who represented Indian national Mohamed Haneef, falsely accused of terrorism in 2007, told the WSWS earlier this week:

“If Julian Assange is imprisoned or murdered because he receives confidential documents and publishes them—documents in the individual case that I think any journalist would have been proud to publish—it means that freedom of speech and the freedom of the press have been set back enormously. I think it’s important that people do stand up and defend freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and the freedom to disagree.”

During the Haneef case, Keim was threatened by the then Liberal-National government for leaking a police transcript that demonstrated his clients’ innocence.

Melbourne-based lawyer Robert Stary, who has taken on Assange’s case in Australia, announced yesterday that he had formally requested that Attorney General McClelland order an investigation into whether Australian criminal charges could be laid against the American politicians and journalists who had called for Assange’s assassination. These included figures such as Sarah Palin, Mike Huckabee, *Washington Times*’ columnist Jeffrey Kuhner and Tom Flanagan, former advisor to the Canadian prime minister.

Stary told journalists: “There have been serious threats made against Julian Assange and it is incumbent on the federal government to take action to protect him. In fact, they have a legislative responsibility to do so under Australian law.” Stary cited legislation making it a crime for any person, in Australia or internationally, to “deliberately or recklessly cause physical or mental harm” to an Australian citizen.

Meanwhile McClelland is being confronted by journalists on a daily basis to substantiate his characterisation of Assange’s actions as “illegal.” Yesterday he said the Labor government was still seeking “advice” as to whether Assange and WikiLeaks had broken any Australian law. In a press conference this morning, a visibly flustered McClelland was still unable to cite legislation that Assange and WikiLeaks may have breached.

Demonstrations in support of Assange and WikiLeaks are taking place today and on Sunday in major cities across Australia.



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