

Australian media organisations, Labor MPs attack persecution of Julian Assange

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Representatives of nearly all the mainstream Australian media organisations today released an open letter to Prime Minister Julia Gillard, condemning her denunciations of the WikiLeaks publication of secret US diplomatic cables as “illegal”. The letter declares that “the reaction of the US and Australian governments to date has been deeply troubling” and states: “We will strongly resist any attempts to make the publication of these or similar documents illegal.”

The document was signed by 26 editors and news directors, including from the Murdoch and Fairfax media empires, the four national commercial television networks, the two government-owned broadcasters, the ABC and SBS, and two other radio stations. It declares its opposition to attempts to use Australian law or criminal charges to assist the US-led witch-hunt against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, an Australian citizen. “There is no evidence, either, that Julian Assange and WikiLeaks have broken any Australian law. The Australian government is investigating whether Mr Assange has committed an offence, and the Prime Minister has condemned WikiLeaks’ actions as ‘illegal’. So far, it has been able to point to no Australian law that has been breached.”

The letter points out that Assange had “worked with five major newspapers around the world, which published and analysed the embassy cables”. It notes that the leaked diplomatic correspondence has begun to be published in Australia. Both the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Melbourne Age*, sister Fairfax publications, have published material from WikiLeaks, although not the original cables.

The letter makes the false claim that WikiLeaks is “doing what the media have always done: bringing to light material that governments would prefer to keep secret”. In reality, the mass media has been complicit in

covering up lie after lie about the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and a host of other crimes committed by the US and its allies. Nevertheless, the letter’s signatories have directly cut across Gillard’s unswerving defence of the US operation to criminalise Assange.

The letter comes in the wake of Australian Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd’s declaration on December 8 that laid blame not with Assange, but with the United States, for the leaking of the 250,000 secret diplomatic cables. The media organisations comment that “it is the most astonishing leak of official information in recent history, and its full implications are yet to emerge”.

Interviewed by the *Australian* last weekend, Rudd reiterated his remarks. Referring to the US, he stated: “Let’s not mince words that their diplomatic communication system was inadequately protected.” He then went further, dismissing suggestions by Gillard and Australian Attorney-General Robert McClelland that Assange may have his Australian passport cancelled. Rudd insisted that any such decision was his alone as foreign minister. “Under law, I’m responsible for the Passports Act, therefore the decisions concerning the withdrawal or otherwise of passports rests exclusively with the foreign minister based on the advice of the relevant agencies,” he said.

Indeed, the former prime minister said he was prepared to intervene to have a laptop computer provided for Assange in London’s Wandsworth prison to help the WikiLeaks founder prepare his defence and obtain bail at his appearance today at Westminster Magistrates Court.

Purporting to be coming to the aid of an increasingly beleaguered Gillard, Rudd claimed that “it’s quite clear that the Prime Minister was expressing concerns about the illegality of actions which in my view refer to stuff

in the United States.” But his extraordinary reinterpretation of Gillard’s remarks only highlighted the growing rift within the government over the WikiLeaks documents.

On Saturday, the *Australian* reported that “a large number” of government MPs had spoken to the newspaper to express “grave concerns” at the language Gillard had used in relation to Assange. Laurie Ferguson, dumped by Gillard as parliamentary secretary for multicultural affairs, said the government had overreacted to the WikiLeaks release of secret US documents.

Ferguson took a pointed swipe at Sports Minister Mark Arbib, the Labor Party factional boss named in the WikiLeaks cables as a long-time confidential source for the US government. Ferguson said of Arbib, who played a key role in the June 23-24 backroom coup that ousted Rudd as prime minister and installed Gillard: “I think it is important that the world is informed ... for instance, that some members of the federal Labor Party caucus are so heavily engaged in briefing another nation.”

Three more Labor MPs were quoted in today’s *Australian*, in what the newspaper depicted as a “growing backlash” against Gillard.

The prime minister, who is officially on leave, has given no indication that she will retreat. Having been installed with Washington’s backing, as the WikiLeaks cables have underscored, she remains determined not to allow an inch of wavering from the US position. On Sunday, Human Services Minister Tanya Plibersek, a member of Gillard’s own “left” faction, sprang to Gillard’s defence, declaring that “for people to go stealing classified documents and sticking them on the internet” was a threat to “world security” and international diplomacy.

None of the Labor politicians has the slightest concern for Assange’s basic legal and democratic rights. Rudd’s position itself is a reversal of his initial recorded response to the WikiLeaks exposures. At a media conference on November 30, a journalist asked him: “How serious is the Australian Government about assisting the US in efforts to prosecute him?” Rudd replied: “We are deadly serious about this. As I said, this is a challenge not just for the United States but the US allies, friends and other countries around the world.”

In part, Rudd’s about-face is bound up with the overwhelming public support that has rapidly developed for Assange and WikiLeaks. As the editorial in Saturday’s *Australian* noted: “The former prime minister has outclassed his successor, who has exaggerated the potential damage of the leaks, on the evidence so far, and misread the public mood ... Mr Rudd appears to have understood earlier than the Prime Minister that Australians would come down on the side of open government and freedom of the press.”

More fundamentally, however, the mounting divisions in the government reflect growing differences within the Australian ruling elite over the nature of Australia’s political, strategic and military relations with the US, under conditions where the US is in historic decline and tensions are rapidly rising between Washington and Beijing.

The rifts over Assange and WikiLeaks signify that none of the political issues underlying the June 23-24 coup that ousted Rudd have been resolved. While Gillard appointed Rudd as her foreign minister, she also declared that he would be obligated to adhere to her policies, not his own. Defence Minister Stephen Smith insisted that not a “sliver of light” should exist between the prime minister and foreign minister on foreign policy. Less than four months on, the differences between Rudd and Gillard have, once again, erupted into the public arena.



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