

Australian government reinforces conspiracy against Assange

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In the lead-up to the impending UK Supreme Court decision on the fate of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, the Australian Labor government has taken several steps that underscore its close involvement in the global operation against him by the Obama administration. Far from protecting any of the basic legal rights of Assange—an Australian citizen—the Gillard government is doing everything it can to help Washington railroad him to jail and silence WikiLeaks.

According to WikiLeaks, Britain's highest court is expected to hand down its decision next week. Assange has appealed against rulings by lower courts to extradite him to Sweden to be questioned by a prosecutor on concocted and baseless sexual assault charges. Despite not being charged with a single offence, he has now spent nearly 500 days under house arrest.

The UK court is Assange's last legal avenue of appeal in Britain. If he loses the case he can be removed to Sweden within days, where he could be held in solitary confinement for months. From there, he is set to be extradited to the United States, where he was indicted by a secret grand jury in December 2010. Under the reactionary Espionage Act of 1917, Assange could face lengthy imprisonment or the death penalty.

Even if Assange succeeds in his UK appeal, the US authorities are likely to unseal the grand jury indictment and seek his extradition direct to the US—assisted by the Australian government.

Evidently acting at the behest of the US, the Gillard government has blocked a freedom of information (FOI) application for the release of diplomatic cables between Canberra and Washington that could reveal

their intimate collaboration in the drive to frame-up Assange.

Late last month, the Australian Foreign Affairs Department delayed any release of the cables until at least late May—well after the UK appeal has been decided. In a letter to the FOI authorities, the department said some of the cables were “highly classified” and “working out precisely where the sensitivities lie” would be “an involved, complex task.”

The department stated that it had yet to finalise consultation with the prime minister's department and had not begun discussions with US authorities, a process expected to take at least four to six weeks. Such “consultations” will veto the release of any information that could further shed light on the conspiracy against Assange.

Last December, Fairfax newspapers used FOI laws to obtain cables that showed Canberra was fully aware, in December 2010, that WikiLeaks was the target of an “unprecedented” investigation to determine whether Assange could be charged under US law.

Concerned by this politically damaging disclosure, Washington stepped in. According to *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* correspondent Philip Dorling, Australian government sources said senior US officials subsequently asked to be “more closely consulted” on future FOI releases.

At the end of February, also acting in concert with the White House, the Gillard government secured the passage of legislation that would cut off any attempt by Assange to avoid extradition to the US by returning to Australia if he wins the UK appeal.

With virtually no coverage in the media, the Extradition and Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation Amendment Act 2012 was rubberstamped in the Senate on February 28. The most critical

provision allows the government to override restrictions on extraditing people accused of “political offences” against foreign governments.

Previously, extradition had to be refused if the alleged crime was political in nature. Now “terrorist”-related offences will no longer be exempt from extradition. This provision could well be used against Assange. US Vice President Joseph Biden has described Assange as a “high tech terrorist,” a charge repeated by others.

The amendments to the Australian Extradition Act further permit the government to introduce regulations, with little public scrutiny, to do likewise for other offences, such as espionage or sedition.

These changes were foreshadowed last November by Jeffrey Bleich, the US Ambassador to Australia. Asked by *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Anne Davies whether the US would expect Australia to extradite Assange if he returned home, he replied: “We will have to see whether there is an offence against any person, and Australia will have to evaluate its own extradition obligations.”

The extradition changes are part of the Labor government’s broader attacks on basic legal and political rights. The amendments expedite the extradition process and make it easier for Canberra to authorise extraditions that could lead to torture, abuse or the death penalty. They also allow the government to domestically prosecute people, like Assange and former Guantánamo Bay detainee David Hicks, accused of crimes in the US.

It should be noted that the Greens, who provide the minority Gillard government with the votes it needs to remain in office, voted for the extradition legislation. Despite posturing in the past as defenders of Assange, Greens senators raised no objection to the pivotal “political offences” changes that could be utilised against him.

In an attempt to justify its complicity in the Assange witch-hunt, the government has reiterated Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s unsubstantiated and highly prejudicial allegations that Assange and WikiLeaks acted illegally in publishing thousands of secret diplomatic cables from the US and other countries.

Late last month, responding to a letter from a citizen challenging the government’s role, Attorney-General Nicola Roxon’s representative insisted that the

government’s concern was the “reckless, irresponsible and potentially dangerous” practice of making “unauthorised disclosure of classified material.”

This accusation, which insinuates that Assange is guilty of espionage, follows the line firmly set by Gillard from the outset. Just as the grand jury was being secretly convened, Gillard branded the WikiLeaks publication of US cables as “illegal” and instigated an investigation by the intelligence and police agencies to unearth whatever material they could find for use against Assange.

The real source of the fury in Washington and Canberra is that the documents published by WikiLeaks have exposed the US-led war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as other crimes, conspiracies and machinations perpetrated by governments around the world. Millions of people have been able to see how assassinations, invasions, wars, coups, renditions and other acts of aggression and repression are organised by the imperialist powers, including Australia.



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