Australian government lines up behind British threats against Assange

Richard Phillips
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By steadfastly refusing to lift a finger in his defence, the Australian Labor government is maintaining its support for the US-led vendetta against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, an Australian citizen. Assange was granted diplomatic sanctuary on Thursday by the Ecuadorian government.

He has been inside Ecuador's embassy in London since June 19, after a British court ordered his extradition to Sweden for questioning on bogus sexual assault allegations. The WikiLeaks founder rightly fears that the US will extradite him from Sweden to face espionage and other frame-up charges for publishing thousands of documents exposing US and other imperialist war crimes.

Ecuador's principled decision was made in defiance of unprecedented political bullying by the British government, which threatened to raid the embassy and arrest Assange if the Latin American country granted him sanctuary. Britain has also refused to grant safe passage from the embassy for Assange to travel to Ecuador.

Instead of condemning this colonial-style intimidation, the Australian government has remained "on message," cynically insisting that it can do nothing about the ongoing legal attacks against the 41-year-old Australian citizen.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard refused to comment, while Foreign Minister Bob Carr declared that Canberra "could not intervene" because it was a matter between Assange, Ecuador and the British and Swedish governments.

On Wednesday, Swedish Social Affairs Minister Goran Hagglund denounced Assange as a "sick" and "pitiable coward" and a "scumbag." Carr was asked whether these slanderous and legally prejudicial comments showed that Assange would not receive a fair trial if extradited to Sweden. The Australian foreign minister brushed the question aside, declaring: "Mr Hagglund's reported remarks are a matter for him."

Canberra's refusal to publicly criticise, let alone challenge, the British government's violations of international law and diplomatic convention, or to oppose the slanderous attacks on Assange by the Swedish government further demonstrates that the Gillard government is a co-conspirator in the escalating anti-democratic US-led attack on the WikiLeaks founder. It was this complicity that forced Assange to seek asylum in Ecuador.

In late 2010, after WikiLeaks had published thousands of highly revealing US diplomatic cables, Prime Minister Gillard declared that its activities were "grossly irresponsible" and "illegal." These unfounded accusations, which directly assisted the Obama administration's preparations to indict Assange, have never been retracted. The Labor government then initiated a federal police and intelligence investigation to find out whether it was possible to charge Assange under Australian law. High-level discussions were also held about the possibility of cancelling his Australian passport.

Widespread popular support for Assange subsequently forced Canberra to modify its rhetoric. It has claimed *ad nauseam* to be providing full consular support to Assange—lies that have been consistently refuted by Assange and his lawyers.

Christine Assange told the *World Socialist Web Site* in June that her son has "requested that the Australian government ask the Swedish foreign minister, prime minister and attorney general to desist from publicly defaming Julian before any possible court hearing, because it threatens his rights to a fair trial. The Australian government refused to make this request. He

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also asked the Australian government to request that those commentators and politicians in the US who have been calling out since 2010 for his assassination, in graphic and violent terms, retract those statements. Canberra refused to do so."

The Gillard government also continues to insist that it has "no evidence" of a grand jury indictment or other US attempts to prosecute the Australian citizen. These claims have been refuted by leaked emails from Stratfor, a US-based think tank, testimony from a FBI agent at pre-trial hearings of Bradley Manning, and direct calls from US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence head Diane Feinstein, a senior Democrat senator, and other American lawmakers for Assange's prosecution on espionage charges.

Declassified cables, obtained under Freedom of Information laws and reported in today's *Age* newspaper, reveal that the Gillard government has been systematically informed by its embassy officials in Washington about US plans to prosecute Assange. The Australian embassy in Washington reported in February that "the US investigation into possible criminal conduct by Mr Assange has been ongoing for more than a year."

The embassy noted that US government officials "cannot lawfully confirm to us the existence of the grand jury." Nevertheless, apparently on the basis of still classified off-the-record discussions with US officials, the embassy reported the existence of the grand jury as a matter of fact. According to the *Age*: "It identified a wide range of criminal charges the US could bring against Assange, including espionage, conspiracy, unlawful access to classified information and computer fraud."

American responses to the embassy's representations have been withheld from release on the grounds that disclosure could "cause damage to the international relations of the Commonwealth."

Assange's decision to approach Ecuador was triggered by a letter from Australian Attorney-General Nicola Roxon to Jennifer Robinson, one of Assange's legal advisors. Roxon categorically stated that the Labor government would do nothing to prevent any extradition of Assange to the US, adding that if he was "convicted of any offence," he could "apply for an international prisoner transfer to Australia."

Assange correctly described the letter as a "factual statement of abandonment'' by the Australian government, making ''it impossible to return to my home country."

The Ecuadorian asylum application also followed a key change to Australia's extradition laws in February. The legislation, passed without any opposing vote by the Greens, effectively ended Assange's ability to circumvent any future extradition to the US by returning to Australia. Under the new provision, Canberra is no longer barred from extraditing anyone to face a "political offence"—a provision that could be used against Assange.

Greens Senator Scott Ludlum yesterday declared that the situation facing Assange was "appalling," but provided the opportunity for the Gillard government to "at long last decide to get off the fence," adding: "This is a chance for the government to redeem itself."

This is cynical illusion-mongering. The Labor government is not sitting on the fence. It is part of the US-led vendetta. The Greens, who are falsely promoted in the mainstream media as defenders of Assange, are fully committed to maintaining Labor in office. Their claim that Assange and WikiLeaks can be defended by pressuring the Gillard government consciously seeks to prevent the development of an independent political movement of workers and youth internationally against the profit system, the source of the anti-democratic attacks underway in every country.

The author also recommends:

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