

Australian “liberal” press joins persecution of Assange

Richard Phillips
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In late 2010, more than two dozen senior editors and news directors from Australia’s mainstream media—print, radio and television—issued an open letter criticising claims by Prime Minister Julia Gillard that WikiLeaks’ publication of secret US diplomatic cables was “illegal.” The signatories declared that the US and Australian government’s reaction to WikiLeaks was “deeply troubling” and pledged themselves to “strongly resist any attempts to make the publication of these or similar documents illegal.”

In November 2011, the WikiLeaks’ web site was presented with a Walkley Award for Outstanding Contribution to Journalism, Australia’s most prestigious journalism tribute. WikiLeaks and Julian Assange, the Walkley Trustees declared, had taken “a brave, determined and independent stand for freedom of speech and transparency that has empowered people all over the world.”

Less than a year later, Australia’s mainstream media as a whole has repudiated its previous defence of Assange and lined up behind the moves to extradite him to Sweden on dubious sexual assault allegations.

No charges have been laid against Assange. If extradited to Sweden, he faces the danger of being shipped off to the US and incarcerated on frame-up charges for publishing US diplomatic cables and exposing war crimes in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Senior US lawmakers and commentators have denounced Assange as a “terrorist” and called for his prosecution. A secret grand jury has been convened to indict the Australian citizen and other WikiLeaks employees.

The determination of US authorities to extradite Assange is denied by both the Murdoch-owned

publications and the other local news conglomerate, Fairfax Media, which postures as the “liberal” face of Australian journalism.

A comment by David Penberthy, a senior editor for Murdoch’s News Ltd, was typical. Penberthy “apologised” for having previously signed the December 2010 letter to Gillard and declared that Assange was not a “prisoner of conscience,” but “just another bloke who allegedly cannot grasp the simple concept that when a woman says no, she means no.”

These claims are false. Assange’s liaisons with the two Swedish women were, in fact, consensual. In addition, there is substantial evidence indicating high-level collusion between Swedish authorities, including the police and the prosecutor’s office, which took the sexual misconduct allegations out of the hands of the women involved, and immediately leaked them to the media. (See: “Australian TV program exposes Assange frame-up”)

Attempts by Murdoch journalists in Australia and internationally to discredit Assange are no surprise. What is new is that the anti-Assange campaign has been joined by the *Sydney Morning Herald*’s international editor Peter Hartcher. The Fairfax-owned newspaper has an ongoing arrangement with WikiLeaks to publish selected material.

On August 21, Hartcher wrote an op-ed comment entitled “Hypocrisy ends hero’s freedom to preach.” The purpose of the piece was three-fold: to politically discredit Assange, deflect attention from the role played by the Gillard government, and signal the Fairfax Media’s support for the US-led vendetta against the WikiLeaks founder.

Rather than pursue the bogus sexual assault claims, Hartcher insisted that Assange had “betrayed the principles he claimed to represent by seeking asylum in Ecuador and aligned himself with President Rafael Correa and his attacks on the Ecuadorian media.”

Correa, according to Hartcher, was “one of the world’s leading oppressors of free speech.” He referred to the expropriation or closure of various media outlets and “crippling” legal action against journalists critical of Correa’s policies. Hatcher’s posturing as a defender of the right to free speech in Ecuador is completely cynical.

Correa is a bourgeois nationalist who claims to be part of a “citizen’s revolution” throughout Latin America. While the populist demagoguery of Correa’s Alianza PAÍS government poses no threat to capitalism, some of its policies, including its decision not to renew a key US air base agreement and changes to deals with multinational energy corporations, have brought it into conflict with Washington and its local right-wing allies.

Two years ago, Ecuadorian police and sections of the local military attempted a coup against the Correa government. Correa was physically attacked and kidnapped by the police and imprisoned at a local hospital before being rescued by another section of the military. (See: “Ecuador shaken by police, military uprising”)

The legal action to which Hartcher referred was in response to libelous allegations by the *El Universo* newspaper. It falsely claimed that Correa had ordered the military to open fire on civilians in the hospital where the president was being held hostage. The Ecuadorian president pardoned the newspaper’s editorial writer and three directors early this year and dropped his damages claim.

Hartcher’s insistence that the WikiLeaks founder has “made common cause with the enemies of free speech” is a lie. Assange has not endorsed the Correa administration but applied for, and been granted, political asylum. Like many others who have faced political persecution, Assange, facing the full might of the US and its allies, is exercising a basic democratic right.

Assange has been forced to seek asylum in Ecuador because the Australian Labor government is a co-

conspirator in the Obama administration’s operation against him. If Assange had sought protection at the Australian embassy in London, he would have been quickly handed over to the British police for extradition to Sweden.

The Gillard government made significant changes to Australia’s extradition laws early this year, making it possible to extradite someone charged with a “political offence.” Five months after passage of the new laws, Assange’s lawyers received a letter from Attorney-General Nicola Roxon categorically stating that the government would do nothing to prevent his extradition to the US.

Hatcher’s comment is riddled with contradictions. He concedes that the US is notorious for its abuse of democratic rights and that Assange could not expect justice if he were extradited there. President Obama was “not a leader who will in any way compromise the operation of the US security apparatus, even when it conflicts with the principles of free speech,” Hatcher wrote.

Hartcher’s accurate observation about the lawlessness of the Obama administration is completely at odds with his denunciation of Assange for seeking asylum. The truth is that Hatcher’s references to Obama’s abuses of democratic rights are cynical and threadbare, designed to camouflage the reality that he is supporting the US-led campaign against Assange.

The Fairfax press’s line-up behind the persecution of Assange is another demonstration that there is no constituency in the Australian establishment for the defence of basic democratic rights.

The author also recommends:

The UK media lines up behind campaign to extradite Assange and silence WikiLeaks
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