

Australian PM denounces Edward Snowden as a “traitor”

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Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott has joined the slander campaign against National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden, declaring him a “traitor” who “betrayed his country.”

Abbott’s remarks on Wednesday came after Foreign Minister Julie Bishop gave a speech in Washington last week accusing Snowden of “unprecedented treachery” and “shamefully betraying his nation while skulking in Russia” (See: “Australian foreign minister slanders Edward Snowden”).

Abbott and Bishop have intervened as part of a coordinated campaign against the former NSA contractor that followed President Barack Obama’s speech on January 17 defending the US intelligence agencies’ global operations. Numerous US Congress members have also appeared in the media to accuse Snowden of being a Russian agent and traitor.

No other government internationally has denounced Snowden in the terms employed by the Abbott government.

For his courageous stand in exposing the illegal operations of the NSA against the people of the US and the world, Snowden has been charged by the US Department of Justice with theft of government property and unauthorised release of intelligence and “national defence” information.

The Australian government is openly flouting both diplomatic norms and basic legal precepts in its accusations of “treason” against the whistleblower. Its stance underscores Canberra’s role as Washington’s junior partner, complicit in many of the crimes committed by US imperialism around the world. The Australian intelligence agencies, as part of the US-led “Five Eyes” network, are culpable in the NSA’s extraordinary international spy apparatus exposed by Snowden.

The Abbott government remains enraged by the NSA whistleblower’s exposure of Australian spying on the mobile phones of the Indonesian president and his wife, reported by the *Guardian* and the publicly owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) last November. This provoked a diplomatic rift between Canberra and Jakarta that remains unresolved. Several media reports have indicated that further Snowden leaks will likely reveal other such espionage operations carried out throughout the Asian region.

The prime minister’s accusations against Snowden were made in the course of a McCarthy-style attack on the ABC.

“A lot of people feel at the moment that the ABC instinctively takes everyone’s side but Australia’s,” Abbott declared in an interview on a right-wing “shock jock” radio program. Referring to the revelations of monitoring Indonesian leaders, he stated: “I was very worried and concerned a few months back when the ABC seemed to delight in broadcasting allegations by a traitor. This gentlemen Snowden, or this individual Snowden, who has betrayed his country and in the process has badly, badly damaged other countries that are friends of the United States. And of course the ABC didn’t just report what he said, they took the lead in advertising what he said.”

Abbott added that “it dismays Australians when the national broadcaster appears to take everyone’s side but our own” and that he wanted the ABC to have “at least some basic affection for our home team, so to speak.” By “our side,” Abbott is referring to the Australian ruling elites and their predatory interests, not to the millions of people in Australia and worldwide who applauded Snowden’s stance in exposing the NSA’s massive international spying operation on the world’s population.

This demand for a more “patriotic” ABC is, in part, aimed at preventing the publication in Australia of more Snowden stories like the Indonesian phone-tapping exposé. Much of the rest of the Australian press—especially the Murdoch media, which controls 70 percent of the country’s newspaper market—denounced the ABC for partnering with the *Guardian* to release the story.

The *Australian* ran an editorial insisting that the public broadcaster ought to have suppressed the NSA documents—because they “were classified top secret because they were considered important for the nation’s security” and “anyone with the most perfunctory understanding of international affairs would have realised at first glance that making these documents public would severely damage relations between Indonesia and Australia and thereby, inevitably, do harm to both countries.”

More broadly, Abbott aims to convert the ABC into an unalloyed propaganda mouthpiece for the government.

During Wednesday’s radio interview, the prime minister complained that the broadcaster aired allegations raised by asylum seekers earlier this month that Australian navy personnel who forcibly returned their vessel to Indonesia had punched them and forced them to put their hands on red-hot engine parts. Indonesian police are investigating the reports.

The Australian government and the navy have flatly denied the allegations, while refusing to conduct an inquiry. Immigration Minister Scott Morrison declared that no investigation was required because he had “been given assurances about their conduct and I believe those assurances because I believe in those individuals.” Morrison added: “The Australian government is not going to put up with people sledging the Australian navy.”

Abbott weighed in, declaring that “you shouldn’t leap to be critical of your own country, and you certainly ought to be prepared to give the Australian navy and its hardworking personnel the benefit of the doubt.”

The prime minister’s remarks about the ABC again exposed divisions within the government. Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull, whom Abbott ousted as Liberal Party leader in 2009, declared that the ABC was accountable to its board of directors,

not the government. “What’s the alternative?” he asked. “The [ABC] editor-in-chief becomes the prime minister? Politicians, whether prime ministers or communications ministers, will often be unhappy with the ABC ... but you can’t tell them what to write.”

Turnbull’s stance reflects concern within ruling circles that Abbott’s strident demand for some kind of nationalistic censorship regime could backfire, triggering opposition among ordinary people. Moreover, the communications minister and others in the government recognise that accusations the ABC is a “left-wing” institution are absurd, and appreciate the services rendered to the ruling elite by the national broadcaster.

Despite Turnbull’s statement differentiating himself from Abbott, the day after the PM’s attack on Snowden and the ABC, Turnbull announced an “efficiency study” into the broadcaster, aimed at “reducing expenses.” The review will likely be followed by sharp funding cuts in the upcoming May budget, including job losses and the abolition of existing services. The government is also reportedly considering axing the ABC’s \$223 million contract providing for the Australian Network Asian broadcasting service.

The government’s opposition to any investigation of alleged crimes carried out by Australian military and intelligence personnel, like its denunciation of Edward Snowden, underscores its utter disregard for democratic and legal norms. Working hand in hand with Washington, Canberra is promoting militarism and preparing for war in the Asia-Pacific.



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