Demands grow that Australian government act to free Julian Assange

Mike Head
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Last Sunday, Australia's Channel 7 network broadcast an interview with Jennifer Robinson, an Australian-born, London-based lawyer who represents WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange. She issued a clear demand for the Australian government to carry out its responsibility to secure his freedom, as an Australian citizen.

The interview and 10-minute segment on the nationally-televised "Sunrise" morning program was a significant break in the general silence within the Australian corporate media on the more than seven-year detention of Assange. It came amid a renewed international campaign to fight for the unconditional freedom of the courageous journalist, who has continued to expose the war crimes, regime-change operations and mass surveillance conducted by the US and its allies around the world.

One of the central demands of this campaign is that Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's government act immediately to secure Assange's freedom and his right to return to Australia, with guaranteed protection from any US request for his extradition on conspiracy and espionage charges. These charges can carry the death penalty.

Robinson's interview came three days after she accompanied two Australian consular officials to meet with Assange inside the Ecuadorian embassy in London, where he sought political asylum on June 19, 2012. The visit was the first made by Australian officials to the Australian citizen in the six years since he has been effectively imprisoned inside the embassy, denied the right to obtain medical treatment or sunlight and outdoor physical exercise.

In her "Sunrise" interview, Robinson posed the pressing question: "What diplomatic representation is the Australian government willing to provide to protect Julian Assange from the risk of US extradition?"

Robinson pointed out that the Trump administration had taken "a far more public and aggressive stance" against WikiLeaks and Assange than even the Obama administration, under which a Grand Jury indictment was made for Assange's arrest.

Since Trump's election, Robinson explained, key members of his administration had called for WikiLeaks to be "taken down," and for ways to be found to prosecute Assange, regardless of the US Constitution's First Amendment guaranteeing free speech.

"When will the Australian government, which is uniquely placed to provide a resolution to this case, step forward to provide assistance?" she asked.

Robinson said Assange was willing to "face British justice, but not the risk of US injustice." He is prepared to face court for breaching his British bail conditions when Ecuador granted him political asylum, but must have a guarantee against extradition to the US.

Such a guarantee was "standard procedure," Robinson said. "If the Australian government would come to the fore, the case could be resolved quickly."

As Robinson emphasised, both US Attorney General Jeff Sessions and CIA Director Mike Pompeo, now secretary of state, had made clear their intent to imprison Assange and shut down WikiLeaks, which Pompeo last year described as a "hostile non-state intelligence service."

US threats against Assange escalated from March 2017, when WikiLeaks began publishing a massive leak of CIA documents, dubbed "Vault 7." The documents lay bare a vast system of surveillance, hacking and cyberwarfare directed against the people of the United States and the entire planet.

As the WSWS reported at the time, the documents indicate that the CIA has developed "more than a thousand hacking systems, trojans, viruses and other 'weaponized' malware" allowing it to seize control of devices, including Apple iPhones, Google's Android operating system and devices running Microsoft Windows. By hacking these devices, the CIA can also intercept information before it is encrypted on social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Signal, Telegram, Weibo, Confide and Cloackman."

These revelations came on top of the fury in the US political establishment after WikiLeaks published emails exposing the Democratic Party National Committee's sabotage of Bernie Sanders' presidential campaign and

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Hillary Clinton's secret speeches promising to protect the interests of Wall Street.

Since March 28 this year, Assange has faced further mistreatment, and is now in imminent danger. Under pressure from Washington, Ecuador's government has deprived him of any form of communication with the outside world, including visitors. It has also threatened to renege on Assange's asylum, and hand him over to waiting British police. Just before he was cut off, Assange had tweeted links to the WSWS series exposing the unprecedented number of former CIA agents running as Democrats in this year's US midterm elections.

After Robinson's interview, *New Matilda*, an Australian media outlet, published a commentary by Kellie Tranter, a lawyer and human rights activist. She detailed documents, obtained by freedom of information requests, showing that Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop had refused to "seek to 'resolve' Mr Assange's case." Bishop's refusal followed the February 2016 findings of the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) that Assange was being arbitrarily detained by Britain and Sweden in violation of international human rights law.

On February 12, 2016 Bishop, a former lawyer, signed a Ministerial Submission stating "we are unable to intervene in the due process of another country's court proceedings or legal matters, and we have full confidence in the UK and Swedish judicial system."

Tranter disclosed two further statements from Bishop's department, on June 7 and 8 this year, adhering to the refusal to act on the WGAD verdict, even though in May 2017 Sweden finally dropped its trumped-up "investigation" into the sexual assault allegations against Assange. Among the exposures made of the politically motivated and dubious character of these allegations was a detailed examination undertaken by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Four Corners" program on July 23, 2012 (see: "Sex, Lies and Julian Assange").

Tranter explained that the Swedish decision meant that the only outstanding "court proceeding" was the "relatively minor one of a breach of bail conditions by Assange when he sought asylum in 2012." Tranter stated: [I]t is incumbent upon a civilised nation to protect its citizens from risks posed by other nations to that citizen's wellbeing."

As a legal analysis published yesterday by the WSWS explained, both international and Australian law establishes that the Australian government clearly has the "discretion"—that is, the power—to take action against the United Kingdom in order to protect Assange, including, potentially, legal action in the British courts.

Robinson's "Sunrise" interview is the second breach in the wall of corporate media silence. On June 2, Fairfax Media newspapers carried an opinion piece by Greg Barns, a barrister who is an adviser to Assange and WikiLeaks.

Barns called on Turnbull and Bishop "to assist in ensuring that this Australian citizen is no longer at risk of being subjected to US detention and can therefore leave the Ecuadorean embassy. This is because a key hurdle to Australian involvement in the Assange case has been removed, namely the Swedish warrant."

On May 28, the WSWS and the International Committee of the Fourth International called for international action to defend Assange and endorsed the vigil being prepared by WikiLeaks' supporters outside the Ecuadorian embassy in London on June 19, and other vigils being organised around the globe.

In the same statement, the Socialist Equality Party (Australia), with the support of journalist and film-maker John Pilger, announced a demonstration to be held at Sydney Town Hall Square on Sunday, June 17 at 1:00 p.m. The rally will demand that the Turnbull government honour its responsibilities to Assange and intervene to secure his right to return to Australia, with guaranteed protection from any US extradition request.

Every effort must be made to mobilise the full strength of the international working class to win Assange's freedom, as part of the defence of all basic democratic rights. Under the Trump administration, the American state and its allies have ramped up their efforts to destroy WikiLeaks and Assange as part of a broader agenda of censoring, silencing and intimidating every critical and independent media organisation.

Since WikiLeaks was created in 2006, both it and Assange have made an immense contribution to the exposure of great power criminality and abuses. That role will become even more important as the US and its partners, including Britain and Australia, escalate the drive toward trade war and war against China and Russia, and any other country regarded as a threat to Washington's post-World War II hegemony.

We urge all our readers to join the demonstrations, vigils and other actions that are being organised internationally and to fight for an end to the persecution of Julian Assange and WikiLeaks.

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