

# Persecution of WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange continues

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Today is the 100th consecutive day of the denial, by the Ecuadorian embassy in London, of the democratic right of WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange to communicate with the outside world, or receive visitors, apart from his legal representatives and a brief, unexplained visit by two Australian consular officials.

Julian Assange sought political asylum in the small embassy building on June 19, 2012. For 2,767 days—more than six years—the British government has denied him exposure to direct sunlight and adequate medical care. On July 3, he turned 47-years-old, enduring conditions that the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention condemned as “deprivation of liberty,” a “violation of his human rights” and tantamount to torture.

The reasons why Assange sought asylum—and why it was granted, under international law, by Ecuador—have not changed. He was being given no support by the government of Australia, where he was born and holds citizenship, under conditions where he faced the prospect of extradition to the United States.

In June 2012, Assange lost his last legal appeal against an attempt to extradite him to Sweden to answer “questions” over manufactured allegations that he may have committed sexual assault offenses. His concern, however, was not the Swedish case. It was the well-grounded fear that Sweden would hand him over to the US to face charges of espionage, in response to WikiLeaks’ publication of leaked documents that had revealed American war crimes, and intelligence and diplomatic intrigues.

The threat that Assange could face a US show trial on charges that carry massive prison sentences, or even the death penalty, has only become more serious. Former CIA director and now Trump’s secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, declared in April 2017—after WikiLeaks began publishing explosive exposures of CIA hacking and criminality—that the US government “can no longer allow Assange and his colleagues the latitude to use free speech values against us.” The Trump administration’s attorney general, Jeff Sessions, declared several days later that Assange’s arrest was a “priority.”

The Swedish prosecutors’ office ended its “investigation” and extradition request in May 2017 with no sexual offence charges ever being laid. The British government and police,

however, immediately made clear that if Assange left the Ecuadorian embassy he would be detained for breaching his bail conditions.

The danger that faces Assange was spelled out this week by lawyer Geoffrey Robertson. The well-known human rights defender stated: “If he leaves the embassy, he will be arrested, held for a short time for a breach of bail, and in that time, the US foreign secretary will order an extradition request that will keep him in prison for years, fighting a US extradition request to prosecute him as a spy.”

Since Ecuador cut off his communication on March 28, and leading up to the June 19 sixth anniversary of his involuntary confinement in the embassy, there has been a renewed groundswell of demands that the persecution of Julian Assange be ended. He has not committed any crime. He is the editor of an award-winning media organisation, which has informed the world of numerous cases of government and corporate criminality and abuse of power.

The demands have been raised around the world: Ecuador must restore Assange’s communications; the British government must drop its pursuit of a minor bail breach and allow him to leave the United Kingdom if he chooses; and the Australian government must exercise its undeniable diplomatic power and legal discretion to secure the unconditional release of an Australian citizen and journalist facing unjust treatment.

The response of the political establishments of the United States, Britain and Australia, however, has been to continue their vendetta to silence WikiLeaks and prosecute Assange.

Mike Pence, Trump’s vice president, visited Ecuador last week. On the eve of the trip, 10 of the most prominent Democratic Party senators demanded that he pressure the government of President Lenín Moreno to renege on Assange’s right to asylum and expel him from the embassy.

Based on statements made after the talks, Pence does not seem to have pressed Moreno on the asylum issue. Instead, the Trump administration appears content to use the Ecuadorian government as its agent in a vindictive attempt to break Assange, physically and psychologically, by denying him his fundamental right to access and communicate with the outside world.

For its part, the May government in the United Kingdom is

participating in the effort to pressure Assange to leave the embassy with no guarantees against extradition to the US.

In words dripping with deceit, Minister of State for Europe and the Americas Sir Alan Duncan told the British parliament on June 26: “We would like to make the assurance that, if he [Assange] were to step out of the embassy, he would be treated humanely and properly and the first priority would be to look after his health, which we think is deteriorating.”

Assange’s health has been “deteriorating” over the past six years because the May government has refused to allow him to even temporarily leave the embassy building to visit a hospital or a dentist. Duncan’s real attitude to the WikiLeaks editor was made clear on March 27, when he labelled him a “miserable little worm,” who should give “himself up to British justice.”

The Labour Party opposition headed by Jeremy Corbyn has made no attempt to expose the utter fraud of Duncan’s statement, let alone demand that Assange be given a guarantee against US extradition and the right to leave the UK unhindered.

The Australian government of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has likewise not shifted from its cowardly collaboration with the US.

Assange’s father John Shipton wrote to Turnbull last month, appealing to him for assistance in extricating his son from the Ecuadorian embassy, with the necessary protections.

Turnbull has responded with a deafening silence. Moreover, the establishment media has raised not a single question of the government over Assange’s condition, or even asked that it explain why it sent two officials to visit him on June 7, for the first time since he sought asylum.

The Australian Labor Party, which denounced Assange as a criminal when it was in government, has predictably also said nothing. More significantly, the Greens’ leadership, along with independent Andrew Wilkie, who once claimed to defend WikiLeaks and Assange, have also remained mute over the issue.

Only one member of parliament has mentioned Assange: Green senator Andrew Bartlett, who is retiring in a matter of weeks. On June 28, during debate on sweeping anti-democratic, “foreign interference” laws, Bartlett noted in the Senate that government member Andrew Hastie had raised Assange and WikiLeaks as examples of the kinds of individuals and organisations that the new legal powers would be required to suppress.

Bartlett used one of his last opportunities to speak in parliament, to provide at least some voice to the sentiments of millions of ordinary people in Australia.

“I’m not giving him [Assange] a character reference,” Bartlett insisted, “but I am certainly saying he has a right as an Australian citizen to receive proper support against what has clearly been an international conspiracy by governments to try and silence him. He has been kept in isolation for years. He has been basically silenced already because of the threat he poses to

the state—not to the community, not to the public.... These laws are attempts to criminalise and attack people like Julian Assange.”

In a later contribution, Bartlett directly asked: “Given that Mr Hastie specifically referred to Julian Assange, is there actually an explicit focus on the activities of him and his organisation?” A government minister replied: “The answer is no.”

The honest answer to that question would have been “yes.”

Successive Labor and Coalition governments have collaborated in the persecution of Assange and WikiLeaks because of their support for the full alignment of Australian imperialism with its alliance partner, the US, in its escalating geo-strategic and military confrontation with China. The Australian ruling elite is just as hostile to an independent and critical media as its American counterpart.

There is little question that the new Australian “foreign interference” laws are intended to be used against media organisations that publish leaked information, which exposes US and Australian war plans against China. They can also potentially be used to criminalise anti-war political opposition and activity. Most ominously, the laws are being hailed internationally as a model for legislation in other countries.

Assange and WikiLeaks are a sharp example of the broader campaign to censor and silence oppositional voices. The fight to defend him is inseparable from the struggle to alert and mobilise the international working class against the ongoing attacks on fundamental democratic rights and against the danger of dictatorship and war.

SEP (Australia) to hold meetings on new “foreign interference” laws: A move towards dictatorship and war [3 July 2018]

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