

Julian Assange's lawyer: Australian government has a "duty" to protect him

Mike Head
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As the danger mounts that WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange will soon be forced to leave London's Ecuadorian embassy, where he was granted political asylum in 2012, a member of his legal team has called for the Australian government to guarantee his right, as an Australian citizen, to return to the country.

The lawyer, Jennifer Robinson, said Assange wants to exercise his right to return to Australia, provided he is protected from extradition to the United States, where the Trump administration, the FBI and the CIA are intent on jailing the WikiLeaks editor for many years, or executing him, on concocted espionage-related charges.

Speaking to *news.com*, Robinson said Assange was grateful for the support of the Australian public. "I would say he is homesick for Australia, he would love to go back, but we have been disappointed by previous governments' failure to take action and it is time the Australian government listens to that and takes action."

Robinson emphasised: "Julian is still an Australian citizen and they have an obligation—and I think a duty—to exercise rights of protection over an Australian citizen."

Prominent Australian civil liberties lawyer Julian Burnside, who visited Assange in June, also published a statement last week urging the Australian government to intervene to bring him "safely back to Australia." The WikiLeaks founder had "provided an historic public service" by revealing "the secrets of the world's unaccountable forces."

These calls, evidently made on Assange's behalf, underscore the importance of the demand issued by the globally-broadcast rally conducted by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) of Australia, with the support of well-known investigative journalist John Pilger, in Sydney's Town Hall Square on June 17. That rally demanded that the Australian government secure Assange's right to return to Australia, if he so wishes, with guarantees that he not be handed over to the US.

Ecuadorian President Lenin Moreno, whose government has taken a lurch to the right to seek a rapprochement with Washington and the European imperialist powers, has been engaged in intensive discussions with the British authorities, who will arrest Assange as soon as he steps outside the embassy so that he can be thrown in jail and ultimately extradited to the US.

Assange has never been charged with, let alone convicted of, any crime. It is more than a year since Swedish prosecutors finally dropped a trumped-up warrant for his arrest to be "questioned" about dubious sexual assault allegations. Nevertheless, Theresa May's British Tory government remains determined to jail him, supposedly for skipping bail when Ecuador granted him asylum six years ago.

May's government is obviously acting in close concert with the US state apparatus. Britain has refused repeatedly to give Assange any guarantee against extradition. Trump's administration, like Obama's, wants to silence Assange and WikiLeaks forever because of their ongoing and courageous work in exposing to the world's people the mass surveillance, war plans and regime-change plots conducted by Washington and its allies, including Britain and Australia.

In testimony to the US Senate Judiciary Committee in May 2017, then-FBI Director James Comey effectively confirmed that Assange was entirely justified in seeking political asylum in 2012. "He hasn't been apprehended [by US authorities] because he is inside the Ecuadorian embassy in London," Comey testified. Senior Trump administration officials, from former CIA Director Mike Pompeo down, have made it clear that Assange's detention is a high priority.

Robinson said Canberra had good relationships with both Britain and US, so it should not be difficult for Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's government to intervene. However, she said the past record raised concerns about

the government's willingness to "stand up for Australians" when the US government was involved.

The truth is that successive Australian governments, starting with Julia Gillard's Labor government in 2010, have not only refused to defend Assange. They have actively colluded with the US frame-up, which Gillard publicly declared her government would assist in any way it could.

In March 2011, when in opposition, Turnbull delivered a speech at the Sydney University Law School in which he denounced Gillard for falsely accusing Assange of breaking the law. "When an Australian citizen is threatened in this way, an Australian prime minister should respond," Turnbull said.

Since taking office, however, like all their predecessors, Turnbull and his ministers have given the green light for Assange to be delivered into the hands of the same spy and military forces whose murderous and anti-democratic activities WikiLeaks has exposed.

Most recently, at a media conference in London on July 20, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop declared that Assange's plight was a matter for "British law enforcement authorities."

Bishop stood alongside her British counterpart, Jeremy Hunt, who boasted that Assange faced "serious charges" and would receive a "warm welcome" from the British police once he left the embassy.

Robinson told *news.com* that Hunt's statement was "curious" because Assange faces no charges whatsoever. Even if Assange were convicted of breaching bail, that is only punishable by a maximum of three months in prison, and is not considered a serious charge by law.

Robinson asked: "So is Mr Hunt talking about an extradition request from the US where he would face serious charges? Has he misspoken and disclosed that?"

Robinson said Assange's legal team had sought assurances from Britain there was no US extradition request and had been met with a "standard, blanket will not confirm or deny."

Robinson warned that Assange's health is deteriorating. "It's an untenable situation," she said. "I'm very concerned about the permanent damage to his health. He is without adequate access to the outdoors and exercise and it has had a serious impact on his health. The UK government refuses to allow him get medical help and leave (which is) a humanitarian issue."

Apart from a vague call by former Greens Senator Scott Ludlam, published on July 25, for an end to the persecution of WikiLeaks, and a brief tweet by ex-Greens

leader Christine Milne, there has been total silence in Australia's political establishment about the grave danger facing Assange.

The SEP is the only political party campaigning for Assange's defence in Australia, which is part of the broader fight necessary for the defence of all fundamental democratic rights.

At the June 17 Sydney rally, SEP national secretary James Cogan explained: "The Australian government had and still has undeniable diplomatic power and legal discretion, under international and national law, to intervene to defend an Australian citizen who is being unjustly treated by another state."

Cogan stressed: "At this rally, we are not *asking* the Turnbull government to act. We are *telling* it. We hold the Labor Party and the Coalition parties fully responsible for the harm and outrages committed against Julian Assange. We will hold them responsible for what happens next. They will be held to account by the working class in Australia."

From the outset, the *World Socialist Web Site* and SEP have explained that a movement to defend Assange and WikiLeaks cannot be built by appeals to the political, trade union and media establishment that has abandoned him. It will be built by a fight to politically educate and independently mobilise the working class.

As part of this campaign, we urge our readers to take part in protests if Assange is forced from Ecuador's embassy into British police custody and then faces a protracted struggle against any attempt to extradite him to the United States.



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