Australian PM and Labor Party leader both reject any defence of Julian Assange

Mike Head
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In their opening media appearances yesterday, on the first full day of the Australian election campaign, Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Labor Party leader Bill Shorten used almost identical language to wash their hands of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

They made their positions clear within hours of Assange, an Australian citizen, being bodily dragged out of Ecuador's London embassy to face US extradition charges. There was sickening bipartisan agreement, in effect, to help hand Assange over to the Trump administration.

It was as if Morrison, who heads the Liberal-National Coalition, and Shorten, the official opposition leader, were speaking to a script prepared in advance. Both expressed their confidence in the British and US legal systems, while claiming that Assange would continue to receive "consular assistance" from the Australian embassy.

Asked by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's television breakfast news presenter, Michael Rowland, for his response to the main news of the day—Assange's arrest—Morrison declared:

"He'll get that consular assistance as you'd expect him to, but he will have to make his way through whatever comes his way in terms of the justice system there."

Asked directly whether Australia would fight a move to extradite Assange to the US, Morrison flatly rejected the proposition. He said the WikiLeaks founder was at the mercy of the British justice system.

"When Australians travel overseas and then find themselves in difficulties with the law, they face the judicial systems of those countries. It doesn't matter what particular crime it is that they're alleged to have committed, that's the way the system works."

Shorten, interviewed straight after Morrison, took the same line, refusing to oppose extradition to the US, while feigning ignorance of the issues. "I think he should receive consular assistance, beyond that I don't know all the facts of the matter," Shorten said. "He should deserve the ability to be represented in court, which he will be."

This shared faith in the due process and independence of the British and US courts is a fraud. The very speed with which Assange was declared guilty of breaching bail and confronted by a suddenly unsealed secret US indictment is a warning that the preparations for a show trial are already well underway.

As Morrison and Shorten are well aware, the brutal treatment of Chelsea Manning, the courageous former army intelligence private who leaked hundreds of thousands of incriminating US cables to WikiLeaks, is another display of "the way the system works." After being persecuted in a US military jail for seven years under Obama, she has been re-imprisoned indefinitely, and held in solitary confinement to try to coerce her into testifying falsely against Assange.

As for the claim of "consular assistance," the reality is that successive Australian governments, both Labor and Coalition, have actively supported the operation by US administrations, first under Barack Obama and then Donald Trump, to silence WikiLeaks and railroad Assange to prison.

This began with the Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard. In November 2010, as WikiLeaks published damning exposures of US war crimes, regime-change plots and other criminality, Gillard rushed to ingratiate herself with Washington by declaring Assange's actions were "illegal." She instructed the police and intelligence agencies to investigate whether Assange could be charged with crimes under Australian law—which he could not.

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One of WikiLeaks's supposed "crimes" was to publish documents that proved that "protected sources" of the US embassy inside the Labor Party and trade unions were centrally involved in Gillard's installation as prime minister in mid-2010, ousting Kevin Rudd. Rudd had no difference at all with the US alliance, but he had suggested that the US should make some room for the rise of China.

Since then, the Labor Party, which committed Australia to the US "pivot to Asia" against China and expanded US military access across the country under Gillard, has never shifted from its hostility toward WikiLeaks.

One government after another, from Labor's Gillard and Rudd to the Coalition's Tony Abbott, Malcolm Turnbull and now Morrison, has backed Assange's persecution in order to make clear their unconditional commitment to the US military alliance, which underpins the predatory interests of Australian capitalism in this part of the world.

Moreover, every government insisted it had "no evidence" of US attempts to extradite the Australian citizen. That pretence now lies in tatters. In fact, as far back as 2012, declassified cables, obtained under Freedom of Information laws, revealed that Australian embassy officials in Washington had informed the Gillard government in detail about US plans to prosecute Assange.

The venomous hostility of Labor, and the entire political establishment, towards Assange was displayed yesterday when the party's deputy leader, Tanya Plibersek reshared a Tweet declaring that the WikiLeaks founder worked as "the agent of a proto fascist state, Russia, to undermine democracy" and that his supporters were "cultists."

This slander is based on the discredited allegations of the US intelligence agencies and the Democratic Party that WikiLeaks was involved in a "Russian plot" to deprive Hillary Clinton of the US presidency. In reality, WikiLeaks published leaked documents demonstrating that the Democratic National Committee illegally rigged the party's primaries against Bernie Sanders, in favour of Clinton. It also published Clinton's secret speeches to Wall Street banks, in which she pledged to do their bidding and to expand predatory US wars abroad.

The record of Australia's corporate media is equally damning. On December 22, 2010, the editors or news directors of virtually every Australian television station or print media publication signed a joint "open letter" to Prime Minister Gillard which stated: "To aggressively attempt to shut WikiLeaks down, to threaten to prosecute those who publish official leaks, and to pressure companies to cease doing commercial business with WikiLeaks, is a serious threat to democracy."

Now that it is undeniable that Assange faces US prosecution, not a single editorial has appeared defending him, freedom of speech or the rights of journalists.

At rallies and public meetings over the past 18 months, the Socialist Equality Party has raised the demand that the Australian government intervene diplomatically and legally to secure Assange's release and ensure his right to return to Australia with a guarantee of protection from extradition to the US.

There must be no illusions, however. The entire Australian political and media establishment is directly responsible and culpable for Assange now being incarcerated.

That is why everything depends on turning to the working class and young people, as part of the struggle to overturn the profit system and its drive to austerity and war. The defence of basic democratic rights is bound up entirely with the fight for socialism.

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