

Australian political establishment rejects calls for defence of Julian Assange

Mike Head
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Despite outraged protests in Australia and internationally over last Thursday's arrest of Julian Assange, and the immediate laying of US extradition charges against him, the Australian political establishment is still adamantly refusing to come to the aid of the WikiLeaks founder, an Australian citizen.

Assange's father, John Shipton, last weekend appealed to the government to intervene to bring his son home. Shipton said Prime Minister Scott Morrison and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade "should in a nuanced way do something."

Shipton, who has visited his son in Ecuador's London embassy each Christmas, expressed shock at how Assange was treated and how unwell he looked. "I saw him, the way they dragged him down the steps—the coppers—he didn't look good," he told the *Australian*.

Shipton attended the Socialist Equality Party's emergency rally in Melbourne last Friday, organised to demand that the Australian government use its diplomatic and legal powers to secure Assange's freedom, with a guarantee against extradition to the US, where he would face a show trial on conspiracy charges.

Assange's mother, Christine, who also supported the SEP rallies in Sydney and Melbourne, urged Australians to "bail up" politicians and ask their position on what she had earlier described as the "thuggish, brutal, unlawful arrest of my courageous, tortured, multi-award winning journalist son, Julian."

Amid the campaign for the May 18 federal election, both Prime Minister Morrison and Labor Party leader Bill Shorten have dismissed calls for them to intervene, while hiding behind false claims that Assange would receive unspecified "consular assistance."

"It's got nothing to do with us, it is a matter for the US," Morrison declared last Friday. His government's venom toward Assange was displayed openly by Senator James McGrath on the Australian Broadcasting

Corporation's Q&A television show last night.

An audience member challenged a panel of politicians to say what action they would take to defend Assange, who had "performed an enormous service to all the people in the world." McGrath contemptuously said Assange would receive just the "same" assistance as any other citizen, then declared he felt "sorry" for Ecuador for having had Assange in its London embassy for seven years. This was after the Ecuadorian government had illegally terminated the political asylum it had granted Assange in 2012 to protect him against extradition to the US.

Similarly, on Saturday, Shorten was asked at a town hall meeting in Woy Woy, just north of Sydney, about the defence of Assange as a journalist. The Labor leader flatly rebuffed the question, saying: "You were using the analogy of a journalist, I don't know if Assange was a journalist."

This reply echoes self-serving claims being made throughout the corporate media that Assange is not a real journalist. That is precisely because WikiLeaks publishes incriminating documents for the public to see for themselves, rather than suppressing and censoring them to protect the interests of governments and their state agencies, as the complicit mass media has been doing for decades.

Just like Morrison, Shorten declared that Assange was merely "entitled to consular assistance." In an attempt to cover his tracks, the Labor leader said he would be "happy to get my spokespeople to talk to his lawyers in the course of the next few weeks. I think that's a fair enough request."

Shorten has form. He was a key minister in the last Labor government, which actively assisted the Obama administration in preparing criminal charges against Assange. Prime Minister Julia Gillard had publicly branded Assange's activities as "illegal."

An editorial in the Murdoch media's flagship, the *Australian*, last Saturday pointed to the underlying interests behind the bipartisan line-up to cover-up the war crimes and other abuses committed by the US and its allies, including Australia.

The newspaper insisted that Assange stand trial in the US. "In the interests of all Western nations and the fight against terror, US security and military services need to protect sensitive information and close loopholes that allowed so much data to be extracted and dispersed," it stated.

After years of official denials that Assange faced extradition to the US, the editorial said it was "no surprise" that minutes after his arrest, the fact that the US had filed an extradition request was revealed. It recalled that in 2010, WikiLeaks had published 90,000 reports on the US-led invasion of Afghanistan and 400,000 on the Iraq war, 800 Guantanamo Bay detainee assessment briefs, and 250,000 secret State Department cables.

The illegal killings, coup plots, regime-change operations and mass surveillance revealed in these documents constitute the "sensitive information" that governments and the mainstream media are desperate to hide from view.

Evidently under pressure from its members, Australia's journalists' union, the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), has stated that it opposes the prospect of Assange's extradition. Pointing out that WikiLeaks had, in 2011, been bestowed with Australian journalism's highest honor, the Walkley Award, MEAA federal president Marcus Strom said Assange's case was a press freedom issue.

The fact remains, however, that the protracted operation to incarcerate the WikiLeaks founder could not have proceeded without the silence of the MEAA since 2011, the year after it awarded Assange a lifetime membership. Moreover, despite Strom's statement, the MEAA has done nothing to mobilise its members in defence of the jailed journalist.

The same goes for the Greens, the other main party of the political establishment. It belatedly broke a long silence on Assange to make a mealy-mouthed suggestion that the government should ask the US not to prosecute him.

Greens leader Senator Richard Di Natale said the Australian government "should be making use of its close relationship with the United States to campaign against the prosecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange."

Successive Australian governments, however, including

the Greens-backed Gillard government, backed the US conspiracy against Assange precisely to maintain this "close relationship," which has included Australian participation in Washington's criminal wars and intrigues.

Last night, on the Q&A program, Greens Senator Larissa Waters demonstrated the duplicity of her party's stance. While she claimed to oppose the US extradition request, she declared that if "rape charges" were revived by Swedish authorities, Assange should be extradited to Sweden instead.

Thus, the Greens are lining up with a globally coordinated campaign to once again smear Assange as a "rapist" in order to divert public attention away from the historic threat to free speech posed by the US extradition proceedings.

The truth is that no "rape" charge, or any other, has ever been laid against Assange in Sweden. Instead, he faced a trumped-up arrest warrant for questioning about dubious sexual misconduct allegations. This bogus investigation, which was finally dropped two years ago, is now being resuscitated because Assange's onward extradition to the US could be fast-tracked under Temporary Surrender treaty arrangements between Sweden and the US.

The line-up of Australia's political and media elite underscores the necessity of the international fight launched by the SEPs around the world, and the *World Socialist Web Site*, as outlined at last Friday's emergency rallies in Sydney and Melbourne, for a determined turn to the working class as the only social force that can and will defend Assange, Chelsea Manning and fundamental democratic rights.

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