

Australian PM refused to raise persecution of Assange with Trump

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Prime Minister Scott Morrison signalled his government's support for the US-led persecution of Julian Assange at last weekend's G20 summit in Osaka.

Morrison confirmed on Sunday that he did not mention the plight of the WikiLeaks founder and Australian citizen with US President Donald Trump, whose administration is seeking to lock Assange away for life, or execute him, for exposing American war crimes and diplomatic conspiracies.

In line with the full support for the US military alliance within the Australian political and media establishment, Morrison repeatedly stressed his admiration for the US government at the summit. Morrison and Trump held backroom discussions and fawned over one another at a dinner involving high-level US and Australian delegations on the eve of the summit.

Morrison's representatives also indicated the government's willingness to participate in US provocations against Iran and other actions aimed at advancing the predatory interests of American imperialism. Trump and senior US officials, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, stressed the importance of the US-Australia alliance amid growing challenges to American hegemony.

Assange, who faces the prospect of extradition from Britain to the US on Espionage Act charges carrying a maximum sentence of 175 years imprisonment, went unmentioned.

In an interview on Sunday, Brett Mason, a Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) reporter, asked Morrison: "When you sat down with President Trump, did you raise any issue about Julian Assange who's facing extradition to the United States?" Morrison smirked, and said that he had not.

The SBS reporter replied: "Should you perhaps have done that given the concern about his case?" Morrison, still smirking, absurdly responded: "I was here to secure Australian jobs."

Morrison's performance confirmed again that the Australian government is fully participating in the international political conspiracy to deny Assange his fundamental legal and democratic rights and to silence him. It exposed as lies the claims of government and Labor Party representatives, since Assange's arrest on April 11, that they would provide the WikiLeaks founder with unspecified "consular assistance."

The SBS interview also demonstrated that the Morrison government's refusal to defend Assange is bound up with its support for a broader turn to authoritarianism by governments internationally, in response to mounting popular opposition to war and inequality.

Mason introduced his question on Assange by noting that Trump had publicly joked with Russian President Vladimir Putin about repressing journalists. Mason also pointed out that Morrison and other heads of state had warmly welcomed Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, who is implicated in the gruesome murder of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Morrison blandly responded that he was unconcerned by these developments and was focusing on "press freedom in Australia."

In reality, Morrison's government last month oversaw unprecedented federal police raids on journalists over stories exposing Australian involvement in war crimes in Afghanistan, and plans for expanded government domestic spying.

Last year, the Liberal-National Coalition and Labor worked together to pass draconian laws, mandating

longer sentences for whistleblowers and creating expanded “secrecy” offences under which journalists can be charged.

Morrison’s government, with Labor’s full support, also passed legislation providing for criminal prosecutions and massive fines against social media executives who do not swiftly remove “violent” and “extremist” material from their platforms.

At the G20, Morrison secured an agreement from all participating countries to take actions based upon the anti-democratic Australian laws. Morrison declared that this was “an unprecedented coordinated effort to crack down on terrorist and extremist content being posted and shared on social media.”

This agreement demonstrates that Australia is playing a central role in an international campaign to censor the internet. Socialist, left-wing and anti-war content could be classified as “extremist,” while “violent” content could include videos of police brutality and political demonstrations.

Already, Google and Facebook have introduced algorithms that have sharply reduced search engine traffic to the *World Socialist Web Site*, WikiLeaks and other progressive websites.

The G20 agreement is a warning that such measures will intensify. It underscores the fact that the persecution of Assange is the spearhead of a broader assault on democratic rights, including to press freedom and the ability to disseminate content online.

Morrison’s unconcealed hostility to Assange is in line with the refusal of successive Australian governments to fulfil their obligations to the WikiLeaks founder, as an Australian citizen.

This began with the Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard. In 2010, when senior American politicians were calling for Assange to be assassinated for exposing US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, Gillard denounced WikiLeaks as a criminal organisation and pledged to help the US intelligence agencies to destroy it.

Every government since has rejected demands, including from Socialist Equality Party (SEP) rallies, that they use their undeniable diplomatic powers and legal discretion to secure Assange’s return to Australia, with a guarantee against US extradition.

Since Assange’s arrest and the unveiling of US Espionage Act charges against him last month, the

government, Labor and Greens have sought to suppress any discussion of Assange’s plight. They have been aided by the corporate press, which has either denounced the WikiLeaks founder, or refused to mention him.

This demonstrates that the Australian government will take action to defend Assange only if it is compelled to do so by a mass movement of the working class. As part of a global campaign by the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Parties, the SEP is seeking to build such a movement, including by holding rallies in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane demanding freedom for Assange and the courageous whistleblower Chelsea Manning.



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