

As Australian government threatens to jail journalists, media chiefs denounce Julian Assange

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The hypocrisy of the corporate media was on display last week at the two public hearings of an Australian parliamentary committee inquiry into the impact of intelligence agency and police powers on press freedom.

Even as a senior government official declared that anyone who leaked “top secret” information should “go to jail,” media chiefs backed the persecution of Julian Assange, which has set the precedent for the intensifying global war on journalism.

While claiming to champion the public’s “right to know,” media executives vilified the WikiLeaks founder for exposing the crimes, conspiracies and mass surveillance of the US-led spy and military apparatuses. They pledged to work more closely with the government and its agencies to ensure that any classified material they received would be suppressed or censored to protect “national security.”

Andrew Hastie, the ex-Special Forces commander who chairs the parliamentary security and intelligence committee, set the tone. He asked the media representatives to confirm that their “public interest journalism” was “quite distinct from the radical transparency advocated by Julian Assange and his merry band of WikiLeaksers.”

Representing the Murdoch media, News Corp executive Campbell Reid replied: “Absolutely.” News Corp Australasia executive chairman Michael Miller declared: “Yes, it is.”

Asked by the Labor Party’s Mike Kelly, another former military officer, about the “reputable” media’s “relationship” with WikiLeaks in initially publishing some of the secret information about US and allied war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, Reid denounced Assange.

“[A]s to any of the editors or publishers along this table or in similar places around the world, none of us hid out

in the Ecuadorian embassy,” Reid stated. “We take responsibility for what we publish. In hindsight, a lot of people who were involved in the Julian Assange matter painted him as a hero of journalism. That’s far from the case. If you’re going to just dump documents into the world and go, ‘Oh well, I’m conducting some kind of public duty,’ and people’s lives are in danger because of that, that’s not journalism; that’s irresponsibility.”

Assange did not “hide out” in London’s Ecuadorian embassy. The British government and police trapped him there for seven years after Ecuador granted him political asylum to protect him from being extradited, via Sweden, to the US on concocted espionage charges. Soon after Assange was ultimately arrested, the Trump administration confirmed his apprehension by unveiling US espionage charges, carrying 175 years’ imprisonment.

Far from “dumping” documents, WikiLeaks struck a powerful blow for the public’s “right to know” by publishing thousands of documents laying bare the illegal killings, regime-change plots and other anti-democratic operations of the US and other major powers. No evidence has ever been produced that lives were lost as a result. In fact, the *Guardian* and other media companies left it up to Assange to redact individual names.

As for “responsible journalism,” Reid described the collaboration between the media conglomerates and the security apparatuses to try to stop such damning material getting into the hands of the working class.

“[M]ostly in these contentious cases we actually have a good relationship with government agencies, and we’ll just say, ‘We have this information,’ and the agency will say: ‘This is dangerous to do. Don’t do it.’ I can’t think of a single occasion when there has been a defiance on the part of media to do the wrong thing.”

Reid broadened his attack from WikiLeaks to other web

sites, denouncing “the kind of irresponsible or misbehaving journalism or information that is just posted online with no care or even bad intentions.” That was totally different, he insisted from “the kind of journalism that is represented by these companies.”

Similar declarations were made by Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) managing director David Anderson and Free TV Australia CEO Bridget Fair, representing the television networks. “[F]or anything that touches on national security we will often work with a respective agency before publishing,” Anderson emphasised.

This is precisely why millions of people distrust the corporate media and regard Assange and the jailed whistleblower Chelsea Manning as “heroes of journalism.” Their “radical transparency” broke through decades of complicity by the media in the crimes and abuses of the US and its allies, including Australia.

The Liberal-National government, in partnership with the Labor Party, convened the committee’s inquiry in an attempt to quell the public anger over two Australian Federal Police (AFP) raids on journalists in June—less than two months after Assange’s April 11 arrest in London—while justifying the intimidation and persecution of whistleblowers and the publication of their exposures.

One government witness after another underscored the determination of the entire political and security establishment to escalate the assault on genuine investigative journalism.

Home Affairs Department secretary Mike Pezzullo told the committee that the person who leaked a classified document to a News Corp journalist, Annika Smethurst, about plans to legalise the internal surveillance activities of the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) should be imprisoned.

Speaking on behalf of the department that oversees the AFP and the domestic spy agencies, Pezzullo defended the raids on Smethurst’s home and the Sydney headquarters of the ABC, which had reported on the cover-up of war crimes committed by the Special Forces in Afghanistan.

Despite the furore over the raids, AFP commissioner Andrew Colvin insisted that the journalists involved were still under investigation and could face serious charges.

Colvin and deputy AFP chief Neil Gaughan warned that information-sharing with the US-led “Five Eyes” surveillance network would be at risk if their “international partners” did not trust them to protect secret documents. Gaughan made a similar warning just

after the raids, effectively pointing to Washington, not just Canberra, as the source of the attack on journalists.

Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) officials reiterated the extraordinary declaration in the spy agency’s submission to the inquiry that raids on journalists were necessary because “in Australia today, journalism is being used as cover by hostile intelligence actors.”

ASIO claimed there were “many similarities between the activities of journalists and foreign intelligence officers that make journalism a suitable cover for hiding intelligence activity.” Both occupations were “inquisitive,” required “access to people, places and sensitive information,” and involved “analysis of issues of interest to the public.”

This assertion is a threat to all journalists and amounts to a warning that they could be targeted under the “foreign interference” laws introduced last year. In fact, a senior Attorney-General’s Department official, Sarah Chidgey, defended her department sending a warning letter to Nine Media after it aired footage from a documentary produced by Al Jazeera—a supposed foreign agent because it is owned by the Qatari government. Clearly, preparations are being made to use laws more broadly.

Far from opposing the crackdown on journalism, Labor members of the parliamentary committee indicated support for legislation to enhance the cooperation between the media companies and the intelligence. Mike Kelly several times suggested a return to the D-notice system, which involved a committee of government and media officials vetting sensitive material from 1952 to 1982, essentially continuing a wartime censorship regime.

This bid to revive a wartime-style blackout is doubly significant. The entire political establishment is intent on blocking any publication that could alert the population to the secretive operations of the intelligence and military forces, which are bound up with involvement in US-led preparations for war, particularly against China.



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