

Government minister, journalists challenged on Australian TV over persecution of Assange

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24 September 2019

In a breach of the official silence surrounding the persecution of Julian Assange, a supporter of the WikiLeaks' founder asked panelists on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Q&A" program last night why his case was going "mostly unreported" by the Australian media.

The reference to Assange was one of only a handful of mentions of Assange on "Q&A," the country's most widely viewed current affairs panel show, since his brutal arrest by the British police six months ago. The entire media establishment has sought to suppress any discussion over his persecution, even though he is an Australian journalist and publisher facing the prospect of extradition to the US and life imprisonment for his role in exposing American war crimes.

Michelle Wood, who asked the question, began by referencing the fact that Kerry O'Brien, a veteran journalist who was on the panel, had been "vocal in urging the government to update national security laws to protect journalists and whistleblowers."

The panelists had just been discussing threats to press freedom, including Australian Federal Police raids last June targeting journalists over stories that revealed plans for expanded domestic surveillance, and allegations of extrajudicial killings by Australian troops in Afghanistan. Wood said that "there seems to be a recognition that media freedom is being eroded in this country."

She noted, however, that "we have a situation where there is an almost total media blackout about Julian Assange. Although he has been held in a maximum-security prison for the last six months, with failing health, most people don't even know about it."

Wood explained that a British judge earlier this month decreed that Assange would be jailed indefinitely, despite the end of his custodial sentence on

bogus bail charges on September 22. Assange now faces the prospect of years in the maximum-security Belmarsh Prison, while he fights the attempt by the British ruling elite to extradite him to the US.

This latest attack on Assange's legal and democratic rights had not even been mentioned on the ABC website.

Wood said that the Australian media could "no longer deny that Assange is a political prisoner." She asked, given this, why his case continued to go "mostly unreported."

Jan Fran, a media commentator who responded first, stated that the government and the media had put Assange in the "too hard basket." She pointedly noted that Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison is currently touring the US, where he is being wined and dined by President Donald Trump. Any action by the Australian government in defence of Assange, she indicated, would attract the ire of the US state.

The refusal of the government to provide Assange with any assistance, she said, was "not good enough." She noted that Assange had been "languishing" in various forms of detention for the best part of the past decade.

Paul Fletcher, the government's minister for communications and the arts, then intervened with a torrent of slander directed against Assange.

Fletcher declared Assange had "refused to answer charges of sexual assault in Sweden." This was a bald-faced slander.

As Wood correctly noted from the floor, Assange has never been charged with a crime in Sweden. He had always stressed his willingness to answer prosecutor's questions about bogus and politically-motivated allegations of "sexual misconduct" levelled against him in 2010 by Swedish lawyers and politicians with close

ties to the US state.

Instead, Swedish prosecutors refused to interview Assange. With the support of the British government, they sought to extradite him, despite the fact that there were no criminal proceedings. At the same time, they refused to provide any guarantee that Assange would not face onward rendition from Sweden to the US.

Under these conditions, Assange exercised his right to seek political asylum in Ecuador's London embassy in 2012. Swedish prosecutors dropped their "preliminary investigation" against him in 2017, less than a year after finally agreeing to interview him in the embassy building.

The unveiling of 18 US charges against Assange this year, including 17 counts under the Espionage Act, was an absolute vindication of the WikiLeaks' publishers' warnings that he required political asylum to protect him from extradition and prosecution by the American government.

Undeterred, Fletcher did not retract his slander. Instead, he declared that WikiLeaks' publications had resulted in deaths. This claim has been refuted by official reports of the US and Australian militaries, which both concluded that not a single individual had come to physical harm as a result of WikiLeaks' publishing.

Fletcher's defamatory statements, aimed at poisoning public opinion against Assange, gave the lie to claims by government ministers since April that they were fulfilling their responsibilities to Assange as an Australian citizen by providing him with unspecified "consular assistance." Fletcher's performance demonstrated that the government, like its predecessors, is an active participant in the US-led vendetta against Assange.

For his part, Labor parliamentarian Chris Bowen sat in stony silence throughout the exchange on Assange. He was a senior minister in the Gillard Labor government which responded to calls for Assange's assassination from leading US politicians in 2010 by declaring that WikiLeaks was a criminal organisation and pledging to assist the attempts of the American intelligence agencies to prosecute its editors.

When O'Brien was asked to speak, he noted that Assange had been given a Walkley Award, the highest honour in Australian journalism, in 2011. He referenced WikiLeaks' exposures of civilian killings by

US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

O'Brien, however, sought to defend the silence of the media on Assange by declaring that news was "cyclical" and a "question of how the story gets sustained." His implicit suggestion that the plight of the world's most famous political prisoner was not especially newsworthy was transparently absurd.

In fact, the media has blacked-out a series of major news stories. There were virtually no reports when the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture declared in June that Assange had been the victim of "psychological torture"; when a US federal judge in July scathingly dismissed a civil lawsuit alleging collusion between Assange, Trump and Russia; or this month, when renowned artists and intellectuals, including investigative journalist John Pilger, musician Roger Waters and actress Pamela Anderson, have spoken out powerfully in his defence.

The media silence is a conscious policy. It is inextricably tied to the support of the major media outlets for Australia's alignment with the US drive to war, especially against China, and their extensive ties to the state and political establishment.

That the issue of Assange was even mentioned on "Q&A" is a reflection of the growing groundswell of support for the WikiLeaks publishers, among workers, students, young people and principled cultural figures.

The rapid discrediting of Fletcher's smears, and the favourable audience response to Jan Fran's comments, demonstrated that the media censorship is aimed at preventing these sentiments from spreading further. Above all, it is an attempt to ensure that they do not coalesce into a conscious political movement fighting for Assange's freedom.



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