

Australian government, Labor opposition silent on sadistic British show-trial of Julian Assange

Oscar Grenfell
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From the editorial pages of the official media and the statements of leading politicians, the uninformed observer would have no idea that a world-famous Australian journalist is enduring extradition hearings that have been condemned as a legal travesty by rights' organisations and United Nations representatives, or that he faces 175-years imprisonment for publishing evidence of war crimes.

Because it is Britain that is staging the current show-trial of Julian Assange, and the US government that is seeking his destruction, the WikiLeaks publisher is largely being treated as a "non-person" by the Australian political and media establishment. Moreover, they, no less than their counterparts internationally, are committed to an agenda of militarism and escalating attacks on democratic rights, of which the persecution of Assange is a central component.

A week since British hearings for Assange's extradition to the US resumed, his name does not appear to have passed the lips of a minister in the federal Liberal-National government or a prominent representative of the Labor Party opposition, publicly, at least. And nor does it seem that they have been asked by any members of the "fourth estate" about their silence.

Not a single editorial in the establishment media has called for Assange to be defended. This includes outlets such as the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and the state-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation, which regularly proclaim their commitment to "press freedom."

The disinterest is not because the British proceedings have been uneventful, or the attacks on Assange's legal and democratic rights carefully concealed.

Last week's hearings began with Assange emerging for the first time in months from Belmarsh Prison, a maximum-security facility, where he has been detained for the past year-and-a-half, even though he has not been convicted of a crime. There he has been imperiled by the coronavirus pandemic, with the authorities failing to provide him with such basic protection as a mask, as dozens of inmates and staff have contracted the potentially deadly-virus.

Before the trial, Assange was "rearrested," despite the fact

that there had been no change to his incarceration. The reason was that, weeks out from the trial, a new "superseding" indictment was filed by US prosecutors. This was plainly aimed at overwhelming Assange's lawyers with thousands of legal documents, after they had already finalised their defence case.

Judge Vanessa Baraitser rejected a defence request that the additional material in the superseding indictment be excised. But she also dismissed a defence motion for a delay, to allow Assange's lawyers to respond to the new allegations. Meanwhile, the US prosecutors have stated that the new material in the indictment, despite the fact that it does not contain additional charges, could itself be the basis for extradition.

The US government is seeking to ensnare Assange in a Kafkaesque nightmare, where, even if extradition is blocked on the basis of the Espionage Act charges against him, he can still be dispatched to his American persecutors, based on the additional material in the new indictment, largely furnished by FBI informants, including a con-man previously convicted of impersonating Assange and stealing money from WikiLeaks.

Taken together, the judicial abuses of the past week alone could be the subject of a short volume. They have been reviewed in the daily court reports published on the WSWWS.

But the travesty has not caused a scandal or provoked any opposition from the Australian establishment. This silent complicity is a continuation of the collaboration of every Australian government since 2010 in the US-led vendetta against Assange, beginning with the Greens-backed Labor administration of Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

This has only become starker since the US first publicly sought Assange's extradition in April last year. Prime Minister Scott Morrison has alternated between assurances that Assange will be provided with worthless "consular assistance," and prejudicial declarations that he must "face the music."

Labor leader Anthony Albanese, like his predecessor Bill Shorten, has not said a word. Some of his colleagues, however, have given vent to Labor's intense hostility to the WikiLeaks founder. Tanya Plibersek, then Labor's deputy leader and still a prominent MP, responded to the scenes of Assange being

illegally arrested and manhandled by British police, on April 11, 2019, by sharing a tweet branding anyone who defended him as a “cultist.”

The bipartisan stance is inextricably tied to the Australian ruling elite’s support for US-led predatory wars and military preparations, including the criminal, 19-year occupation of Afghanistan, which WikiLeaks did so much to expose, and Washington’s economic, diplomatic and military confrontation with China.

At the same time, Labor and Liberal-National governments have passed a battery of anti-democratic laws, first under the bogus “war on terror,” and more recently on the pretext of unsubstantiated claims of “foreign interference.” They have repeatedly increased maximum terms of imprisonment for whistleblowers, and introduced laws that would make it a criminal offence to even possess classified “national security” information.

The line-up extends beyond the major parties. A handful of individual Greens MPs, current and retired, have made comments condemning the British hearings over the past week.

Speaking for affluent layers of the upper-middle class, and preoccupied with seeking coalitions with Labor, or even the Liberals, the Greens, however, are organically hostile to any fight against war, authoritarianism and the major parties. That is why they have rejected calls, including from within their ranks, for a public, party campaign demanding the Australian government defend Assange.

A couple of other MPs, including independent Andrew Wilkie, have also spoken out. He is the co-chair of a cross-party group of parliamentarians that claims to be committed to “Bringing Assange home.” Most of its 24 members have never mentioned Assange publicly, and its activities appear to be limited to the occasional statement or letter of opposition. Like similar toothless committees, its primary function is to bolster the illusion that a section of the political establishment will address Assange’s dire plight.

For their part, the pseudo-left organisations, such as Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance, have boycotted the campaign in defence of Assange for years.

This has gone hand in hand with their increasingly open support for US regime-change operations in Syria, Libya and the Ukraine, and is bound up with their promotion of middle-class identity politics, which have been used to slander Assange on the basis of the discredited, frame-up allegations of sexual misconduct that were leveled against him by the Swedish state years ago.

The refusal of the entire political establishment to uphold Assange’s rights has been facilitated by the corporate media.

Having repeated all of the slanders concocted by the intelligence agencies to undermine support for Assange over the course of a decade, dozens of prominent reporters “discovered,” when the WikiLeaks founder was charged by the Trump administration for publishing activities, that he was not

really a journalist.

To the extent that these assertions are based on a coherent argument, it appears to be that Assange is not part of their closed order, because he has never been employed by a multi-billion dollar media conglomerate and publishes information without having it vetted by the authorities.

The shameful role of the media is underscored by the fact that the Assange precedent—the escalation of attacks on press freedom following the unveiling of the Espionage Act charges against him—has been evident here, including in the form of federal police raids targeting journalists, and threats of prosecution over stories exposing war crimes.

Ironically, Assange’s resumed hearing has coincided with a renewed campaign by the official media over “press freedom.”

Its areas of focus are revealing. Numerous journalists have lined up with both their bosses and the federal government, to demand that Google and Facebook provide the media conglomerates with millions of dollars in advertising revenue, for the privilege of listing their content in search results and allowing it to be shared by social media users. Numbers of reporters have also condemned attacks on the press in China, dovetailing with stepped-up provocations against Beijing by the US and Australia. These concerns do not seem to extend to Britain.

The reporters who have consistently opposed the attacks on Assange, such as the award-winning investigative journalists John Pilger and Andrew Fowler, and former SBS newsreader Mary Kostakidis, are notable, not only for their forthright defence of democratic principles, but also because they are the exception that proves the rule. The official media—and most of the affluent careerists who staff it—functions ever more as a willing adjunct of governments, intelligence agencies and the corporate elite.

The response to the first week of Assange’s resumed hearings has again demonstrated that the fight for his freedom must proceed through the development of a political movement of the working class. This is the only way that an Australian government will be compelled to uphold its obligations, under domestic and international law, to intervene in defence of Julian Assange.



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