

Australian government silent on calls to intervene in defence of Julian Assange

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The Australian government and Prime Minister Scott Morrison have maintained a stony silence in response to calls from prominent defenders of democratic rights to intervene to secure the freedom of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange and block his extradition from Britain to the US, where he faces life in a supermax prison for exposing American war crimes.

In the course of four weeks of resumed British extradition hearings, which concluded last Friday, Assange's name did not pass the lips of a single prominent representative of the Liberal-National Coalition government or the Labor Party opposition.

The official blackout on Assange's plight, enforced with the assistance of a compliant media, was a green light for the legal abuses he has been subjected to over the past month, and the entire US-led campaign to silence the WikiLeaks founder forever.

In a rare breach in the media's refusal to even mention Assange, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age* published a front-page interview with his partner Stella Moris on September 23.

Morris said: "What he [Assange] has asked for and what I have asked for directly to [Prime Minister] Scott Morrison is for political intervention, for a political intervention because this is a political case... this is not something that the Australian government can just hide its head in the sand and say 'nothing to do with us.'"

Her appeal went unanswered.

In comments to London's Foreign Press Association last week, Assange's father John Shipton bluntly stated: "Silence on their behalf is seen as complicity and that's not a healthy position for the Australian government to be seen doing. It would be the simplest matter to solve diplomatically Julian's needs..."

Jennifer Robinson, one of Assange's lawyers, added: "If the Australian government was doing diplomatic representations, Julian would not be in the position he is today: he is an Australian citizen who won a Walkley award [for journalism], facing extradition."

Robinson revealed that three seats had been reserved in the courtroom for representatives of the Australian High Commission in London. They did not show up or bother to inform Assange's lawyers. This meant that for several days, under conditions of severely restricted seating due to the coronavirus crisis, monitors from Amnesty International and other rights' organisations could not attend the proceedings.

The empty courtroom seats sum up the real attitude of the entire Australian political and media establishment to Assange. Whatever

weasel words of concern they may occasionally utter, they are indifferent to the persecution of a journalist for publishing the truth, and would rather not see or hear of his dire plight.

The failure of Australian officials to attend the hearings gives the lie to the government claims that Assange is being "provided with consular assistance, like every other Australian citizen." The most basic, and perfunctory form of "assistance," would be to have attended the hearings, which were condemned as a gross abuse of procedure by hundreds of legal experts, international political figures and UN Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer.

Everything that can be said about the Liberal-National government's complicity in the campaign against Assange applies with equal force to the Labor opposition. Current Labor leader Anthony Albanese has dodged every question from the public about Assange.

It was the Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard that in 2010 slanderously accused WikiLeaks of "illegal acts" for exposing war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, and pledged to assist the US intelligence agencies to destroy it. This was in line with its support for the US-Australia military alliance, including the occupation of Afghanistan and the plans for war with China, and went hand in hand with escalating attacks on democratic rights domestically.

The line-up extends more broadly. There is no evidence on the public record that Morrison, his senior ministers or Albanese have been asked about Assange during the past month, at any of the many media briefings and press conferences they have delivered.

The shameful role of the media was pointed to by world-renowned Australian investigative journalist John Pilger. In a recent interview, he drew attention to an article by the *Sydney Morning Herald's* London correspondent Latika Bourke, which stated: "The court heard Assange became depressed during the seven years he spent in the Ecuadorian embassy where he sought political asylum to escape extradition to Sweden to answer rape and sexual assault charges."

Bourke managed to include multiple lies and slanders in a single sentence. Assange was granted political asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy to protect him from a US prosecution for his lawful publishing activities: the very subject of the hearing that Bourke was covering. His status as a political refugee was repeatedly upheld by the United Nations.

Assange was never charged with any crime in Sweden. A decade-long investigation which never passed beyond the "preliminary"

stage was dropped for the third and final time for lack of evidence. Melzer and other legal experts have extensively documented the legal irregularities and political interventions that underlay the allegations, which were concocted by US-aligned Swedish prosecutors and police agencies.

In most other circumstances, once such gross factual “errors” were brought to the attention of a journalist, they would be removed. An apology would likely be offered, if only to prevent a defamation action. Not so in the Assange case.

Because he is a political prisoner, showing what Melzer has stated are medically-verifiable symptoms of psychological torture, Assange is considered fair game. In the editorial rooms of the corporate publications, it is known that Assange and his lawyers, facing innumerable abuses at the hands of the US and British states, will likely be unable to take legal action against the slanders that they hurl at the WikiLeaks publisher.

For their part, the Australian Council of Trade Unions has said nothing about Assange during the British trial. Its secretary Sally McManus is on the closest of terms with the conservative government, with which she has collaborated throughout the pandemic to attack the jobs, wages and conditions of workers and ensure that hundreds of billions of dollars in bailout funds have been handed to the banks and corporations.

The last statement by the official national Greens’ website referencing Assange is from April, 2019. Greens leaders have rejected calls from members of the organisation for a party campaign demanding Assange’s freedom. This is in line with their attempts to present themselves to the corporate elite as a “responsible” parliamentary party, and their increasingly open support for imperialist war.

Individual Greens parliamentarians have made statements against the attacks on Assange, but they have a for-the-record character. A number of their representatives are members of a cross-party “Bring Assange Home” parliamentary grouping, which has organised virtually nothing since its formation last October.

It is an indictment of all of the official parties, and especially Labor and the Greens, that the two most outspoken parliamentarians on the defence of Assange have been Andrew Wilkie, an independent MP with limited influence, and George Christensen, an extreme right-wing populist whose relations with the government are fractious.

Christensen and Wilkie met with the British high commissioner to Australia Vicki Treadell last week, and stated that they received a “good hearing” from her. The backroom meeting with a representative of the British government, to express “concerns,” sums up the feckless activities of the parliamentary group.

The British state has refused to release Assange on bail, despite the fact that he has not been convicted of a crime, deliberately threatening him with coronavirus infection, and have blocked his access to doctors and lawyers alike at every opportunity. To expect its representatives to “see sense” as a result of a private conversation with two little-known Australian MPs is politically deluded.

In comments to the media, Christensen said that revelations that the US Central Intelligence Agency spied on Assange when he was a political refugee “show a foreign power tried to use illegal

means to harm an Australian citizen.” He floated the possibility of legal action in response, but his statements were vague, and it was not even clear if he meant action by the Australian government or Assange’s lawyers.

Wilkie gave an interview to *Sydney Criminal Lawyers*, in which he described Assange as a “broken man.” Wilkie stated: “The Australian government’s conduct has been appalling. They don’t give two hoots about Julian Assange. They don’t care one bit about the principles at stake and the precedents that will be set.

“For the Australian government, it’s almost entirely about Australia’s relationship with Washington, kowtowing to whoever is in the White House, and being prepared to line up with people like Mike Pompeo, who, being the former head of the CIA, just wants to get even.”

But one of his only concrete proposals was the following: “It’s up to politicians like me, and including the prime minister, to educate the public about the substantive facts of the matter,” because “the public’s view of Julian Assange is largely based on misinformation and disinformation.”

In other words, Wilkie is calling on Morrison, who he correctly indicted as a collaborator of Assange’s chief persecutors, to enlighten the public on the importance of press freedom, and defending an Australian journalist, which his government has resolutely refused to do. This is truly mutiny on one’s knees.

In reality, there is widespread support for Assange among workers, students and young people. The criminal role of the Australian government and the entire political and media establishment in this case demonstrates that the fight for Assange’s freedom must proceed by building an independent political movement of the working class.



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