

After British extradition verdict, Australian government still refuses to defend Assange

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The Australian government has responded to a British court decision against Julian Assange's extradition to the United States by restating its refusal to defend the persecuted WikiLeaks publisher.

In an unexpected verdict on Monday, British District Court Judge Vanessa Baraitser ruled that Assange could not be dispatched to the US, where he faces 17 charges under the Espionage Act and 175 years imprisonment for exposing American war crimes, human rights violations and diplomatic conspiracies.

Baraitser's judgement did not uphold civil liberties or press freedom. She accepted virtually all of the legal arguments of the US State Department, effectively greenlighting the prosecution of journalists and publishers for revealing "national security" material. Rather, Baraitser judged that extradition would be "oppressive" as a result of Assange's compromised mental health and the risk of suicide if he is imprisoned in the US.

While the rejection of the extradition request is a welcome development, the dangers facing Assange are far from over. He remains incarcerated in Belmarsh Prison, despite the fact that he has been convicted of no crime, pending a bail hearing on Wednesday, British time. The coronavirus is circulating widely in the maximum-security facility, imperiling Assange, who has a chronic lung condition.

The US authorities indicated that they would appeal the verdict, meaning that Assange's legal ordeal may continue for as many as two more years, and the threat of extradition remains.

Assange's highly precarious situation underscores the need for a fight for his immediate freedom.

The Australian government, however, has responded to the ruling by making plain that it will do nothing to secure the rights of the WikiLeaks founder. Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Foreign Minister Marise Payne have again claimed that the persecution of the Australian journalist has nothing to do with them, declaring that they are "not a party" to the British hearings and insisting that the "legal process run its course."

In reality, the ruling is a damning indictment of the current Coalition government and previous ones.

For the past year and a half, Morrison and Payne have either

ignored or blithely dismissed warnings from UN Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer and hundreds of eminent medical experts in the Doctors for Assange group that the WikiLeaks founder's health has deteriorated dramatically and that he requires immediate expert care. Late last year, Payne confirmed that she had never bothered to speak to Melzer, despite the fact that he had issued direct appeals to her government to intervene in defence of Assange.

Baraitser's verdict confirms that the Australian government has stood by as a citizen has suffered legal and political abuses that have brought him to the brink of death.

Contrary to the claims of Morrison and Payne, Australian governments have a clear responsibility to take action when an Australian citizen's rights and health are attacked overseas. This is enshrined, not only in international law, but also in precedent. As recently as late last year, the current government conducted a high-level diplomatic operation to secure the release of Kylie Moore-Gilbert from Iran, where she had been jailed on unsubstantiated charges of spying for Israel.

By contrast, Assange has been offered only worthless "consular assistance," which his relatives have said amounts to nothing more than the provision of dated newspapers and vague assertions that Australian officials are "monitoring" the progress of his case.

The reason for the Australian government's complicity in the persecution of Assange was underscored yesterday when Morrison responded to a question from a reporter by declaring that he would not ask the US to drop the Espionage Act charges, which have been condemned by authoritative legal organisations, UN officials and civil liberties organisations as a frontal assault on press freedom.

The government is fully committed to the US alliance, including Washington's preparations for war with China. These have been accompanied by sweeping attacks on democratic rights in Australia, including secret trials to prosecute whistleblowers and the passage of sweeping "foreign interference" laws potentially criminalising anti-war activities.

The drive to war and authoritarianism, which underlies the persecution of Assange, is supported by the entire Australian political establishment. Labor has played a central role, either enacting or voting for every piece of "national security"

legislation over the past two decades, and aligning Australia with a massive US military build-up in the Asia-Pacific.

Responding to Monday's verdict, Labor's shadow attorney general Mark Dreyfus stated that his party "welcomes the decision to give priority to the health and welfare of Julian Assange. Now that a British court has found that it would be unjust to extradite Mr. Assange to the US, Labor believes that this has dragged on for long enough."

Dreyfus added: "While the U.S. has the right to appeal the court's decision, we call on the Morrison government to do what it can to draw a line under this matter and encourage the U.S. government to bring this matter to a close."

The mealy-mouthed comment, respecting the "right" of the American government to continue its attempts to silence a publisher, marks the first time a senior member of Labor's shadow cabinet has called on the Morrison government to intervene in Assange's defence. Labor waited until the verdict was issued before issuing even these weasel words.

The fact that Assange's persecution has "dragged on" for a decade is in no small part a result of the actions of Labor governments of which Dreyfus was a part.

The Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard responded to WikiLeaks' 2010 publications, for which Assange faces US charges, with unconcealed fury.

The Iraq and Afghan war logs exposed the criminality of US-led wars supported by Labor and the Coalition, while American diplomatic cables, also published by WikiLeaks, revealed the intimate ties between senior Australian politicians, including Gillard's closest backers, and the US authorities.

Gillard falsely declared that the publications were a violation of Australian law, and pledged to assist the American intelligence agencies in their bid to shut down WikiLeaks. For his part, Dreyfus felt compelled to write a 2011 opinion piece, repeating the lie that the publications had placed the lives of US informants at risk. It concluded with the authoritarian declaration that "we are in fact well served by some proper and thought-through confidentiality in government affairs."

The Gillard government's collaboration in the vendetta against Assange set the precedent that has been followed by all of its successors. Current Labor leader Anthony Albanese remains silent on Assange's plight having echoed government statements on the case for the past year and a half.

Some Australian media outlets have responded to Monday's verdict by warning of the implications of Judge Baraitser's endorsement of the US government's claims that it has the right to prosecute publishers.

An editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald* yesterday headlined "PM should urge US to abandon pursuit of Julian Assange" stated: "The decision of British judge Vanessa Baraitser to block the extradition of Julian Assange to the United States to face espionage charges was made on the grounds of his mental health and the regime under which he would be jailed there. This leaves important wider questions

still at issue."

To the extent that the corporate publications have pointed to the broader assault on press freedom, it has largely been from the standpoint of how it could impact on their own lucrative activities. The *Herald* editorial gave no account of that publication's role in the Assange case, which for most of the past decade has consisted of repeating all of the lies peddled by the intelligence agencies to undermine support for the WikiLeaks publisher.

Similar hypocrisy has been on display from the Greens. That party was in a de facto coalition with the Gillard government as it attacked Assange. Its MPs were silent on Assange's plight for years, and have rejected calls from their own ranks for a public, party campaign for the WikiLeaks founder's freedom since he was arrested by British police in April, 2019.

The occasional statements of concern from individual Greens MPs, along with cross-bench parliamentarians and a handful of Labor backbenchers, have a for-the-record character. Such remarks have not involved any frontal challenge of the government, Albanese or the media blackout of the Assange case. Rather they have served primarily as a means of perpetuating the fraud that a section of the parliamentary establishment defends democratic rights.

As the Socialist Equality Party has insisted, an Australian government will only uphold its obligations to Assange if it is forced to do so by a political movement of the working class. The struggle for press freedom must be connected to the fight against escalating militarism, austerity and the accompanying turn by governments to dictatorial forms of rule.

Monday's verdict, which opens a crack in the door for Assange's liberty, underscores the crucial importance of intensifying this campaign over the coming weeks and months. In addition to intervening in defence of Assange, the Australian authorities must give an unconditional guarantee that they will not entertain any extradition requests against Assange, if he returns to his country of origin, or otherwise participate in political conspiracies against him.



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