

Australian government, Labor silent over revelations CIA planned to kill or kidnap Assange

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The Australian government and the Labor Party opposition have maintained a stony silence on a *Yahoo News* investigation which revealed late last month that the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Trump administration discussed plans to kidnap or even assassinate Julian Assange in 2017, when he was a political refugee in Ecuador's London embassy.

In the weeks since the explosive claims were made, they have not been addressed by Prime Minister Scott Morrison or Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese. Nor have any senior government or shadow ministers issued a statement on the claims, which were made on the basis of anonymous comments from more than 30 former US intelligence and government officials.

The silence would be extraordinary, if it did not conform to a protracted pattern of essentially pretending that Assange does not exist. Credible information is now on the public record that the top levels of the US government and state apparatus conspired to illegally murder an internationally-renowned Australian citizen and journalist.

Were the government involved one of those in the crosshairs of the Western imperialist powers, such as Russia, China or Iran, and not Australia's closest military and strategic ally, the response would have been very different.

This is not a hypothetical question. Over the past 14 months, the Australian government has issued at least two statements condemning the Russian government's treatment of extreme right-wing dissident Alexei Navalny, even though he has no connection to Australia whatsoever.

The official silence is motivated by several factors. In the first instance, the *Yahoo News* revelations completely refute any suggestion that the current US attempt to extradite Assange from Britain and prosecute him under the Espionage Act, is a lawful undertaking. The Australian government, with the support of Labor, has repeatedly upheld the sanctity of the British and US legal systems, as justification for its refusal to intervene in defence of Assange.

Now, however, it is clear that the US government is persecuting Assange for his journalism. The plans to assassinate him were a response to WikiLeaks' exposures of

mass CIA spying operations. And it is undeniable that Assange faces the threat of death if extradited, given that the US government was considering killing him, even before he was on American soil.

To the extent that it has made any comment, however, the Australian government has continued to mouth banalities about ensuring Assange's "due process" and "humane treatment," even as it has become irrefutable that the US campaign against WikiLeaks is a frontal assault on these core legal and democratic principles.

Contacted after the *Yahoo News* report was released, a spokesperson for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) told *Guardian Australia*: "Minister Payne has raised the situation of Mr Assange with her US and UK counterparts, most recently with US Secretary of State [Antony] Blinken on 15 September."

Payne supposedly conveyed Australia's "expectations that Mr Assange is entitled to due process, humane and fair treatment, access to proper medical and other care, and access to his legal team."

The same *Guardian* article hinted at another reason for the stony official response to the CIA revelations in Australia. It reported that DFAT did not answer "whether the US had ever briefed or consulted the Australian government on the reported option of the CIA kidnapping or killing Assange."

Malcolm Turnbull, who was prime minister throughout 2017 when the plans were reportedly afoot, told the *Guardian* that "the first I heard about" the plot was when it was reported in the media last month.

It is scarcely credible, however, that no branch of the Australian government or its intelligence agencies were aware of the US discussions targeting Assange. The two countries have the closest ties as decades-long military allies and key partners in the US-led "Five Eyes" intelligence network.

The Australian state, moreover, has played an active role in the campaign against WikiLeaks from the outset, and the US preparations for "extreme measures" against Assange were strongly hinted at in public.

The issue, of whether any branch of the Australian state was

apprised of or involved in a plot to murder an Australian journalist, has been buried in the official press.

In one exception that proves the rule, Bernard Keane of *Crikey* wrote: “The most obvious question for the Australian government is whether the CIA discussed with Australian intelligence officials its plans to abduct or murder an Australian citizen, or whether Trump administration figures... alerted the Turnbull government at a political level.” He noted: “The extent of Australian knowledge of the plans for Assange is likely never to be clarified because Australia’s intelligence agencies are able to operate behind a bipartisan wall of secrecy.”

Recent history, however, is suggestive. In 2010, WikiLeaks published US army war logs from Iraq and Afghanistan, exposing the criminal, neo-colonial occupations of both countries, and hundreds of thousands of American embassy cables, revealing the daily intrigues of imperialist diplomacy.

As senior US politicians responded by denouncing Assange as a terrorist, then Labor Party Prime Minister Julia Gillard falsely labelled the WikiLeaks publications as an “act of illegality.” She pledged that the Australian intelligence agencies would assist their US counterparts in the campaign against Assange and WikiLeaks.

In 2011, Assange claimed the Labor government was providing information about WikiLeaks and its Australian employees to other governments. On an episode of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Q&A” program, he asked Gillard: “When will you come clean about precisely what information you have supplied to foreign powers about Australian citizens working or affiliated with WikiLeaks?” The Labor PM denied the allegation.

In early 2017, as the CIA was discussing “active measures” against Assange, its then director Mike Pompeo delivered a public speech defining WikiLeaks as a “non-state hostile intelligence service.” The novel distinction, which was accompanied by denunciations of Assange as a “demon,” was clearly aimed at stripping him and WikiLeaks of core democratic protections, and placing them in a pseudo-legal category equivalent to terrorists. This can hardly have been lost on the Australian government.

Current Prime Minister Scott Morrison was installed in a party-room coup in August, 2018. He immediately deepened relations with the Trump administration, including Mike Pompeo, who by that point had become US secretary of state.

Official documents, obtained under a freedom of information request by lawyer Kellie Tranter, detail a January, 2019, visit to Assange by DFAT officials. Assange told them that the CIA was heavily involved in the US government campaign to pressure Ecuador to throw him out of its London embassy, and that he was a subject of pervasive spying. Three months later, these efforts resulted in the illegal termination of Assange’s asylum, and his arrest by British police. Morrison responded by declaring that Assange had to “face the music,” while senior

Labor parliamentarians shared a tweet slandering him as a “Russian agent.”

Ever since, the Australian government and Labor have rejected calls to defend Assange as a persecuted Australian citizen and journalist.

The CIA revelations have broad implications, in as much as dozens or even hundreds of people were potentially subjected to illegal spying and targeting. The *Yahoo News* report stated that the CIA discussions extended to assassinating “Europe-based WikiLeaks members” and to that end developing “pattern of life” surveillance on them.

A group of 26 prominent Australian journalists, lawyers, academics, and activists who visited Assange in the Ecuadorian Embassy have written to the Morrison government, demanding to know whether they were spied upon or placed on “speculative kill lists.” They wrote: “We also believe we have a right to know whether the Australian government was informed or consented to our communications and movements being tracked.” To date, no reply has been reported.

The Australian ruling elite’s support for the campaign against Assange is inextricably tied to its support for US-led wars and military preparations, including the current build-up and threats directed against China. At the same time, Australian governments, no less than their counterparts abroad, are carrying out sweeping attacks on democratic rights, directed against whistleblowers, journalists, and above all, mounting social and political opposition from the working class.

The non-response to the CIA revelations, and the record of consecutive governments, demonstrates that Assange’s freedom will not be secured through plaintive appeals to the Australian authorities to intervene. They will only act, if compelled to do so by a mass political movement, demanding Assange’s liberty as part of a fight for all of the democratic and social rights of the working class.



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