

Silence in the media and Labour ‘left’ on Assange’s extradition danger

Thomas Scripps
15 March 2022

Julian Assange was shunted a step closer to his would-be executioners on Monday. The UK Supreme Court issued a one-line decision refusing to hear the WikiLeaks founder’s appeal against an earlier decision ordering his extradition to the United States.

The case will now be returned to the original court as a formality before being passed to the home secretary, Priti Patel, to give the final order. Once Patel receives the case, Assange could be on a plane to the US in just four weeks’ time, except for inevitable further appeals.

The Biden administration intends to prosecute Assange for charges under the Espionage Act with a potential sentence of 175 years in prison. This would be served in barbaric conditions that previous judgements acknowledged could drive him to suicide. His health has already been destroyed by years of incarceration in Britain’s maximum security Belmarsh prison.

Despite the immense danger faced by the most significant journalist of the 21st century, many major newspapers did not cover the Supreme Court decision. Those that did ran entirely perfunctory stories, largely without comment.

Britain’s leading liberal newspaper, the *Guardian*, did not write a single critical line in its cursory 350-word article, quoting just two sentences from his legal team. The US *New York Times* managed, “If Mr. Assange were extradited to the United States and faced a trial, the case could raise profound First Amendment issues. His prosecution has alarmed advocates of press freedom.”

These are publications which have spent the last weeks screaming about Russian President Vladimir Putin’s censorship and attacks on free speech and journalistic freedoms. When speaking out about democratic rights lines up with imperialist war aims, they are fervent advocates. In the case of Assange, who

exposed the systematic crimes of US and British imperialism, the “democratic principles” they so fiercely defend in Russia wither on the vine.

The NATO-Russia war over Ukraine has not only accelerated Assange’s persecution, but intensified his long and deliberate isolation by the corporate media.

At a briefing with the Foreign Press Association last month, to introduce his new book *The Trial of Julian Assange: A Story of Persecution*, UN special rapporteur on torture Nils Melzer accused the mainstream media of failing in their duty as the “fourth estate” to hold governments to account. Melzer’s book is based on his three years of efforts to end the illegal mistreatment of the WikiLeaks founder.

In it, he criticises the “too little, too late”, “tame and lame” reporting of the British, American and American press, exposing their cynical pseudo-support for Assange:

“A handful of half-hearted opinion pieces in the *Guardian* and the *New York Times* rejecting Assange’s extradition are not bold enough, and so fail to convince. While both papers have timidly declared that convicting Assange of espionage would endanger press freedom, not a single mainstream media outlet protests the blatant violations of due process, human dignity and the rule of law that pervade the entire trial. None holds the involved governments to account for their crimes and corruption; none has the courage to confront political leaders with uncomfortable questions; none feels dutybound to inform and empower the people—a mere shadow of what was once the ‘fourth estate’.”

Amid the war frenzy and the need to present Britain and the US as champions of global democracy, even the days of the half-hearted opinion piece are over.

Melzer’s point extends far beyond the media. The UN rapporteur is one of just a handful of prominent

public figures in any sphere with an honourable record on Assange. At his FPA event, he described his inability to seek redress “through the diplomatic channels at my disposal, or by alerting the General Assembly [of the UN] or the Human Rights Council in Geneva,” describing Assange as “the untouchable case,” kept behind a “wall of silence”.

Among the more significant silences is kept by the British “left”.

In July 2020, only 26 MPs could bring themselves to sign an early day motion, “Julian Assange, press freedom and public-interest journalism”, which asserted, “That this House notes the July 2020 statement by the National Union of Journalists, the International Federation of Journalists, Reporters Without Borders and others in relation to the WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and affirms its commitment to press freedom and public-interest journalism.”

Among the signatories were 16 Labour MPs, including now former party leader Jeremy Corbyn and several of his shadow front benchers: John McDonnell, Diane Abbott, Rebecca Long-Bailey, Ian Lavery and Clive Lewis.

Of this rump, only one, Claudia Webbe, has spoken on Assange since the Supreme Court decision. Webbe is no longer a Labour MP, having been expelled from the party after a criminal harassment conviction. She tweeted simply, “Julian Assange should be free”.

The last time Corbyn, McDonnell, Abbott or Burgon, supposedly leading figures in the campaign for the WikiLeaks founder’s freedom, even tweeted on Assange was on January 24. Their support has always been for the record, motivated by a concern to preserve their “progressive” credentials. Under conditions of an escalating NATO war drive against Russia, to which they are all adapting, even nominal support is passing beyond the pale.

McDonnell and Abbott showed the direction of travel earlier this month, withdrawing their signatures from a Stop the War Coalition statement criticising NATO and backing out of the panel at its national rally in London. McDonnell instead attended a pro-NATO rally alongside the imperialist shill Paul Mason.

He continued to make his political priorities clear on Monday, ignoring the Supreme Court ruling on Assange while tweeting the “incredibly courageous”

anti-war protest of news editor Marina Ovsyannikova on Russia’s Channel 1. Ovsyannikova held up a sign during a live broadcast which read, “No war, stop the war, don’t believe the propaganda, they are lying to you here.”

A socialist might have commented that the same slogan sums up Assange’s beliefs, for which he is currently locked in a British prison and threatened with an effective death sentence, commending Ovsyannikova while exposing the hypocrisy of UK and US imperialism. They might also have noted that such a protest was never mounted on a British news channel during the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya or Syria, condemning the spineless conformity of the media.

But McDonnell, Corbyn and co are part of the same rotten milieu, committed to the sanctity of the state and its institutions, above all the Labour Party, now fulfilling its role as “the party of NATO” under Sir Keir Starmer. They can offer no serious opposition to British imperialism and its warmongering and therefore no defence of democratic rights, which will be increasingly curtailed as the war crisis and its domestic implications worsen.

Resistance to these measures will come from an independent movement of the working class. WikiLeaks and Assange won enormous popular sympathy among workers for their work 10 years ago. As the class struggle develops, pitching millions into fierce conflicts with their governments, that sentiment can be reawakened by a determined campaign in the working class to build a movement against war and for the freedom of Julian Assange.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact