

Australian establishment responds to latest UK judicial travesty against Assange with a stony silence

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Monday's declaration by the British Supreme Court to refuse to hear an appeal by Julian Assange against his extradition to the United States has passed with barely a mention in the Australian political and media establishment.

To the extent that it is reported in the press, the indefinite detention in Britain and threatened life imprisonment in the US of an Australian citizen and journalist is treated as minor news. The unending persecution of Assange has been normalised, when it has not been buried entirely.

The state-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and most corporate outlets published only a brief wire report on the judgment. Barely concealing its solidarity with the US-led attempt to destroy Assange, the report stated that American prosecutors were pursuing him for the "release of vast troves of confidential US military records and diplomatic cables, which they said had put lives in danger."

That the cables revealed historic war crimes, including the killings of thousands of civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan, was not mentioned. Nor was the fact that the US claims about Assange having 'put lives in danger' have never been backed up with a shred of evidence. The official media, like the CIA and the US Justice Department, is presenting standard journalism, critical of the US and its allies like Australia, as illegitimate and criminal.

The muted response to the Supreme Court verdict is all the more striking, because of its sweeping implications for the Assange case. The Supreme Court justices declined to hear the appeal, despite the High Court having earlier this year accepted that Assange had an "arguable point of law."

The Supreme Court judgment forecloses any defence against extradition on the grounds of Assange's ill-health, stemming from a decade-long persecution. The District Court blocked extradition in January 2021, on the grounds that Assange would likely die in US custody. That ruling was overturned by the High Court, based on worthless US diplomatic assurances. And now the Supreme Court is refusing to hear an appeal to the High Court judgment.

Assange's only remaining avenues within the British legal system, are to petition Home Secretary Priti Patel, whose

government fully supports the extradition, and to appeal the substantive political points of the case, which were decided in favour of the US during the first District Court hearings, in the British courts. Those points include the political character of the prosecution, its violation of the British-US extradition treaty and its character as a frontal assault on press freedom.

Given the entire record of Assange's treatment, the prospects of such an appeal are very poor. In other words, he is closer to being dispatched to a hell-hole US prison for the rest of his life than ever before.

Despite this, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison has said nothing, and nor has opposition Labor leader Anthony Albanese. Both of the major parties have collaborated in the US campaign to destroy Assange and WikiLeaks and have rejected demands that they exercise diplomatic and political powers to secure Assange's freedom.

As the WSWWS has noted, the accelerating moves towards Assange's extradition are bound up with the massive US-NATO war drive against Russia, intensified following the outbreak of conflict in Ukraine.

The British and US authorities are seeking to make an example of Assange, to intimidate widespread anti-war sentiment, and to create a precedent for further political persecutions targeting opposition to war and militarism. At the same time, the incessant media propaganda over Ukraine is being seized upon, to drown out other crucial issues, including Assange's plight.

The same processes are at work in Australia. Morrison and Albanese have marched in lockstep with the NATO intervention in Ukraine. The Australian government has pledged more than \$70 million in military aid to the right-wing, US-backed Ukrainian regime.

In line with Australia's role as deputy US sheriff in the Asia-Pacific, Morrison and Albanese are exploiting the Ukrainian crisis to place maximum pressure on Beijing. Morrison has denounced an "arc of autocracy" extending from Russia to China; both have demanded that the Chinese Communist Party condemn the Russian invasion, and they have made duelling announcements of a further military build-up, directed towards

a US-led conflict with China.

For its part, the Australian media, including the ABC, is gripped by war fever. Publications and pundits, who have gone along with every US and Australian military intervention of the past thirty years, and have covered up the atrocities in Iraq and Afghanistan, have rediscovered the horrors of “war crimes.” Their selective outrage, however, is focused solely on the reactionary actions of the Russian state.

In this climate, Assange’s record of exposing US and Australian imperialism is even more of an inconvenience than before. WikiLeaks’ revelations, to the extent that they are mentioned, have to be dismissed as a “reckless release” of “confidential information.”

The standpoint of the major parties is no surprise, given their protracted hostility to Assange, their assault on democratic rights at home, and their full-throated support for US-led militarism.

More striking is the way in which any reference to Assange has been dropped amid the Ukraine crisis, by those who previously claimed to defend him.

The Greens have never waged a campaign demanding Assange’s freedom, because it would cut across the pro-war positions of their affluent upper middle-class base, and their attempts to form a coalition government with Labor. Individual Greens MPs have, however, occasionally issued statements of concern over Assange’s plight.

Party leader Adam Bandt has said nothing about the Supreme Court verdict. Instead, he has been “demanding” that the right-wing Coalition government intensify Australia’s participation in the anti-Russian campaign, including through the imposition of expanded sanctions.

Bandt and other Greens MPs are part of a cross-party parliamentary grouping, ostensibly established to advocate for Assange’s rights. In the more than two years of its existence, the grouping has not waged any sort of campaign, limiting its activities to occasional token statements, and the promotion of fatal illusions that polite requests to the Biden administration will compel it to end the US vendetta against Assange.

Julian Hill, the only Labor MP in the group to have made frequent statements on Assange, does not appear to have uttered his name in 2022. Hill is feverishly campaigning for Albanese in the May federal election, as Labor pitches itself to the ruling elite as the party best placed to deepen Australia’s integration into the US-confrontation with China, and to implement sweeping pro-business restructuring.

Hill has previously carried water for Albanese on the Assange question. Last year, he claimed Albanese privately stated that “enough is enough” when it comes to the attempted prosecution of the WikiLeaks founder. Then he touted a Labor Party motion, committing the party to nothing at all, as a major advance in the fight for Assange’s freedom.

The vast majority of the group’s members have similarly said nothing this year. That includes right-wing populist National

Party leader and Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce.

The MPs have effectively shelved their mealy-mouthed statements of concern, so the question of Assange is buried in the election campaign amid the Ukraine war crisis. This demonstrates the fraudulent character of the grouping from the outset. Its aim was always to promote the illusion that there is a constituency for the defence of Assange and democratic rights within the parliamentary set-up when none exists.

For their part, the pseudo-left organisations, including Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative all but abandoned Assange years ago. They did so, on the basis of the frame-up allegations of sexual misconduct in Sweden, in line with their support for identity politics, and as they were aligning ever more directly with imperialist war.

Socialist Alliance occasionally carries brief news reports on Assange’s persecution but has not mobilised in his defence. Socialist Alternative scarcely mentions the WikiLeaks founder.

Both have enlisted in the war propaganda campaign, blaming the Ukrainian crisis exclusively on Russia and calling for uncritical support for the US-NATO backed Ukrainian regime. The pseudo-left, speaking for an affluent layer of the upper middle-class is completely hostile to any independent movement of the working class, including against war.

The response to the verdict, and the entire record of Assange’s persecution, demonstrates that his freedom can only be won in a struggle against the political establishments of the US, Britain and Australia. The working class, which is the constituency for a fight against war and in defence of democratic rights, must be mobilised to block extradition and to secure Assange’s unconditional freedom.

Only the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Parties have based the fight to end the persecution of Assange on a turn to the working class. In the wake of the Supreme Court decision, this task takes on a new urgency.



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