

Assange and the Australian government's persecution of alleged Afghan war crimes whistleblower

Oscar Grenfell
10 May 2023

Over the past week, several prominent members of the Australian Labor government have feigned sympathy for WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange. The most notable of these interventions was a statement made by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, while he was in Britain for the coronation of King Charles.

Albanese and other Labor representatives have reiterated the vague comment that “enough is enough” in relation to the Assange case, and it has “gone on for too long.” Assange has been detained in a British prison for more than four years, and faces extradition to the US where he could be jailed for 175 years for exposing American war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The essential position of Albanese is that he has made comments to the British and US governments along these lines and that is all he can do. As the WWS has previously noted, this is the antithesis of an aggressive diplomatic and legal campaign aimed at securing the freedom of a persecuted Australian citizen.

The refusal to take any concrete measures to ensure Assange's release is bound up with Labor's complete commitment to the US alliance, including Washington's escalating preparations for war with China.

But that is not the sole issue. A key component of this program of war, with Labor overseeing the country's largest militarisation in 80 years, is the suppression of anti-war opposition. That is evident in the persecution of Assange, but it is also apparent in several draconian “national security” cases that the Labor government is directly presiding over in Australia.

The most significant is the prosecution of David McBride. A former army lawyer, he is accused of leaking information exposing Australian war crimes in Afghanistan and other violations of international law in that protracted neo-colonial occupation.

The documents that the state claims McBride leaked included details of the potentially unlawful killings of ten Afghan men and boys by Australian Special Forces soldiers.

In one instance, a man and his son were shot dead by Special Air Service Regiment in September, 2013. Official reports indicated that the man had pointed a weapon at the Australian personnel. The leaked documents said that the man and the boy were found shot dead in their beds, indicating that they may have been executed in their sleep.

Other cases also involved children. Some of the documents

indicated that prisoners were being killed, execution style, and then posthumously being accused of attempting to seize a weapon.

Most explosively, the files indicated awareness in the military command of a “warrior culture” among special forces that had gotten out of control and threatened breaches of the laws of war.

The publication of details from the files, by the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), triggered a series of inquiries into the actions of the defence forces in Afghanistan. This culminated in the 2020 release of an official Brereton Report, confirming “credible information” that the Special Forces had murdered 39 Afghan civilians and prisoners.

In other words, whoever leaked the documents in the years earlier provided the public with true information about war crimes that were being hidden from the population.

In June, 2019, the Australian Federal Police carried out an unprecedented raid on the Sydney office of the ABC, over its publication of the Afghan files. It was later revealed that one of the journalists involved in the story, Dan Oakes, had been threatened with national security charges, in what would have been an exact parallel to the Assange case.

That prosecution did not eventuate. But last month, a hearing of the Australian Capital Territory's Supreme Court confirmed that McBride will stand trial in November. He is charged with “national security” offenses, including unauthorised disclosure of information, theft of commonwealth property and breaching the Defence Act. McBride has pleaded not guilty.

Confirmation that the case will proceed means that McBride will be the first person to face court over the war crimes of the Australian military in Afghanistan, i.e., for allegedly revealing them, not perpetrating them.

Only one soldier has been charged over the documented killings of civilians. He allegedly shot an unarmed Afghan boy at point blank range. That killing occurred in 2012. Footage of it was broadcast in early 2020 on national television, but the soldier was only charged last month. He will not be tried until next year and is out on bail.

Because McBride is charged with federal offenses, the Labor government and specifically its Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus can order an end to the prosecution.

McBride is an alleged whistleblower, whereas Assange is a publisher. But the essence of the case against both is that they

should be imprisoned for decades for exposing war crimes. Labor claims it cannot free Assange, because he is subject to British “legal processes,” and is facing extradition to the US. Australia is “not a party” to those proceedings, they assert.

The McBride case gives the lie to these assertions. Labor could drop this prosecution whenever it wanted to. But, like the Biden administration with its pursuit of Assange, the Albanese government is intent on setting new precedents for the suppression of anti-war sentiment, amid an explosion of militarism and war.

There are other cases that Labor is presiding over. They include the prosecution of Richard Boyle, an accused whistleblower, who allegedly exposed the aggressive debt collection practices of the Australian Taxation Office. Last March, a South Australian court rejected an application by Boyle for public interest immunity. Labor has refused to intervene to end the prosecution of Boyle, who faces years in prison.

Last month, Australian businessman Alexander Csergo was charged with one count of “reckless foreign interference,” under draconian legislation passed by the Liberal-National Coalition government, with Labor’s support, in 2018. Csergo is accused of having written reports, based exclusively on public source material, and provided them to two individuals, who the Australian authorities have asserted worked for Chinese intelligence.

Csergo has effectively been charged with a national security offence for conducting business consultancy, his line of work, in China. This is part of the US-led drumbeat against purported “Chinese interference,” used to justify Washington’s own aggressive military build-up targeting China.

Since October, Australia has imprisoned Daniel Duggan, an Australian citizen and former American Air Force pilot, in maximum-security prisons. He faces extradition to the US, which is seeking to prosecute him for providing flight training, including to Chinese individuals. In the extraordinarily flimsy US indictment, this is ludicrously presented as a breach of money laundering and arms export controls.

In other words, Labor is deepening an anti-democratic offensive targeting the civil liberties of the population, of which the US prosecution of Assange is an international focal point.

That underscores the fraud of claims that Labor is conducting “quiet diplomacy” on Assange’s behalf.

In the latest stage of this charade, members of a cross-party federal parliamentary grouping visited US ambassador to Australia Caroline Kennedy to discuss the Assange case. There is no indication that they came away with anything.

Greens MP David Shoebridge nevertheless gushed: “The fact that the ambassador allocated precious time to this issue ahead of President Biden’s visit is a useful indication of the visibility of the campaign to free Assange.”

Labor backbencher Julian Hill wrote on Twitter: “I thanked the Ambassador for her willingness to engage. Aside from the issues at stake in Julian Assange’s case, the delay in resolving it is an unwelcome distraction from AUKUS & our work with the US to confront the strategic challenges we face.”

Describing the 12-year state persecution of a journalist, which has brought him to the brink of death, as an “unwelcome distraction” is obscene. The reference to AUKUS is notable. Hill

was speaking of the trilateral pact between Britain, the US and Australia, directed against China. The “strategic challenge,” is a veiled reference to the US confrontation with China.

In other words, Hill is arguing that the prosecution of Assange, an anti-war publisher, is a distraction from the US preparations for a new war. In reality, the two go hand-in-hand. One could not conceive of a more right-wing, warmongering argument, nominally in Assange’s defence.

In an interview with the ABC yesterday, Albanese restated his line of “enough is enough” in relation to Assange. He refused to indicate if the Labor government is even asking the Biden administration to end its prosecution of Assange.

Ominously, Albanese stated: “A solution needs to be found... and Mr Assange needs to be a part of that of course.” The only way that Assange could be “part of a solution” to his case, is if he were to concede guilt as part of some sort of plea deal arrangement. If the US were to drop the charges, Assange’s “part” would simply be to walk out of prison a free man.

The statements of Albanese and other Labor leaders are a transparent attempt by a government that has done nothing for his freedom to blunt the widespread public support for Assange. Most immediately, Assange’s plight is viewed as a “distraction,” to use Hill’s words, from the Quadrilateral Dialogue summit, to be held in Sydney later this month. Biden, together with the Indian and Japanese leaders, and Albanese, will gather to discuss the next stage of their preparation for war with China.

Only the naive and the credulous would believe that this warmongering cabal is about to extend a benevolent hand to someone who exposed their past crimes when they are preparing even greater ones.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact