

Widespread opposition to Australian government ban on Chelsea Manning

By Oscar Grenfell and James Cogan
31 August 2018

Over the past 24 hours, opposition has mounted to the Australian government's threat to deny well-known US whistleblower and political activist Chelsea Manning a visa to enter the country and engage in a speaking tour which is scheduled to begin this weekend.

The Coalition government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison yesterday issued Manning with a "notice of intention" to reject her visa application, just days before she was set to address events in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane.

The government is invoking Manning's criminal conviction for leaking hundreds of thousands of military files and US diplomatic cables to claim that she fails the Migration Act's "character test."

As far as hundreds of millions of people are concerned, the actions of Chelsea (formerly Bradley) Manning were both justified and proved she is a person of the highest character and quality. The publication of the information she leaked by WikiLeaks and its editor Julian Assange exposed the staggering dimensions of the US-led war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the sordid intrigues by the American state around the world.

Manning paid an immense price for her courageous decision to let the world know the truth. She was subjected to what amounted to torture and driven to the brink of suicide. She spent seven years of her life in a prison cell. Large and respectful audiences in Australia have booked tickets to attend the public events at which she will appear.

Chelsea Manning has the right to speak and her audiences and the entire working class has the right to hear her views.

The move to ban Manning from the country is among the first actions of Morrison's government since he was installed following the backroom political coup that ousted former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull last Friday.

It is intended as a signal to Washington and the US and Australian intelligence agencies that the government will intensify the persecution of whistleblowers and investigative journalists and crackdown on widespread opposition to Australia's central role in US-led wars and military

preparations, including in the Asia-Pacific region.

There is little doubt that the threatened cancellation of Manning's visa was planned in discussions with the US administration of President Donald Trump. It followed, by less than a week, a congratulatory phone call from Trump to Morrison the day after his installment as prime minister. Morrison invited the widely-reviled American president to visit Australia this November.

Significantly, the ban on Manning was preceded by a little-reported meeting of the Five Eyes, the US-led spying network, earlier this week in Australia's Gold Coast. The event brought together ministerial representatives of the US, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Britain, including the Trump administration's Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen.

The joint statement adopted at the meeting called for a campaign against attempts to "sow discord" and "manipulate public discourse," on the bogus pretext of combating "foreign interference." It mapped-out plans to enable governments and intelligence agencies to bypass encryption and other online privacy measures.

In other words, the purpose of the meeting was to escalate online surveillance and censorship, the very subjects that Manning had been set to speak against in her Australian talks.

If the government does succeed in blocking Manning, it will establish a precedent to deny other journalists and whistleblowers, along with progressive, left-wing and socialist figures, from entering the country and speaking publicly.

Prominent journalists and human rights organisations have noted that the attempt to silence Manning is part of a broader crackdown on free speech.

In a letter of protest to Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, world-renowned investigative journalist John Pilger stated: "Just when it doesn't seem possible that Australia's reputation can sink further into a mire of injustice and human rights atrocity, the government of my country proposes to deny Chelsea Manning a visa to enter Australia

in order to prevent her taking part in a speaking tour. Australians are to be ‘protected’ from the free speech of this courageous person.”

Pilger demanded that the government reverse its “authoritarian” decision. He concluded: “Australians have every right to hear what Chelsea has to say, and she has every right to say it. If such freedom no longer exists in Australia, tell us now; otherwise welcome this courageous truth-teller.”

Peter Greste, a well-known Australian journalist who was imprisoned by the US-backed military dictatorship in Egypt for more than a year, declared that the ban was “undermining democracy.”

Crikey editor Bernard Keane condemned the government for blocking Manning “who leaked to reveal war crimes and US atrocities.”

Claire Mallinson, the national director of Amnesty International Australia, stated: “By refusing her entry, the Australian government would send a chilling message that freedom of speech is not valued by our government.”

Other rights organisations, including the Australian Privacy Foundation, Digital Rights Watch and the Human Rights Law Centre have likewise called for the visa ban to be lifted. In an indication that Manning is rightfully viewed as a heroic figure by broad sections of the population, online petitions demanding she be granted entry into Australia have been signed by more than 15,000 people.

The response stands in stark contrast to the hostility of the political and media establishment towards the whistleblower.

Federal Labor Party shadow minister Penny Wong issued a mealy-mouthed statement suggesting only that the government “explain” its decision to ban Manning, who she described as a “controversial figure.” Wong did not even pretend to oppose the government’s anti-democratic move.

This is in line with Labor’s protracted support for the US-led persecution of WikiLeaks. When the publisher released the cables obtained by Manning in 2010, Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard falsely declared that the “foundation stone” of WikiLeaks was “an illegal act.” She pledged that Australian authorities would collaborate with the US counterparts in the persecution of WikiLeaks and its sources.

The state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) has likewise backed virtually every attack on Assange and WikiLeaks. Last year, it featured a fawning interview with Hillary Clinton, allowing her to slanderously declare, without challenge, that Assange was a “Russian agent.” The executive producer of the “7:30” program, Sally Neighbour responded to a complaint from Assange by retweeting a post describing him as “Putin’s bitch.”

The ABC has predictably lined up behind the ban on Manning, publishing a prominent opinion piece by Rodger Shanahan, a former army officer and research fellow at the Lowy Institute think tank with close ties to the intelligence agencies. He baldly declared that Manning “is not a whistleblower and Australia is right to deny her a visa.”

The ABC’s stance reflects the abandonment of any defence of democratic rights, by an entire layer of the self-styled “left” and “liberal” upper-middle class.

The actions of the Coalition government have been directly facilitated by the refusal of this milieu of the Australian political and media establishment to defend Julian Assange, an Australian citizen who has been subjected to relentless persecution for publishing the leaks made by Chelsea Manning.

It is necessary to point out that many of the organisations and individuals which have issued protests over the treatment of Manning are refusing to raise one word of opposition to the collaboration of successive Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, with the vendetta of the US government and military-intelligence apparatus against Assange and WikiLeaks.

The Greens, the trade unions, Amnesty International and other civil liberties groups, and pseudo-left organisations such as Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance, have maintained a complicit silence amid the efforts to force Assange out of Ecuador’s embassy in London and have him extradited to the US to face a show trial on false charges of espionage.

The persecution of Assange and now the threatened ban on Manning stem from the lurch of the political establishment toward authoritarian, police-state forms of rule. It must be opposed as part of the broader struggle to defend and advance all the democratic and social rights of the working class.

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