

Australian government, Labor opposition silent on espionage charges against Assange

By Oscar Grenfell
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Last Thursday the Trump administration unveiled 17 additional charges against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, carrying a maximum prison sentence of 170 years. Since then, not a single representative of the newly elected Australian Coalition government or the Labor Party opposition has condemned the stepped-up persecution of the Australian citizen and journalist.

By their silence, the Liberal-National government and Labor are signalling their support for the US-led persecution of Assange, over his role in the exposure of US war crimes, mass surveillance and diplomatic conspiracies around the world.

The political establishment is making clear that nothing will be done to prevent Assange's extradition from Britain to the US, where he would face a show-trial that would establish a precedent for the suppression of freedom of the press and free speech.

The Espionage Act, under which Assange has been charged, has historically been associated with the suppression of anti-war activists and organisations, along with whistleblowers. A publisher and journalist has never been charged under its provisions.

The refusal to defend Assange on the part of the official parties is in line with their collaboration in the US-led vendetta against him since 2010.

Successive Labor and Coalition governments have refused to exercise their legal discretion and diplomatic powers to protect Assange. Instead they have joined in the chorus of denunciations and aided the US intelligence agencies in their efforts to destroy WikiLeaks.

Assange was expelled from Ecuador's London embassy, where he was granted political asylum in 2012, on April 11 and arrested by the British police on trumped-up bail charges and to facilitate his extradition to the US.

Labor and Coalition MPs made mealy-mouthed statements that they would provide him with unspecified consular assistance, committing them to nothing. With the assistance of the Greens, the unions and the pseudo-left, they buried the issue of Assange's plight throughout the official federal election campaign that began just hours after his detention by British police.

Now, senior political figures are voicing concerns that the government's abandonment of Assange may provoke widespread opposition from workers, students and young people, who rightly view him as a heroic figure who is being attacked for revealing the truth.

On Friday, former Labor foreign minister Bob Carr told the *Guardian* that the additional charges against Assange "change the game" and could "test the patience" of US allies, including Australia. He noted that the length of the maximum sentence against Assange made the charges against him almost as severe as those which attract capital punishment.

Carr issued a warning to the Coalition government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison that its Foreign Minister Marise Payne "needs to protect herself from the charge that she's failed in her duty to protect the life of an Australian citizen."

Carr stated that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade would likely provide Payne with "talking points" for discussions with her US, British and Swedish counterparts. Sweden has revived a sexual misconduct investigation into Assange, aimed at blackening his name and creating an alternate route for his extradition to the US.

"Not to do so would leave the minister exposed to withering criticism that they did not take all appropriate action that might have made a difference, mainly before the British court makes a decision," he warned.

Carr is a former state premier and longstanding Labor Party figure, with deep-going ties to the US political and intelligence apparatus. He functioned as a “protected source” of the US embassy, within Labor, as early as the 1970s. Beginning in 2012, Carr was foreign minister in the Labor government of Julia Gillard, which publicly attacked Assange, branding WikiLeaks as a criminal organisation.

Carr’s intervention is not motivated by a defence of Assange and basic democratic rights, but stems from the fear that by openly refusing to defend an Australian citizen persecuted abroad, the Australian government risks inflaming widespread opposition.

His comments came amid growing calls for the government to take action to defend Assange. Rex Patrick, a senator from the right-wing populist Centre Alliance, stated that the charges against Assange posed “a grave threat to freedom of the press worldwide” and that it was necessary for the Australian government to be “outspoken” in its representations on his behalf.

Greg Barnes, an Australian advisor to the WikiLeaks founder, told the *Guardian*: “Australia does have a role to play here and our view is that the Australian government needs to intervene.”

Barnes warned that the Trump administration was seeking to apply US legislation extraterritorially. This means that any journalist or publisher internationally could be charged under domestic US law, without enjoying any of the protections of the American Constitution.

Barnes noted precedents for Australian governments intervening to protect Australian citizens arrested or prosecuted abroad. “It’s not as though we’re asking the government to do something unusual—it was a conservative Australian government which brought David Hicks back to Australia,” he said.

After widespread public pressure, the Coalition government of John Howard intervened to secure the release of Hicks from the US military prison at Guantánamo Bay in 2007. In 2015, the Coalition government took action to ensure the release of journalist Peter Greste from imprisonment in Egypt.

Earlier this year, the Coalition made representations on behalf of Hakeem Al-Araibi, an Australian permanent resident detained in Thailand who faced extradition to his native Bahrain. The release of Al-Araibi followed a major public campaign, led by

former national soccer player and sports commentator Craig Foster.

On Saturday, James Ricketson, an Australian filmmaker who was jailed for fifteen months in Cambodia on bogus espionage charges, told the *Guardian* he hoped the Morrison government would make “a forthright public statement.”

Ricketson warned that the persecution of Assange was “a fundamental attack on the Fourth Estate.” He called for the Australian government to intervene in defence of Assange. Ricketson noted that in his own case, the government had “made fairly high-level representations” to the Cambodian government on his behalf beginning in February, 2018.

The refusal of successive governments to take similar action in defence of Assange is inextricably tied to their support for the US alliance and for Australia’s participation in the predatory wars of American imperialism around the world.

At the same time, the Australian political establishment, no less than its counterparts abroad, is fearful of mounting anti-war sentiment and social opposition. It is responding with police-state measures, including a crackdown on whistleblowers, and a turn to authoritarianism.

The record demonstrates that an Australian government will only fulfil its obligations to Assange, if it compelled to do so by a movement of workers, students and young people. This is what the Socialist Equality Party has fought for in a series of rallies over the past 18 months, demanding that the government immediately secure Assange’s release and his return to Australia with a guarantee against extradition to the US.

Defenders of democratic rights should contact the SEP to join this crucial fight.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>