

Julian Assange: The great unmentionable as Australian leader wines and dines with Trump

By Oscar Grenfell
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Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison is in the United States over the coming eight days and will be feted by President Donald Trump and other representatives of his right-wing administration.

Morrison will be the first Australian prime minister to be treated to a state dinner by the US president in over a decade. He will also appear at various public events alongside Trump and other senior representatives of the administration. They will discuss Australia's stepped-up role in the US confrontation with China and Washington's advanced preparations for a war of aggression against Iran, along with how to best advance the interests of the corporate and financial elite of both countries.

The fate of Julian Assange, however an Australian citizen and journalist imprisoned in the United Kingdom at the behest of the Trump administration for exposing American war crimes, will not feature among Morrison's scripted talking points.

Jennifer Robinson, one of Assange's Australian lawyers, yesterday told the Special Broadcasting Corporation: "Prime Minister Morrison ought to be raising with President Trump his concern about an Australian citizen facing extradition to the United States for publishing truthful information."

Robinson's call will be ignored. Morrison last year rejected appeals from Pamela Anderson for his government to intervene in defence of Assange, instead directing frat-boy "humour" at the actress. When a reporter asked Morrison if he had raised the issue of Assange at the G20 summit in June, he simply responded with a smirk.

Morrison's refusal to defend the persecuted Australian publisher is of a piece with the abandonment of Assange by the entire political and media establishment as it has aligned ever more closely with US imperialism.

Were Assange imprisoned by the Chinese, Russian or Iranian regimes, the response would doubtless be very different. Ministers would claim that they were making urgent diplomatic representations and they would piously

speak about their responsibilities to Australian citizens unjustly imprisoned abroad.

Such statements have been made by leading Australian government ministers over the past week, after it was revealed that three Australian citizens are imprisoned in Iran on espionage charges—the same allegations faced by Assange. Morrison and his colleagues have also protested against the imprisonment of Chinese dissident and Australian citizen Yang Hengjun by the Beijing regime.

The silence on Assange is all the more criminal, as the flagrant illegality of the proceedings against him become ever clearer.

On September 13, a British judge unilaterally decreed that Assange would remain in a British prison, despite the fact that his custodial sentence for a trumped-up bail charge lapses on September 22. In other words, the WikiLeaks founder will remain behind bars indefinitely, as the British political and legal establishment seeks to extradite him to the US to face charges that carry a life sentence of 175 imprisonment.

The British judge delivered her "ruling" despite the fact she was presiding over an administrative hearing that was not supposed to determine whether Assange remained behind bars. She fraudulently declared that Assange's lawyers had not issued an application for his release from prison.

In an interview last weekend, John Shipton, Assange's father confirmed that the judge had "decided to hear a bail application case which wasn't before her," that she nevertheless "promptly refused." Asked by the interviewer who it was that had brought the supposed bail application, Shipton responded "she made it herself."

The Courage Foundation, an organisation that defends persecuted publishers and whistleblowers, has explained that Assange himself was confused by the proceedings. When asked by the judge if he understood what was taking place, he replied: "Not really. I'm sure the lawyers will explain

it.”

The hearing ended the charade that Assange was being imprisoned for the supposed “breach of bail,” stemming from his successful application for political asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy in London in 2012. He is explicitly being held as a political prisoner by the British government, on behalf of the Trump administration, as the US seeks to prosecute him for WikiLeaks’ exposures of illegal wars and global diplomatic intrigues.

The judge’s ruling also demonstrated that the vendetta against Assange is being carried out in violation of basic legal and democratic norms.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer found in May that Assange had been subjected to a nine-year campaign of vilification and “public mobbing,” which amounted to “psychological torture.” He warned that Assange’s detention in the maximum-security Belmarsh Prison was compounding the trauma he had already suffered and called for his release.

Visitors to Assange have warned that his health is deteriorating rapidly. The British authorities, however, have rejected all calls for Assange to be provided with adequate care, and have kept him in a high security prison designed for convicted terrorists, murderers and other serious offenders.

The Courage Foundation reported on Wednesday that the conditions of Assange’s detention have become even more repressive. It noted that he “is currently being held in solitary confinement at HMP Belmarsh. He remains in the health ward and is only transported in and out of his cell under so-called ‘controlled moves,’ meaning the prison is locked down and hallways are cleared. Furthermore, the prison hasn’t delivered mail to him for over a month, and Julian is unable to call his parents or his US lawyer.”

Within the US and internationally, the Trump administration’s attempt to prosecute Assange pose a dire threat to basic democratic rights.

The US government has imprisoned the courageous whistleblower Chelsea Manning for more than six months to force her to give perjured testimony against the WikiLeaks founder. She was joined last month by Jeremy Hammond, an activist who also leaked information to WikiLeaks, and is similarly being pressured to make false statements to manufacture a case against Assange.

A successful prosecution of Assange in the US would effectively abolish the First Amendment free speech protections of the US Constitution. It would also confirm the ability of the US government to file extradition warrants for the arrest of journalists around the world who expose its sordid intrigues and illegal military operations, anywhere in the world.

The Australian government, by refusing to uphold its responsibilities to Assange as an Australian citizen and journalist, is totally complicit in this far-reaching assault on democratic rights.

Morrison, however, has only been able to rebuff calls to defend Assange, because his position is supported by the entire political and media establishment.

The Labor opposition has played a key role in the protracted campaign against the WikiLeaks founder. In 2010, when senior US politicians were calling for Assange’s assassination, the Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard denounced WikiLeaks as a criminal organisation and pledged to assist the US to destroy it.

Assange has also been abandoned by the Greens, the unions and pseudo-left organisations that once claimed to support him. Since he was illegally expelled from Ecuador’s London embassy and arrested by British police, Greens MPs have made only a handful of pro forma, mealy-mouthed statements of “concern” about his plight.

They have all rejected calls for a public campaign to free Assange. This week, Morrison was not once challenged in the Australian parliament about his refusal to raise Assange with Trump in the week leading up to his US state visit.

The record demonstrates that a movement in defence of Assange and all democratic rights will not emerge from the official political and media establishment.

What is required is the development of a political movement of the working class, the overwhelming mass of the population. This is the only means by which the Morrison government will be forced to take the necessary diplomatic and legal action to secure Assange’s release from Belmarsh Prison and his return to Australia, if he chooses to do so, with a guarantee against extradition to the US.

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