

Australian government and media block discussion over Wikileaks revelations

Alex Messenger
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Australia's political and media establishment has moved quickly to ensure that the leaking of more than 91,000 US military documents does not provoke open debate on the Afghanistan war during the current federal election campaign. With a majority of Australians opposed to further military involvement, the Wikileaks' "Afghan War Diary" threatens to further inflame public sentiment, because it highlights the criminal character of the US-led occupation, including the role of Australian troops.

The Australian media has followed the Obama administration's lead in hypocritically accusing Wikileaks of endangering the lives of foreign troops and Afghan informants—potentially laying the basis for legal action. The real responsibility for the rising death toll in Afghanistan rests with the US and its allies, including Australia, for prosecuting this neo-colonial war. In a similar vein, the Australian government has responded by establishing a "taskforce" charged with determining whether the leaks might "compromise Australian Defence Force operations".

The Labor government may have been more directly involved in attempting to silence Wikileaks. In an interview broadcast on the SBS television program "Dateline" on Sunday, Wikileaks director Julian Assange said he was forced to flee Australia and go underground after the US government's arrest in May of US soldier Bradley Manning for allegedly leaking footage of US war atrocities in Iraq. Assange said Wikileaks "had Intel sources saying that things were not looking good" and that the US was "requesting" that the Australian government "perhaps raid, detain, interview, get information from me in that manner".

Assange claimed that "[i]n the end it was being seen as a counterespionage request, and was being treated that way by Australian authorities because it involved an Australian journalist. They were a bit hands off." Assange is an Australian citizen. His house was raided by Federal Police and he stood trial for computer hacking offences in 1991. He

said that when he entered Australia in May his passport was temporarily confiscated and government officials had threatened to cancel it.

Assange was due to speak at a conference in Las Vegas in June but did not attend because of fears the US government would arrest or harm him. He avoided a second conference in July in New York. Federal law enforcement agents were in attendance. Several websites, including Wikileaks itself, have published reports that the US is engaged in a "manhunt" for Assange.

In his "Dateline" interview, Assange also shed light on the cynical role of the *New York Times* in the publications of the Wikileaks documents. Having participated along with the *Guardian*, *Der Spiegel* and Wikileaks in preparing the documents for simultaneous release, the *Times* tried to back out. In the "Dateline" interview just before the July 25 publication, Assange explained that the *Times* "want us to scoop them... so they can claim they were reprinting someone else's news...The *Times* wants a web-start-up press to scoop them."

The reason became clear after the publication of the Wikileaks documents. It emerged that the *Times*' Washington bureau chief and two other reporters visited the White House prior to the release in order to brief the Obama administration on what to expect in the documents so it could prepare its counteroffensive. Not surprisingly, bureau chief Dean Baquet reported that grateful Obama officials "praised" the newspaper for being "responsible".

As the leaked reports are from the US military, Australian troops are mentioned when their activities overlap with American forces. Despite the relatively small Australian contingent, references to Australian troops are peppered throughout the more than 91,000 Wikileaks documents. In "on the ground" dispatches about daily fighting and casualties, Australian troops appear in their capacity as the

Australian Reconstruction Task Force. The documents do not refer to the activities of the Australian Special Air Services (SAS) Regiment which is intimately involved in the assassination squads engaged in killing “Taliban suspects”.

In a press interview, Assange explained that the documents cannot be summed up in a single damning revelation. “That is not the real story of this material. The real story of this material is that it’s war—it’s one damned thing after another. It is the continuous small events, the continuous death of children, insurgents, Allied forces, the maimed people. Search for the word ‘amputation’ in this material, or ‘amputee’, and there are dozens and dozens of references,” he said.

Several incidents point directly to Australian involvement in the killing of Afghan civilians and subsequent official cover-ups. One dispatch describes how on 25 July 2007, Australian troops shot at a car carrying two children, causing them serious gunshot and shrapnel injuries. The car had tried to drive past a military checkpoint without stopping. The cable dismisses the event as an “escalation of force incident”.

Another document reports the killing an Afghan man by Australian troops in December 2008. The report indicates the dead man was an Afghan policeman apparently approaching the Australian patrol in routine fashion. However, Australian defence officials only reported the death publicly some five months later, making any genuine investigation impossible. As the *Age* pointed out, the eventual press briefing by Defence Force Chief Angus Houston made no mention of the fact that the man was a policeman or that he had not been carrying explosives. Instead Houston referred to a “suspicious wire leading across his body”—something not mentioned in the original dispatch.

Generally, the Australian media has assiduously avoided any detailed examination of the greatest single release of secret military documents in US or Australian history. The *Sydney Morning Herald* played down the significance, headlining its first report on the leaks “Australia Figures Lightly”. The government-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation claimed that the documents are mostly “routine”. Murdoch’s *Australian* newspaper declared that “Assange’s documents [they are suddenly his documents not the US army’s] say nothing new. They contain mostly raw field data that reinforces what is already known. They do not point to failings by the White House or senior Pentagon officials.” The leaks have not featured at all in

Murdoch’s Australian tabloids. The reverberations of the Wikileaks release in the US and Europe has barely rated a mention in the Australian press.

In covering up the Wikileaks documents, the media is in line with the Labor and Liberal parties, both of which have pledged to maintain Australian troops in Afghanistan for as long as the US requires. The new Prime Minister Julia Gillard made that pledge as one of her first policy utterances in the days immediately following her ousting of the previous Labor leader, Kevin Rudd. Speaking on July 11 at the funeral of the latest Australian soldier killed in Afghanistan, Gillard, taking her cue from the Obama songbook, told reporters that the Australian government would maintain its forces despite the rising death toll. “We pursue that mission because Afghanistan has been a safe haven for terrorists, for terrorists who have wreaked acts of violence against Australians in 9/11 and in Bali,” she said. “Loss actually increases determination to get the job done.” Neither the Labor nor Liberal parties have ruled out boosting troop numbers and there is increasing pressure from the US to do so.

The determination of the political establishment to prevent any debate over the Wikileaks revelations and the Afghan war is above all aimed at obscuring the real aims of the war. Far from being about “fighting terrorism”, the Obama administration is escalating military operations in Afghanistan in pursuit of its ambitions for broader domination in the resource rich region of Central Asia. Successive Australian governments have committed troops to the occupation to ensure Washington’s continuing support for Canberra’s neo-colonial actions in the Asia Pacific region, including East Timor and the Solomons.



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