

Australian government refuses to defend Julian Assange

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Amid growing demands for the freedom of Julian Assange, senior representatives of Australia's Liberal-National Coalition government last week reiterated their refusal to provide legal or diplomatic assistance to the WikiLeaks founder.

The brazen denial of Assange's rights as an Australian citizen underscores the importance of the rallies called by the Socialist Equality Party in Sydney on March 3 and Melbourne on March 10, demanding that the government intervene to secure his safe passage to Australia with a guarantee against extradition to the United States.

Government ministers will take such action only if they are compelled to do so by sustained mass pressure from workers, students, young people and all defenders of democratic rights.

On February 21, Foreign Minister Marise Payne, along with senior Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) officials Andrew Todd and James Larson, were questioned by two senators on Assange's plight. The exchange occurred in the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee.

Senator Peter Whish-Wilson, of the Australian Greens, described Assange as an "Australian citizen arbitrarily detained overseas." He asked Payne and Todd about a January 29 visit by Australian officials to Assange in Ecuador's London embassy, where the WikiLeaks publisher was granted political asylum in 2012.

Todd cynically deflected a question about Assange's health, which is in a perilous state after almost seven years of confinement in the embassy building. He declared that he and the officials are not "medical practitioners." He stonewalled further questions about Assange's welfare, citing "privacy reasons."

Whish-Wilson asked Payne to outline "what you or

your government have done to try to secure Mr Assange's release."

Payne responded: "We don't necessarily agree with the premise inherent in your question. We do continue to offer him consular support, as I have just indicated. We are not in a position to interfere in his legal matters in the United Kingdom or elsewhere."

Payne's statement was a tissue of lies. Her claim that the Australian government is powerless to "interfere" in Assange's "legal matters" is false.

Under international and Australian law, the government has a clear responsibility to exercise its diplomatic powers and legal discretion to aid a detained Australian citizen abroad.

The government has the ability to make diplomatic representations to the British government to drop trumped-up bail charges against Assange that will result in his immediate arrest if he leaves the embassy building. If Britain refuses, the government has the power to initiate legal proceedings to compel the British government to allow for Assange's safe passage out of the country.

There are recent precedents. Liberal-National governments intervened in 2007 to have David Hicks returned to Australia from the US military prison in Guantanamo Bay, and in 2015 to secure the release of journalist Peter Greste from imprisonment in Egypt. In both cases, they took action only following a groundswell of public demands.

Earlier this month, the Coalition government took diplomatic action to secure the release of Hakeem al-Araibi from Thai custody and his return to Australia, where he is a permanent resident, with a guarantee against extradition to his native Bahrain where he faces political persecution.

Coalition ministers, including Payne, who intervened

only after a public campaign by the Australian and international football community, made sanctimonious statements about the responsibility of governments to protect their citizens and permanent residents.

The government is well aware of its legal obligations. The DFAT officials brazenly rejected two rulings by the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, upholding Assange's status as a political refugee and deeming him to be arbitrarily detained.

In response to a question, Larson, who is DFAT's chief legal officer, declared: "The Australian government doesn't share the view of that UN committee. We don't believe that Mr Assange is being arbitrarily detained." Neither Larson nor Payne sought to justify the dismissal of the authoritative UN ruling.

This stance is of a piece with the criminality of successive Australian governments, Labor and Coalition alike, which have backed the persecution of Assange while also defying international asylum law by incarcerating refugees on remote Pacific islands.

Later in the hearing, Whish-Wilson and Senator Rex Patrick from the Centre Alliance asked questions about the prospect of Assange being extradited to the US, where he faces concocted espionage or conspiracy charges, potentially carrying the death penalty.

Senior figures within the Democratic Party and the Republican administration of President Donald Trump are determined to prosecute Assange for his role in WikiLeaks' exposures of US and allied war crimes, illegal diplomatic intrigues and mass surveillance operations.

Larson claimed: "The Australian government does not have any knowledge of any outstanding proceedings brought within the US courts against Mr Assange." He insisted: "I'm not aware of those proceedings and, in that sense, there is nothing to discuss with the United States."

Larson's statements were bald-faced lies. As Whish-Wilson and Patrick noted, the US charges against Assange were revealed last year, when they were included in public documents on an unrelated court case, apparently by mistake.

The charges likely relate to WikiLeaks' publication of US army war logs, exposing mass civilian casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan, and diplomatic cables, documenting the US government's interference operations and intrigues around the world.

The Australian government's refusal to even acknowledge the US charges against Assange makes clear it is collaborating in the US-led vendetta against him. This is a continuation of the actions of Labor and Coalition governments alike since 2010. They have done nothing to defend Assange, but have instead aided the operation against the WikiLeaks founder.

The exchanges at the Senate hearing are an indictment of the entire Australian political establishment, including the Greens. The party was in a de facto coalition with the Labor government of Julia Gillard in 2010 and 2011, as it falsely branded WikiLeaks a criminal organisation and pledged to aid the US attempts to destroy it.

Significantly, Greens leader Richard Di Natale did not say a word about Assange at Senate Estimates Committee hearing on February 21. This exemplifies the broader hostility toward WikiLeaks and Assange of an entire upper middle-class fraternity, comprised of the trade union apparatus, the pseudo-left groups and many self-styled civil liberties organisations.



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