

Australian parliamentarians form cross-party group in defence of Julian Assange

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Independent federal MP Andrew Wilkie last week formally announced the establishment of a cross-party group of Australian parliamentarians in defence of persecuted WikiLeaks' founder Julian Assange.

The formation of the group comes in the lead-up to court hearings in Britain next February for Assange's extradition to the United States, where he faces the prospect of life imprisonment for exposing American war crimes and global diplomatic conspiracies.

The parliamentarians are responding to a growing groundswell of support for Assange, and anger over the refusal of successive governments to defend the Australian citizen and journalist.

For years, the entire political and media establishment—including the parties and individuals represented in the parliamentary group—have suppressed any public discussion of Assange's plight. This has been in line with the collaboration of every Australian government, Greens-backed Labor and Liberal-National Coalition alike, with the US-led vendetta against Assange.

Now, a group of parliamentarians, sensitive to the moods of ordinary people, recognise that the Assange issue can be buried no longer. It will become a mass question over the coming months. A number of the MPs hold their seats in marginal electorates, while others cover regional and working-class areas, where hostility to the government and the political establishment as a whole is at record highs.

Prior to the announcement, Wilkie, a former military intelligence officer who resigned in March 2003 in order to publicly condemn the looming illegal US-led invasion of Iraq, said that if extradited to the US, Assange "faces serious human rights violations including exposure to torture and a dodgy trial."

The independent MP declared that Assange was being pursued for exposing war crimes, and stated: "This has serious implications for freedom of speech and freedom of the press here in Australia, because if we allow a foreign country to charge an Australian citizen for revealing war crimes, then no Australian journalist or publisher can ever be confident that the same thing won't happen to them."

Wilkie is co-chair of the group alongside National Party MP

George Christensen. Other members are Nationals' parliamentarian and former deputy prime minister Barnaby Joyce; Rebekha Sharkie and Rex Patrick from the Centre Alliance; Labor MP's Julian Hill and Steve Georganas; Greens leader Richard Di Natale, deputy leader Adam Bandt and senator Peter Whish-Wilson, and independent MP Zali Steggall.

In comments to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation yesterday, Christensen stated that Assange was in a "crazy situation." He explained: "He has published information that may have been sensitive in the United States, but he wasn't in the United States when he published it, nor is he a citizen of the United States. So, I question how someone can fall foul of a law when they are not a citizen or resident of that country."

Christensen said that he would make a formal request to the British government to visit Assange, including to see whether "poor treatment" and the "circumstances of his jailing" in Britain's maximum-security Belmarsh Prison had contributed to his rapidly deteriorating health.

The Nationals MP said he had been ignored when he called upon his colleagues in the Coalition government to take action in defence of Assange, and that he had raised his concerns with the British authorities. He declared he would like Assange "to know that there are people fighting for him back in Australia and are fighting for the principles of freedom that underpin his case. It is my hope that he is returned to Australia."

In comments last week, Joyce stated: "I've seen this debate before, because neither did I give a character endorsement of David Hicks, but I supported him because people much wiser than me said: 'This is about *habeas corpus*, not about David Hicks.'"

Hicks, an Australian citizen, was rendered from Pakistan to the US prison in Guantánamo Bay, without having been charged, let alone convicted, of any crime. He was falsely accused of being an "enemy combatant" and "terrorist" during the American invasion of Afghanistan. His brutal treatment and torture by the US government provoked widespread opposition, and a public campaign in his defence won significant support. Joyce was acutely aware of the sentiments for Hicks' release, especially in regional areas, and was among the first Coalition MPs to call on the then Howard government to take action.

Joyce and Christensen, who are both right-wing populist figures, are undoubtedly responding to similar impulses in their statements in defence of Assange.

They are well aware that among the social layers they seek to appeal to—including agricultural workers, small-scale farmers, regional workers and small businesspeople—there is considerable hostility to the brutal persecution of the WikiLeaks founder. This has been reflected in the formation of committees in defence of Assange in central and northern Queensland, and in other regional areas.

Another factor underlying the emergence of the parliamentary group is fear within the political establishment over the consequences of Assange dying in British or US custody. They know that this would be viewed by millions as a political crime for which the Australian government bore central responsibility.

Wilkie and other members of the committee have noted the reports of Assange's serious ill health when he appeared before a British magistrate last week. Assange's father, John Shipton, and other close supporters have said they fear he may die in prison, while United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer has stated that his treatment amounts to torture.

The fact that figures like Joyce and Christensen are among the few parliamentarians making strident statements in defence of Assange is, above all, a damning indictment of Labor, the Greens, the trade unions and the pseudo-left parties.

Since Assange's brutal arrest by the British police on April 11, prominent Labor MPs have either solidarised themselves with his persecution or maintained a complicit silence. The parliamentary grouping has been boycotted by every Labor MP, except for two virtually unknown backbenchers.

This is a continuation of Labor's central role in the campaign against Assange, and its close alignment with the US State Department and intelligence agencies. When senior US politicians were calling for his assassination in 2010, the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard falsely declared that WikiLeaks was a criminal organisation and demanded an investigation into whether Assange could be prosecuted in Australia.

For their part, the Greens have largely abandoned Assange. While they participated as de facto coalition partners in the Gillard government, which ruthlessly attacked Assange, some of their leading MPs claimed to defend him.

Over the ensuing years, even this purely verbal defence was dropped by most Greens MPs, as the party dispensed with even nominal opposition to imperialist war, and shifted further to the right. The main concern of Richard Di Natale has been on insisting on the Greens' willingness to form coalition governments with Labor and the Coalition.

Greens MPs, including Di Natale, have made only a handful of pro-forma statements since Assange's arrest. None of the Greens' in the parliamentary grouping have issued a press release or made comments since it was established.

For their part, the pseudo-left organisations, including Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance, abandoned Assange as they backed the US-led regime-change operations in Syria, Libya and the Ukraine. Steeped in reactionary identity politics, many of their members also supported the attempt to frame Assange on bogus allegations of sexual misconduct in Sweden.

The record is a graphic demonstration of the fact that a movement to defend Assange can only be built in the working class, the constituency for the defence of all democratic rights. As workers enter a growing wave of strikes and protests, they must be apprised of the connection between the defence of their own social and democratic rights and the fight for the immediate freedom of Assange and all class-war prisoners.

Over the past 18 months, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has held a series of rallies demanding that the Australian government immediately use its legal and diplomatic powers to secure Assange's release, and his return to Australia if he so chooses. The SEP has insisted that the government will only take such action, however, if it is compelled to do so by mass pressure from below.

This pressure must be intensified, including through campaigns, meetings and demonstrations. The demand must also be raised that the parliamentary grouping immediately move motions in the House of Representatives and Senate, insisting that the government intervene to secure Assange's unconditional freedom from imprisonment in Britain. The members of the parliamentary group must also be called upon to publicly campaign for their own parties to formally adopt a policy opposing Assange's extradition to the US, and guaranteeing that he would be protected from any extradition warrant if he returned to Australia.

As part of the crucial fight for Assange's freedom over the weeks and months ahead, the SEP has called public meetings in cities across Australia and in New Zealand. We urge all supporters of democratic rights to attend.



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