

Petition calling for Julian Assange's freedom tabled in Australian parliament

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A petition signed by over 200,000 people calling for the freedom of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange was tabled in the upper house of the Australian parliament on Wednesday.

The petition was initiated 12 months ago by Australian teacher Phillip Adams, before the Ecuadorian government had revoked the political asylum it had granted Assange and allowed British police to enter its London embassy and arrest him on spurious bail-related charges. The United States had laid charges against Assange and filed for his extradition.

The text of the change.org petition was updated to reflect this immense change in the situation. It states: "Julian Assange now faces the prospect of extradition to the USA to face 175 years imprisonment for publishing facts delivered to him as a journalist and those facts revealed systemic government corruption and war crimes. These were the exact issues he required protection from and why he accepted Ecuadorian political asylum."

The petition concludes:

"We respectfully request the Prime Minister and/or the Foreign Minister of the Australian Government intervene and ensure Julian Assange's freedom of safe passage and return to his home Australia or any other location that Julian Assange requests to travel to. We further respectfully request that the Australian Government where influence can be made with friendly nations, that the Australian Government ensure that no extradition order is effected on Julian Assange from the USA that may otherwise impinge on his ongoing freedom of passage and existence."

The number of people who signed the petition is a measure of the broader support and sympathy for Assange, as well as widespread outrage over the role of

the Australian government in the nine-year vendetta that has been waged against the award-winning publisher and journalist.

Successive Labor Party and Liberal-National Coalition governments have collaborated with the US to persecute, slander, isolate and seek to imprison Assange, an Australian citizen who has not committed any crime.

Many of those who have signed the petition left a short comment explaining why they had done so. They give a sense of the sentiments that have been expressed repeatedly.

CA wrote: "This man, Julian Assange, is not, and never was a criminal, as you all know. Telling the truth is NOT a crime. You should be giving him a medal for his bravery.

"I know of no other country on this planet with as brave a man as he is. Wake up and stop hiding the truth. You are servants of the people, and very well-paid ones at that. Do your job honestly and properly as Julian was, as a journalist. You should be very proud of this man."

BY stated: "How Julian Assange has been treated and denied the right to justice with no support or intervention from the Australian Government is a travesty. Bring him home safe."

SM commented: "When we make it illegal to report the truth we lose our rights. Free Julian and arrest George W. Bush for mass murder in Iraq."

The petition was tabled by Greens' senator Peter Whish-Wilson, who is one of three Green politicians who joined an 11-member cross-party parliamentary group in late October to oppose Assange's extradition to the US and advocate for his freedom and ability to return to Australia.

Tabling of the petition appears to be the only action

taken by any of the group's members since its formation was announced. Greens' leader Richard Di Natale and deputy leader Adam Bandt have not, to date, issued a press release or even written a Tweet about their membership in the grouping.

The petition, as well as other recent developments, reflect the increasing public discussion on Assange's case.

Since the dramatic scene of a publisher being physically dragged by police from where he had been granted political asylum, growing numbers of people have felt compelled to speak out. This has intersected with immense concern over the police-state style raids which were conducted by Australian Federal Police on the home of a NewsCorp journalist Annika Smethurst and the Sydney offices of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) last June.

Smethurst faces potential criminal prosecution for publishing leaked information on proposed new domestic spying powers for the Australian Signals Directorate. ABC journalists Dan Oakes and Sam Clark could be charged for the publication of leaks that revealed Australian military involvement in alleged war crimes in Afghanistan.

The move against journalists has brought home that the government's collaboration with the persecution of WikiLeaks and Julian Assange has established a precedent that is being extended into a frontal assault on whistleblowers and press freedom in Australia itself.

The silence within the media profession on Assange is breaking as a result.

On November 8, retired foreign affairs correspondent Andrew Fowler tweeted that the ABC Alumni—an organisation of former ABC staff—had endorsed a motion he moved calling for the current Coalition government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison to “repatriate Julian Assange and stop his extradition to the US.”

A slightly amended version of the resolution, available on the ABC Alumni website, states:

“The ABC Alumni views with dismay the failure of the Federal Government to object to the possible extradition of Julian Assange to the United States. This extradition has far reaching consequences. It signals that the US believes publishers, editors and journalists anywhere in the world, including Australia, can be extradited if they obtain US classified documents.

“In the light of this attack on press freedom, this meeting instructs the ABC Alumni executive to write to the Prime Minister requesting that he urgently demand an end to extradition proceedings against Assange and that Assange be returned to Australia.”

This evening, WikiLeaks' lawyer and advocate Jennifer Robinson is being interviewed by award-winning Australian journalist Quentin Dempster, at a public event in Sydney hosted by PEN—an international body founded to “fight censorship and promote freedom of expression.”

The discussion is being promoted as getting to the “heart of the tough issues around WikiLeaks and Assange, free speech and press freedom.” It has been supported by the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Schools of Journalism and Law, as well as the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), the union covering media workers, which has recently begun to comment on Assange's case, after years of silence.

Starting on Saturday in Newcastle, the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) is holding public meetings to review the political lessons that must be drawn from the campaign in defence of Assange over the past nine years. The aim of the meetings is to prepare and develop the political action that must be organised, in Australia and internationally, against the attempt to extradite Assange from Britain to the United States and to secure the freedom of both Assange and Chelsea Manning, who has been imprisoned for refusing to testify against him.

We urge all those who support and want to actively join this campaign to attend. Click here for the details of the meetings.



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