Australia: Alice Springs group condemns silence of “Bring Assange Home” parliamentary group

Our reporters
31 January 2020

Last October an ad hoc grouping of 11 Australian parliamentarians and senators, co-chaired by independent Andrew Wilkie and Liberal/National Coalition government member George Christensen, announced that they planned to campaign in defence of persecuted WikiLeaks’ founder Julian Assange. The parliamentary group includes Richard Di Natale, the leader of the Greens, as well as Greens deputy leader Adam Bandt.

Apart from some perfunctory statements by Wilkie, Christensen and National MP Barnaby Joyce about Assange’s plight, the ad hoc group has remained silent and organised nothing in the face of detailed information about ongoing violations of the Australian citizen’s basic legal rights, warnings about the dangerous state of his health, and the refusal of the Australian government to demand his release. Di Natale and Bandt have not even issued a statement on their membership of the grouping.

The Open Letter to the “Bring Assange Home Parliamentary Group” published below was written by Margaret Richardson, a registered nurse, on behalf of the Julian Assange Supporters Alice Springs Action Group. The letter was published on the group’s Facebook page yesterday.

Richardson is a founding member of the Assange Supporters Alice Springs Action Group, which was established a week after the Socialist Equality Party held a public meeting in the central Australian city on November 24 last year.

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An Open Letter to the “Bring Assange Home Parliamentary Group”

To: George Christensen (Liberal), Barnaby Joyce (National), Andrew Wilkie (Independent), Sali Steggall (Independent), Richard Di Natale (Greens), Peter Whish-Wilson (Greens), Adam Bandt (Greens), Julian Hill (Labor), Steve Georganos (Labor), Roberta Sharkie (Centre Alliance), Rex Patrick (Centre Alliance) and Helen Haines (Independent).

I’m writing to you because I’m seriously concerned about the dangerous and life-threatening health of Julian Assange, the Australian journalist and WikiLeaks publisher, and want to know exactly what you are doing in his defence, and for his freedom.

I have been following with great interest the activities of the “Bring Assange Home Parliamentary Group” of twelve Australian MPs since it was established in October. It is now more than three months since your group was established but it has done nothing of substance in this time.

There is an abundance of evidence to support the fact that Assange’s health is fragile. Why are you not raising loud alarm bells about the brutal persecution of Assange? Your inaction shocks me.

Although the group was formally announced on October 22, it did not meet for the first time until late November. Concerned about the holdup, I phoned Mr Wilkie’s office to ask why there had been such a delay and was told, “It’s the first opportunity they had, to be able to meet together all in one place.” This did not ring true.

I then read in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that plans were being made by George Christensen to visit Assange in the UK “in the coming months.” He said that he wanted to “see for himself” whether the abusive treatment of Assange and the “circumstances of his jailing” in Belmarsh Prison had contributed to the

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Australian citizen's rapidly deteriorating health.

It is patently obvious that Assange's life is in danger. As you are fully aware, all those who have visited Assange in maximum-security Belmarsh Prison including, John Pilger, Julian's brother Gabriel, Julian's father John Shipton and Pamela Anderson, leave with grave concerns about his deteriorating physical and mental health. These concerns have been widely published.

UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Niles Melzer made clear in his May 2019 report that Assange's long confinement inside the Ecuadorian embassy in London and his ongoing illegal incarceration in Belmarsh prison is tantamount to psychological torture and the worst case of mistreatment he has seen in twenty years.

In a letter to the British government published last November, Meltzer declared, "Unless the UK urgently changes course and alleviates his inhumane situation, Mr Assange's continued exposure to arbitrariness and abuse may soon end up costing him his life."

On October 21, an RT video clip of Assange in the police van being transported to a case-management hearing in Westminster Magistrates Court gave some indication of the dreadful state of Assange's health. I would expect it has been seen by all members of cross-party group.

On October 22, Craig Murray, former British former diplomat and now whistleblower, human rights campaigner and friend of Assange, was present at the first Westminster Magistrates Court hearing. Murray published a report entitled "Assange in Court," which provided a very chilling description of the event and of the rapidly declining state of Assange's health.

Shock waves reverberated around the world, as reports of the terrible state of his health filtered out. This extremely intelligent and articulate man had become a bumbling wreck and could not even recall his date of birth. Assange's youthful good looks and dignified persona were gone and he was almost unrecognisable, causing great concern internationally.

On November 22, an urgent letter signed by over 65 doctors from around the world was sent to the UK Home Secretary Priti Patel warning that Assange could die in prison and demanding that he be transferred from Belmarsh to a university teaching hospital for urgent medical assessment and treatment. This letter was based on factual medical reports documented over several years.

Since then, another letter signed by more than 100 doctors has been sent to the UK home secretary. Neither letter was answered by the British government.

Recent reports reveal that conditions are so bad in Belmarsh that three people have died in the prison in the previous year, the most recent in January 2020.

What more evidence is required of the parlous state of his health? His most recent appearance at the procedural hearing on January 13 at Westminster revealed a very aged man.

At Christmas, Julian was given a "Christmas treat" and allowed to make a phone call. Julian told his close friend Vaughan Smith "I'm dying in here" and said he that he was being sedated.

Assange's self-reported fear for his life has been greeted with a deafening silence, not just from the Australian government and Labor Party opposition, but also by your "Bring Assange Home Parliamentary Group."

Notwithstanding your claims to be concerned for the WikiLeaks publisher, the "Bring Assange Home Parliamentary Group" has not called any joint press conferences, no public meetings and no rallies.

Rather than mobilise support for Assange you're promoting illusions that "someone" in parliament is "doing something." This is to cultivate a passive attitude, so that ordinary people don't do anything.

Why call yourselves the "Bring Assange Home Parliamentary Group" when you have done nothing to bring Julian home or ensure that the utterly inhumane treatment in Belmarsh doesn't kill him.

Can you please tell me what concrete political actions your group is planning?

Yours sincerely,

Margaret Grace Richardson (Registered Nurse)
On behalf of Julian Assange Supporters Alice Springs Action Group

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