

Petition for Assange's freedom tabled again in Australian parliament

Mike Head
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One of the largest petitions ever tabled in Australia's parliament—now signed by 280,000 people—was presented in the House of Representatives on Monday, calling for freedom for WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

However, all the circumstances surrounding the event demonstrate that the Australian government and the political establishment will do nothing to defend Assange unless there is a powerful working-class movement demanding his release.

First tabled in the Senate last November with more than 200,000 signatures, the petition has been signed by the fourth largest number of citizens in the history of the parliament. This reflects a widespread and growing demand for the Australian government to exercise its legal and diplomatic powers to end the 10-year persecution of Assange, an Australian citizen.

Incarcerated in the notorious maximum-security Belmarsh Prison since April, Assange faces an extradition hearing, due to commence on February 24, that could see him rendered to the United States to face a show trial on framed-up espionage charges and a life sentence of up to 175 years. The prosecution of Assange will set a global precedent for the suppression of the media and free speech.

Despite the powerful public support and strongly expressed sentiments of the petition, its tabling received virtually no coverage in the corporate media, including the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. It has triggered no response whatsoever from the Liberal-National Coalition government, or the opposition Labor Party.

The media blackout and non-response to the tabling underscored the continuing refusal of the government and the political establishment to intervene on Assange's behalf. The Australian ruling elite is committed to its military alliance with the US.

Beginning in 2010 with the Greens-backed Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard, successive Labor and Coalition governments have collaborated with the US to persecute, slander, isolate and seek to imprison Assange, in an attempt to silence WikiLeaks for exposing,

and continuing to expose, their war crimes, global diplomatic intrigues and mass surveillance.

On Monday, Independent MP Andrew Wilkie presented the petition in a nearly deserted chamber. There was no discussion or debate. Wilkie spoke for just one minute and was quickly granted leave, by consent, to table the document for consideration by parliament's Petitions Committee.

The updated on-line petition opposes the US extradition of Assange and "instructs" the Australian government to "facilitate the providing of a bail application via consular presentations" on Assange's behalf once the extradition hearing commences.

On the same day, another petition was tabled, providing further evidence of the mounting hostility toward the refusal of the political elite to defend Assange. Signed by 76 citizens, it called on parliament to "take immediate action in order to bring Julian Assange home. Lobby against the unjust charges and detainment of Julian Assange in the UK, give him diplomatic status and protections that will allow him to fly back to Australia unhindered by all other foreign powers. Be visible in your fight for Julian, be vocal and be relentless. NOW."

In presenting the first petition, Wilkie, a former Australian intelligence officer, told the house: "A lot has been said and written about Julian Assange and there's a broad range of views about the man. But the substantive matter here is quite simply that he's being persecuted for publishing information that was in the public interest, including hard evidence of US war crimes.

"That the perpetrator of those war crimes, America, is now seeking to extradite Mr Assange to face 17 counts of espionage and one of hacking is unjust in the extreme and arguably illegal under British law. If it goes ahead, not only would Mr Assange face 175 years in prison, but the precedent would be set for all Australians—and particularly for journalists—that they are at risk of extradition to any country they offend."

Wilkie announced that he and right-wing National Party MP George Christensen will fly to London on Saturday, at

their own expense, to visit Assange in London's Belmarsh Prison. "My aim is to check on his welfare and to assure him that a great many people, especially here in Australia, are rightly concerned he is being treated unjustly," he said.

Wilkie and Christensen are co-chairs of the "Parliamentary Friends of the Bring Julian Assange Home Group," a cross-party grouping formed last October. Apart from tabling the petition and seeking to visit Assange, however, the group has done virtually nothing to secure his release. Despite their capacity and resources to do so, its members have called no public meetings, organised no rallies and moved no motions, in parliament or anywhere else.

The other publicly-identified members are former National Party leader Barnaby Joyce; Rebekha Sharkie and Rex Patrick from the Centre Alliance; Labor MPs Julian Hill and Steve Georganas; Greens ex-leader Richard Di Natale, new leader Adam Bandt and Senator Peter Whish-Wilson, and independent MPs Zali Steggall and Helen Haines.

Notably, none of them have sought to commit their parties to protect Assange. Since being installed as Greens leader last week, Adam Bandt—like Labor leader Anthony Albanese—has not said a word on the fact that the world's most prominent political prisoner is about to face a US extradition bid.

Bandt's silence is an open rejection of the widespread outrage of many Greens members over the vendetta against Assange and their desire for a campaign in his defence. On February 12, the Northern Territory Greens Management Committee issued a press release of a resolution that it adopted on January 19. It states:

"We demand that the Australian government immediately utilises all available diplomatic and legal means to impel the British government to cease supporting the US attempt to extradite Assange on false charges of espionage. We demand his immediate release from custody. Assange must be freed without any conditions. He must be able to return to Australia, or to a country of his choice, so he can seek urgently required medical treatment. Assange must be guaranteed immunity from any US extradition application."

The refusal of successive Labor and Coalition governments, along with the Greens, the trade unions and pseudo-left organisations, to take any action to secure Assange's freedom is contributing to the historic level of political disaffection over worsening social conditions, glaring inequality, the bushfire disaster and the use of slush funds to win elections.

The parliamentarians who are making occasional, token gestures reflect the broader fear of the popular anger if Assange, whose health has suffered from prolonged psychological torture, were to die in British or US custody.

The participation in the Bring Assange Home

parliamentary group of Joyce and Christensen, both right-wing populists within the ruling Coalition, is particularly revealing. They are acutely aware that among the social layers to which they seek to appeal—including agricultural workers, small farmers, regional workers and small businesspeople—there is broad opposition to Assange's persecution.

Over the past two years, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has held rallies and public meetings 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 take such action, however, only if it is compelled to do so out of fear of an independent movement of the working class.

As part of the crucial fight for the freedom of Assange and courageous whistle blower Chelsea Manning, the SEP has called rallies in Australia and in New Zealand and the SEP in Britain is holding a public meeting in London. We urge all supporters of democratic rights to attend.

Free Assange! Free Manning! No to extradition!

London Public Meeting

Sunday, February 23, 2:30 p.m.

Mahatma Gandhi Hall

Indian YMCA

41 Fitzroy Square

London, W1T 6AQ

(nearest Tube: Great Portland Street)

Sydney Rally

Saturday February 22, 12:00 p.m.

Parramatta Town Hall

182 Church Street, Parramatta

Melbourne Rally and March

Sunday February 23, 2:00 p.m.

State Library of Victoria

Then march to Federation Square

Wellington, New Zealand Rally

Sunday, February 23, 3:00 p.m.

Cuba Street (intersection with Left Bank)

Wellington

Brisbane Rally

Saturday February 29, 2:00 p.m.

Reddcliff Place, Brisbane

(corner Queen and George Street)



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact