

Australian parliamentary parties endorse British show trial of Julian Assange

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Senior representatives of the Liberal-National Coalition government, including Foreign Minister Marise Payne, have signalled their complete support for the Trump administration's attempt to extradite WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange from the United Kingdom to the US for his exposure of American war crimes. The leadership of the opposition Labor Party, which has always sided with Washington against WikiLeaks and freedom of speech, remained silent as Assange faced the first week of his extradition hearing in London.

Speaking in the House of Representatives on Monday evening, Coalition MP Dave Sharma complained that "many in Australia are following the case of Julian Assange closely." He then declared his "faith in the rule of law, due process and the independence of the judiciary in the United Kingdom."

Sharma's comments were in line with previous government statements, contrasting Britain's supposed "rule of law" and "due process" with the anti-democratic actions of totalitarian regimes. In fact, the first week of Assange's court hearings resembled nothing so much as the show trials staged by despotic regimes, replete with a denial of fundamental legal rights, a biased judiciary and a preordained conclusion.

In the months leading up to the hearings, Assange was denied the right to prepare, with his access to legal documents and to his own lawyers severely limited. He appeared in a court generally reserved for terrorism suspects, to which he was transported by a tunnel running from the maximum-security Belmarsh Prison where he is detained—despite the fact that he has been convicted of no crime.

Assange was subjected to constant physical and psychological abuse by the Belmarsh and judicial authorities. He was repeatedly strip-searched, shifted

from cell to cell and had his documents confiscated by prison guards. During the court proceedings, he was confined in a bullet-proof glass cage that prevented him from hearing most of what was said and interacting with his lawyers. The judge presiding over the case is openly hostile to Assange and repeatedly dismissed clear legal arguments as to why the extradition application should be rejected.

The Australian parliamentarians are all well aware of this outrageous state of affairs. Sharma nevertheless had the gall to state: "Mr Assange has strong legal representation in an open trial and before an impartial judiciary. The charges he faces are known, and he has a spirited defence team acting on his behalf. He will get a fair hearing in court, and justice will ultimately be served."

Sharma's dismissive statements in parliament, which were not challenged by any other member, are a greenlight from Canberra for continuing attacks on Assange's rights. They are in line with the refusal of every government, beginning with the Greens-backed Gillard Labor government in 2010, to defend Assange as a persecuted Australian citizen and journalist.

The week before Sharma's remarks, Foreign Minister Payne declared on February 25 that the government had "no standing in any of Mr. Assange's legal proceedings and is unable to intervene in them." In a question to Payne, Greens' Senator Peter Whish-Wilson noted that this was patently false. Payne herself had travelled to Thailand last year to secure the freedom of soccer player Hakeem al-Araibi, a soccer player and Australian permanent resident who faced deportation to his native Bahrain. Australian governments have made numerous diplomatic interventions on behalf of Australian citizens, including Al Jazeera journalist Peter Greste who was framed-up

in Egypt and falsely imprisoned.

Assange has not been defended solely because of the bipartisan support of the Coalition and Labor for Washington's persecution of WikiLeaks and its publisher, and the broader assault on all independent and critical journalism.

Underscoring the government's contempt for democratic rights, Payne rejected the warnings of United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer that Assange would have no prospect of a fair trial if he was dispatched to the US. She brushed aside Melzer's damning findings that Assange has been subjected to relentless psychological torture. Payne dismissed the seasoned and highly-informed UN official as just "an individual rapporteur who has made a range of observations, not all of which we agree with."

The Australian parliament is flagrantly flouting international laws and institutions to give support to the US-led vendetta against Assange, just as it did when it supported the illegal 2003 invasion of Iraq. Payne refused to even comment on the revelations that the US Central Intelligence Agency illegally spied on Assange when he was a political refugee in Ecuador's London embassy—a fact that should have seen the extradition application thrown out as soon as the court convened.

The stand of the Coalition and Labor Party flows directly from the unalloyed commitment of the Australian ruling class to the US-Australia military alliance and its role as a junior partner in Washington's relentless aggression to maintain its waning global dominance. Payne and Sharma are both deeply involved in the preparations for Australia to play a frontline role in a US war with China, which were initiated under the Gillard Labor government. Anthony Albanese has not said a single word about Assange since being installed as Labor leader last May.

The complicity in Assange's persecution extends across all official establishment. The Greens and other parties represented in the parliament have issued no formal party statements and waged no campaign for Assange's freedom as he is subjected to a legal travesty. While Senator Whish-Wilson posed questions in parliament, Greens leader Adam Bandt, who is ostensibly the most senior figure in the small cross-party grouping of politicians calling for Assange to be "brought home," has only issued one statement.

As for the corporate media, its coverage of Assange's extradition hearing was perfunctory. For years, editorial boards of the print and television news outlets peddled the innumerable slanders against Assange concocted by his persecutors. They ridiculed his warnings that he faced extradition to the US as a "conspiracy theory," in a transparent attempt to isolate him and poison public opinion against him. Now that Assange's warnings have come to pass, they are doing everything possible to prevent the development of a broad political movement in his defence.

The shameful role of the press has allowed the collaboration of the parliamentary establishment with the persecution of Assange to go largely unscrutinised. Albanese, for example, has not faced a single press question about their refusal to say a word about the extradition hearing.

The line-up against Assange demonstrates that his freedom will not be won by peddling illusions in, or issuing moral appeals to, any section of the country's political and media establishment. What is required is the development of a mass political movement of the working class in Australia and internationally, fighting to block Assange's extradition to the US, as part of the struggle to defend all democratic rights.



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