

Labor MP denounces Australian government's refusal to defend Julian Assange

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29 August 2020

In a statement to the House of Representatives on Thursday, Labor Party member of parliament Julian Hill spoke out against the US-led persecution of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange and condemned the Australian government for being “too cowardly to defend him.”

A brief video of Hill's remarks has been shared widely on social media. His comments were among the most strident by an official Australian politician opposing the gross attacks on Assange's legal and democratic rights. They were, moreover, a minor breach in a wall of silence surrounding the WikiLeaks founder's plight that has been enforced by the Australian political and media establishment.

Significant political issues, however, were raised by Hill's statement, which have not been examined by any section of the media, or elsewhere.

The Labor MP, who represents a working-class electorate in the outer suburbs of Melbourne, began by declaring: “Eleven days from now, an Australian citizen will fight for his life in a London court as the United States government seeks his extradition. If this Australian is extradited and manages to escape execution, he will still face an effective death sentence in the US, confined in extreme isolation for 175 years.”

Assange, Hill said, confronted the prospect in the US of being “trapped in a system that ensures political prisoners like him will be systematically broken, with no hope of a fair trial...This Australian, who exposed American crimes, including international law violations at Guantanamo Bay, will be buried alive in the same oppressive system.”

Hill reviewed some of the attacks on Assange by the British authorities, including his detention in the maximum-security Belmarsh Prison, despite the fact that he has not been convicted of a crime, and the denial of adequate access to his lawyers and to legal documents.

The Labor MP stated that Assange was being treated “worse than a war criminal.” In his major court appearances last February, the WikiLeaks founder had been “in a glass box. Even war criminals accused of genocide on trial at the International Criminal Court can sit down and communicate privately with their lawyers.”

Hill declared: “The UK claims to be a rule of law country guaranteeing a fair trial, open justice and due process. What a joke!”

In his most politically-significant comments, Hill stated: “The persecution and treatment of Julian Assange are unconscionable. This is inherently political and our government is too cowardly to defend him, to even demand that he gets a fair trial.”

The Liberal-National Coalition government has largely remained silent on Assange's persecution. When they have mentioned him, it has been to state that Assange will be provided with token “consular assistance,” like “every other Australian.” Prime Minister Scott Morrison has previously endorsed the frame-up of Assange, declaring that it is time for him to “face the music.” The government has feted senior figures in the Trump administration, which is spearheading the campaign against Assange.

Hill made clear that he was not speaking as an opponent of American imperialism, or the US-Australia military alliance. He warned, rather, that Australia's complicity in the persecution of Assange “corrupts our alliance with the United States and makes a mockery of the United Kingdom's justice system and international law.”

These comments reflect fears within sections of the political establishment that the treatment of Assange threatens to provoke major public opposition directed against the entire political set-up. Hill was also, in effect, calling for a more equitable balance in the US-Australia alliance, by which the Australian ruling elite prosecutes its own predatory imperialist interests, especially in the South Pacific.

More significant than this is what Hill did not say. As a representative of Labor, a pro-war party of big business, he was unable and unwilling to indict the political forces responsible for Assange's predicament, beyond his immediate opponents in the Liberal-National government.

Hill could just as well have declared that “The Labor Party and its leader Anthony Albanese are too cowardly to defend Assange, to even demand that he gets a fair trial.” For obvious reasons, he did not.

Since assuming Labor's leadership last year, Albanese has not made a single statement in defence of Assange and nor did his predecessor Bill Shorten. This is all the more damning, given the gross abuses of Assange's rights over that period, ably outlined by Hill himself.

Far more than cowardice, however, is involved. The political establishment's consistent backing for the attacks on Assange, despite the fact that he is an Australian citizen and journalist, has been a central component of Australia's ever-greater alignment with US militarism, including the plans for war with China, and a mounting turn to authoritarianism domestically.

In this, Labor has played the central role.

WikiLeaks came under attack from the previous Labor government, while the organisation was still in its infancy. In 2009, WikiLeaks published Labor's blacklist of websites, blocked from view in Australia. The list refuted claims that only sites hosting illegal content were targeted, exposing significant internet censorship.

Then Labor communications minister Stephen Conroy threatened to refer WikiLeaks to the Australian Federal Police (AFP). Assange later stated that he was fearful the organisation would be targeted for police raids and other state attacks.

An even more significant response came in 2010, when WikiLeaks published a series of explosive releases, exposing US war crimes and global diplomatic conspiracies. The Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard falsely stated that some of the publications, for which Assange has now been charged by the Trump administration, constituted a violation of Australian law. Gillard's slanderous assertion was refuted by the AFP.

Undeterred, Gillard pledged that her government would work with the US intelligence agencies to destroy WikiLeaks. She threatened to strip Assange of his passport. This occurred as Labor was preparing to support US President Barack Obama's announcement of a "pivot to Asia," a vast US military build-up in the region directed against China.

At the time, opposition Liberal-National representatives warned of the anti-democratic implications of Labor's attacks on Assange, in language not dissimilar to that now used by Hill.

More recently, senior Labor figures responded with glee to Ecuador's illegal violation of Assange's political asylum and his brutal arrest by the British police on April 11 last year. Tanya Plibersek, Labor's former deputy leader, reshared a Tweet denouncing Assange supporters as "cultists." Penny Wong, the party's Senate leader, tacitly endorsed the lie that Assange is not a journalist, which plays directly into the attempted US prosecution of him on Espionage Act charges.

The record more than demonstrates that if there is to be a defence of Assange, it will not come from the Labor Party, which has served as one of his chief persecutors.

It is nevertheless noteworthy that Hill's statement has not been reported in a single corporate publication or by the publicly-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Enjoying

the closest ties to the military and intelligence agencies, the official media's support for "press freedom" does not extend to the only Australian journalist currently behind bars.

The muted response, however, is also an indication of the feckless and for-the-record character of such parliamentary statements if they are unconnected to broader action.

Hill was speaking as a member of the "Bring Assange Home" parliamentary grouping, which he said would be "writing to the UK High Commissioner requesting an urgent meeting to relay our concerns and demand his extradition be blocked as he is not receiving a fair trial in the UK."

It will come as a surprise to most that the cross-party grouping now includes 24 MPs, given that the majority of them appear never to have mentioned Assange in public.

In addition to Hill, six other Labor MPs are in the grouping. None of them has a substantial public profile or leadership position. They have noted that they are defending Assange in a "personal capacity and not as party representatives."

The most outspoken supporters of Assange from the grouping have been independent MP Andrew Wilkie, right-wing populist National Party representatives Barnaby Joyce and George Christensen, and Greens Senator Peter Whish-Wilson.

Nine other Greens MPs have signed up, but none of them, including party leader Adam Bandt, have done anything more than issue very occasional statements. The party has not mobilised its membership in defence of Assange or initiated a public campaign.

This is because a struggle against imperialist war, for democratic rights and in opposition to the major parties is anathema to the Greens' upper-middle class constituency. The party has concentrated its last two federal election campaigns on appealing for a coalition with Labor, or even the Liberals, and propped-up the minority Gillard Labor government as it initiated the assault on Assange's rights.

As the Socialist Equality Party insisted in a recent National Congress resolution: "[T]he only way to block Assange's extradition to the US and secure his freedom is through the development of a mass international movement, centred in the working class. Millions of workers have entered into explosive struggles over the past years, including in Britain, the US, and, increasingly, in Australia. These will intensify over the coming period.

"The task of all those fighting for Assange's freedom, including the SEP, is to turn to this movement, and to explain that the fight for the WikiLeaks founder's liberty must be inscribed on the banner of every struggle in defence of democratic rights, for social equality and against war."



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