Australian Senate passes motion acknowledging “alleged” persecution of Julian Assange

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On Monday, the Australian Senate passed a motion “noting” the plight of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange, who is imprisoned in Britain and faces extradition to the United States for his exposure of American imperialism’s war crimes, global diplomatic intrigues and human rights violations.

The motion was the first to be passed in either house of the federal parliament that is in any way supportive of Assange, since the British police illegally arrested him in April 2019. It is one of only a handful of times the WikiLeaks founder has been mentioned in parliament following last month’s conclusion of the final British show trial hearings for his extradition on unprecedented US espionage charges, on which he could be jailed for life.

The impetus for the motion was undoubtedly concern over popular hostility toward the complicity of the parliamentary establishment in the railroading of an Australian journalist and publisher.

Over 150 legal experts and lawyers’ associations around the world condemned the British court proceedings as a legal travesty. A group of 161 prominent international political figures, including 13 former national presidents, similarly denounced the hearings as a sham and demanded Assange’s immediate freedom.

The Australian government and the Labor Party opposition, aided by the corporate media, however, maintained a stony silence throughout the trial. This was in line with the support given by the entire political establishment for escalating US militarism and its corollary—efforts to quash anti-war opposition, epitomised by the campaign to destroy Assange.

With the verdict over Assange’s extradition due on January 4, the Australian ruling elite is well aware that the widespread latent public support for the WikiLeaks founder, which they have sought to suppress, will again come to the surface.

The motion’s function was to put on record the “concerns” of some parliamentary parties, without committing them to anything. The perfunctory character of such gestures is underscored by the fact that not a single corporate media outlet, including the publicly-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation, reported the motion. Nor does it appear that any of those who passed it have gone to any great lengths to publicise the motion.

The resolution was moved by Greens Senators Peter Whish-Wilson, Sarah Hanson-Young and Janet Rice. The motion passed with the support of Labor Party senators and some crossbenchers. Those who voted against were members of the Liberal-National Coalition government and the right-wing populist Jacqui Lambie.

The text of the motion can be described only as ambivalent, tepid and mealy-mouthed. Its form is to state a series of incontestable facts, without commenting on their significance or putting forward any clear political position.

The motion begins by “noting” that Assange is an Australian citizen, that he has a family and that he won a 2011 Walkley Award for outstanding contributions to journalism, all of which can be discovered by looking at his Wikipedia entry.

The second section “acknowledges that during the recent extradition trial, the court heard evidence about” WikiLeaks’ exposure of war crimes and human rights abuses, along with

> (ii) the alleged spying operation conducted against Julian Assange by UC Global on behalf of United States (US) intelligence agencies, (iii) the alleged seizure of legally privileged material from the Ecuadorian Embassy by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, (iv) alleged plans to poison and kidnap Julian Assange, and (v) the devastating health consequences that Julian Assange is currently facing.

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The final section "acknowledges" that there have been demands from local councils for the Australian government to intervene in defence of Assange, that a number of "world leaders" have called for his freedom, and that protests have been held in support of the WikiLeaks founder.

The motion abruptly concludes by noting that a British court will rule on Assange's extradition next January. Anyone looking for an indication of what the senators themselves are planning to do will be disappointed.

Significantly, the motion was amended between the time that it was put on notice on Sunday night, and passed on Monday. The change was to place the word "alleged" before each of the references to violations of Assange's rights by the US government and intelligence agencies.

The purpose of these amendments was to prevent any direct condemnation of the crimes of the American state against Assange, or any suggestion that the senators were preempting the decision of the British courts.

Labor, like the Coalition government, has insisted that it has "full confidence" in the British and US legal processes, despite the fact that the attempt to extradite Assange and to prosecute him for publishing activities violates international laws and domestic legislation in both the UK and US.

Labor has held fast to this position, even as it has been shown that the British judge overseeing the case has close ties to the intelligence agencies, and that Assange has been denied the right to prepare a defence, would have no prospect of a fair trial in the US, and has been deliberately imperilled by coronavirus infection by being detained in a maximum-security British prison, despite the fact that he has not been convicted of a crime.

By inserting "alleged" before each substantive statement of fact, the motion leaves Assange's fate in the hands of the British judiciary and ruling class, which have already demonstrated that they will rubber stamp the demands of the major powers for Assange to be thrown in a US prison for the rest of his life.

Similar calculations underlie the motion's failure to make any demands for the Australian government to intervene. Labor has echoed the government's false claims that it can provide only worthless "consular assistance" to Assange. This has been aimed at covering-up the fact that there are substantial legal bases and precedent for a government to fight for the freedom of a citizen who is being persecuted abroad.

Behind Labor's mask of impartiality and vague concern for Assange's health, the party, which has the closest ties to the US and Australian intelligence agencies, is intensely hostile to the WikiLeaks founder. It was a Greens-backed Labor government that responded to WikiLeaks' exposures of US war crimes by denouncing it in 2011 as a criminal organisation, and pledging to assist the American intelligence agencies in their campaign against Assange.

The character of the motion demonstrates again that the fight for Assange's freedom cannot succeed through parliamentary horse-trading and appeals to the official parties.

The Greens, while claiming to oppose the persecution of Assange, have rejected calls, including from within their own ranks, for a public, party campaign demanding that the government intervene to secure his freedom. Instead, they have sought to divert opposition behind illusions in the very parliamentary set-up that is responsible for Assange's dire plight.

This is in line with the Greens' character as a party of the affluent upper middle-class, oriented toward forming coalitions with Labor and the Liberals, and increasingly open in its support for imperialist war.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) explained in a recent congress resolution, "the 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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