

Australian Labor leader criticises Assange's imprisonment, privately

Oscar Grenfell
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At a closed-door meeting of his party's parliamentary caucus last Tuesday, federal Labor leader Anthony Albanese was reportedly asked by a colleague to give his opinion on the ongoing incarceration of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange, who is detained in London's maximum-security Belmarsh Prison.

"Enough is enough," Albanese is said to have responded. "I don't have sympathy for many of his actions, but essentially I can't see what is served by keeping him incarcerated."

The comments were immediately leaked to the press and reported by several corporate outlets the next day. "Anthony Albanese calls for Assange to be released," read one headline. Another widely syndicated article by the Australian Associated Press, shared by the official WikiLeaks Twitter account, proclaimed: "Labor leader wants Julian Assange freed."

On social media, a number of longstanding supporters of Assange hailed Albanese's purported comments. "Thanks for stepping up Anthony," "Welcome to the fight," and "At last Labor is on board," were common refrains. The tenor of the response was summed up by a Twitter post which declared: "The farce of 'British justice' is finally over. After a long decade, the Australian leader of the opposition has stood up for a citizen persecuted for publishing."

To be blunt, such comments have more in common with wishful thinking and self-deluding fantasy, than with an objective, political assessment of anything that has actually transpired.

What really took place?

A handful of little-known Labor Party backbenchers have joined a cross-party "Bring Assange Home" parliamentary grouping over the past year. Most of them have never uttered Assange's name in public. None have spoken out against Labor's central role in the decade-long US pursuit of the WikiLeaks founder.

Their posture of "concern" has not resulted in any of these MPs challenging Labor's current position, which remains that the attempt to destroy Assange for exposing war crimes

is a matter for the British legal system. The parliamentary group is, to all public intents and purposes, completely inactive.

It appears likely that it was one of these Labor backbenchers who asked Albanese about Assange. The question, as reported in the press, did not raise a word of criticism, nor did it ask Albanese to state or to alter Labor's official position, but merely to provide his personal opinion. As recounted in the media, the questioner posed the issue of Assange as though it had only come up recently, and not that the persecution of the WikiLeaks founder has proceeded for the past ten years with Labor's support.

Albanese's response was highly conditional and committed him and Labor to nothing. It was promptly leaked to the media, which obliged by grossly overstating the significance of the comments. In other words, this was a cynical public relations exercise, aimed at fostering the illusion that Labor and Albanese were doing something for Assange, when they are not and have no intention to.

This has been demonstrated by what has occurred in the week since the caucus meeting, i.e., nothing. Albanese has not publicly stated even the mealy-mouthed comments he reportedly made privately.

In fact, it is exceedingly difficult to find any record of Albanese having spoken about Assange's plight over the past two years of his Labor leadership. When he has, it has been to echo Prime Minister Scott Morrison's statements that Australian authorities are powerless, except to provide unstated "consular assistance" to the WikiLeaks founder, which Assange's relatives have said consists of little more than offering to bring him weeks old newspapers as they inquire on his "welfare."

The media exercise surrounding the caucus meeting occurred under conditions in which the lawless character of Assange's prosecution has been thoroughly exposed. In January, a British Magistrate's Court judge ruled against Assange's extradition to the US, where he faces 17 Espionage Act charges and up to 175 years imprisonment, for publishing true documents that exposed US war crimes,

diplomatic conspiracies and human rights violations.

The verdict was narrowly focused on the fact that Assange's mental health has deteriorated dramatically over the past decade of his persecution, and he would be at a high risk of suicide in the draconian US prison system. This, in itself, is an indictment of the Australian establishment's abandonment of the WikiLeaks founder, showing that the government and Labor have stood by as a citizen and journalist has been brought to the brink of death.

The British court ruling upheld all the anti-democratic arguments of US prosecutors, effectively greenlighting future prosecutions of journalists. This was followed by a denial of a bail application, on the grounds that Assange posed a "flight risk." The consequence is that the WikiLeaks founder is being indefinitely detained on remand in a maximum-security prison, solely on the basis of an extradition request that was rejected in the first court at which it was heard.

Labor and the Australian ruling elite as a whole have long been fearful that the latent public support for Assange could develop into a political movement directed against imperialist war and a broader assault on democratic rights. Albanese's comments, and their leaking, are aimed at preventing this from taking place, and fostering the illusion that Assange's freedom can be achieved through plaintive appeals to a section of the parliamentary establishment.

In the various responses to Albanese's comments, very little reference was made to Labor's record. Far from being faltering friends and wavering allies in the defence of the WikiLeaks founder, Labor has been the most determined proponent of Assange's persecution within the Australian political establishment.

In 2009, WikiLeaks published the then Labor government's secret blacklist of banned websites. This refuted claims that only criminal sites were blocked, and exposed significant internet censorship. Labor communications minister Stephen Conroy threatened to refer the publication to the Australian Federal Police (AFP). Assange later stated he was fearful that Labor was preparing police raids against him.

In 2010, WikiLeaks released US army war logs from Iraq and Afghanistan documenting historic war crimes and exposing the neo-colonial character of the occupations. Towards the end of the year, it published 250,000 US diplomatic cables, revealing the daily intrigues of American imperialism, from coup plots, to interference operations and illegal spying on heads of state and United Nations officials.

As senior US politicians responded by calling for Assange to be jailed, or even assassinated, Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard joined the chorus. She slanderously declared that the "foundation stone of the WikiLeaks organisation is an illegal

act." This assertion, subsequently contradicted by the AFP, prefigured the US attempts to prosecute Assange for the 2010 publications.

Gillard considered stripping Assange of his Australian passport, in violation of domestic law, and pledged to help the US intelligence agencies in their campaign to destroy WikiLeaks. This stance set the pattern for every government since, which has continued to deny Assange's rights as an Australian citizen and journalist.

Gillard's role was not an aberration. It expressed the character of Labor, as one of the preeminent parties of Australian imperialism, fully committed to participating in all US-led wars and military interventions. At the same time, Labor has directly implemented or supported one piece of anti-democratic legislation after another over the past two decades, first on the pretext of the bogus "war on terror," and more recently as part of a McCarthyite campaign against supposed "foreign interference."

Albanese's refusal to defend Assange has gone hand in hand with his bipartisan support for the Liberal-National government's right-wing policies, from its pro-business response to the pandemic, to the massive tax cuts for the corporations and the wealthy contained in the last federal budget, to Australia's escalating role in an aggressive US confrontation with China.

If anything, Albanese has sought to pitch Labor as a more reliable partner for the US administration of President Joseph Biden, as it ramps-up preparations for war directed against Beijing and Moscow.

The experiences of the past decade, and especially of the last two years, since Assange's expulsion from Ecuador's London embassy, demonstrate that his freedom will not be secured by fawning over pro-war parties of the political establishment. Such exercises in self-delusion serve only to bolster political forces directly implicated in the abrogation of Assange's rights, and to politically-neuter the latent support for the WikiLeaks founder.

The fight for Assange's liberty must be connected to a broader struggle against imperialist war and the turn to authoritarianism. It must orient to the working class, the constituency that defends democratic rights and that is being propelled into struggle against the very governments that are seeking to destroy Assange.



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