Australian government, Labor opposition greenlight US rendition of Julian Assange

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Friday's British High Court judgment backing Julian Assange's extradition to the United States has provoked widespread outrage, including in Australia, where the WikiLeaks founder was born and holds citizenship.

The Australian Liberal-National Coalition government and Labor Party opposition, however, have given their approval to the show trial ruling, in line with their decade-long participation in the US-led campaign against the publisher and journalist.

Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne held talks with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken yesterday, and did not mention Assange's plight. Together with Prime Minister Scott Morrison, she has maintained a stony silence in response to journalists' requests for comment on the verdict.

The government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) declared: "Australia will continue to respect the UK legal process—including any further appeals under UK law. It is for Mr Assange to decide how to respond to the high court decision. Australia is not a party to the case."

The British "legal process" is a frame-up, aimed at ensuring Assange's destruction for exposing US-led war crimes.

The High Court judges over-ruled an earlier District Court judgment finding that Assange's extradition would be "oppressive" because of the dire conditions under which he would be held in the US prison system and the likelihood he would commit suicide. The two judges overturned that ruling on the basis of phony US "assurances" of fair treatment, which even included disclaimers giving the American government the right to do whatever it liked to Assange once he was on US soil.

The appeal verdict was delivered two months after it was revealed by *Yahoo News* that the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Trump administration had plotted to kidnap or assassinate Assange in 2017.

DFAT would have known what was revealed by Assange's partner, Stella Moris, yesterday, namely that he suffered a minor stroke on the first day of the US appeal hearing in October. DFAT has monitored Assange's circumstances in an effort to minimise the political damage to the Australian government.

Under these conditions, DFAT's statement amounts to a declaration that the Australian government is willing to see Assange die behind bars. The government's claim "not to be a party" to the legal proceedings is a sham. As an Australian citizen persecuted abroad, Assange has a clear right to diplomatic intervention under domestic and international law.

That right has been underscored by a series of recent precedents. These include the Australian government's role in securing the release of journalist Peter Greste from an Egyptian prison in 2015; filmmaker James Ricketson from Cambodian detention in 2018, and academic Kylie Moore-Gilbert from Iranian incarceration last year.

In each of these cases, and a number of others, the Australian citizens were deemed to be the subject of political persecution and action was taken on their behalf.

But the government refuses to take any similar action in defence of Assange. He is viewed as a threat. This is because of the military alliance with the US, including escalating preparations for war with China, and the Australian ruling elite's own crackdown on democratic rights amid deepening social and political opposition.

Labor's shadow foreign affairs minister, Penny Wong, essentially said the same as DFAT. She declared: "We respect the UK court's decision and note this will not signal the end of this legal fight with the matter to be referred back to the lower court, and whatever the result there the matter is likely to go to the supreme court."

In other words, Assange can rot behind bars. Labor will do nothing, but declare its "respect" for the British courts trampling on his rights.

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Wong added: “However, Labor believes this has now dragged on for too long and has pressed the Morrison government to do what it can to encourage the US government to bring this matter to a close. Labor expects the Australian government to provide appropriate consular support to Mr Assange, as is his right as an Australian citizen.”

The reference to “consular support” is revealing. It falls far short of a diplomatic or political intervention aimed at securing Assange’s freedom. “Consular support” is generally associated with assisting citizens who have misplaced their passports or encountered other minor difficulties abroad.

Wong’s comments about the need to “draw this matter to a close” are a cynical attempt to adapt to popular anger, without committing Labor to anything.

Over the 48 hours since the verdict was announced, Assange’s name has been continuously among the top ten trending topics in Australia. Almost 200,000 separate tweets have been posted referencing him, the vast majority supportive.

The popular sentiment has found a pale reflection in the statements of several Australian politicians. Independent federal MP Andrew Wilkie demanded that Morrison “end this lunacy” by intervening on behalf of Assange.

“He is a hero, not a villain, and journalism is not a crime,” Wilkie stated. “Again the United Kingdom proves it’s a lackey of the United States and that Australia is delighted to go along for the ride.”

Labor backbencher Julian Hill tweeted: “Julian Assange, an Australian citizen, is fighting for his life in London, as the USA seeks his extradition to face an effective death sentence. This Australian, who exposed US war crimes, is treated worse than a war criminal. He’s NOT receiving a fair trial.”

Greens leader Adam Bandt said: “Assange’s persecution and our government’s inaction are chilling, and should worry everyone who cares about a free press or thinks that governments should protect their citizens.” Greens Senator Peter Whish-Wilson pledged to make Assange’s defence a central issue in the forthcoming federal election.

The statements are a reaction to a groundswell of support for the WikiLeaks publisher. But the central question is, how is this sentiment to be taken forward?

The politicians quoted above are members of the “Bring Assange Home” cross-party parliamentary grouping. It has issued several statements defending the WikiLeaks founder since its formation in 2019, but has held almost no public meetings, initiatives and or mass public campaigns to fulfil its stated aim. Most of its members have yet to utter Assange’s name in public.

Labor MP Hill has never publicly challenged his own party’s refusal to defend Assange. Instead he promoted a mealy-mouthed party conference resolution that committed Labor to nothing, and touted purported comments made by leader Anthony Albanese, behind closed doors, that Albanese has never repeated in public.

The Greens have rejected calls from among their own ranks for a public campaign to demand Assange’s immediate freedom. They have boycotted rallies in defence of the WikiLeaks publisher, and some of their MPs have lent credence to the discredited frame-up allegations of sexual misconduct in Sweden which were used to undermine Assange’s mass support.

The record of the past decade, moreover, is very clear. The entire Australian political establishment bears central responsibility for Assange’s dire predicament. It was the Greens-backed government of Julia Gillard that in 2010-11 joined the US campaign against Assange, slandering him as a criminal, attempting to cancel his passport and pledging full support for the efforts of the American intelligence agencies to destroy him.

The fight to free Assange is inextricably tied to the broader struggle against massive social inequality, the drive to war and the criminal pandemic policies of the ruling elites that have allowed millions to die so that economies remains “open” and corporate profits flow. The persecution of Assange is the spearhead of a turn to authoritarianism by the capitalist class in response to rising social and political opposition.

The Socialist Equality Party, which has fought for Assange’s freedom for more than a decade, will do all it can to bring the fight for his liberty into the emerging struggles of the working class. That is where the constituency for defending democratic rights exists. The SEP will make the defence of this heroic journalist and publisher, who has exposed historic war crimes, a central issue in the upcoming Australian election.

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