

Hypocritical expressions of concern over Assange from Australian politicians

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Several Australian members of parliament, including Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, issued statements of concern this week after the British High Court cleared the legal road for the extradition of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to the US.

These statements have been depicted in the media as shows of support for the persecuted journalist and publisher, an Australian citizen. Closer examination demonstrates that they are anxious efforts to contain the popular outrage over the prolonged psychological and physical torture of Assange.

Nearly 700,000 people in Australia and globally have now signed a petition to free Assange and stop the US extradition.

To discuss how to take forward the fight to release Assange, the Socialist Equality Party has called an emergency online public meeting next Wednesday night, and appealed for the widest participation by all defenders of democratic rights and opponents of imperialist war.

Not the slightest confidence must be placed in the cynical manoeuvres inside the political establishment. All parties have been complicit in Assange's torment ever since the Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard branded him a criminal in 2010 and pledged to help the Obama administration gets its hands on him.

In fact, the comments of Joyce and two other government members point to a continuation of this conspiracy. They confirm that the government has been involved in backroom discussions with the UK and US governments to assist the extradition. This helped the Biden administration supply "assurances" to the court that Assange would be well treated in detention and could serve his prison time—potentially 175 years—in Australian jails.

The two ~~British~~ judges duly these "assurances" as "sufficient to meet the concerns" about his well-being, despite being made by the US government that, as they were told in the appeal hearing, plotted Assange's "assassination, kidnap, rendering and poisoning."

The obvious travesty of the High Court ruling has triggered a renewed outpouring of disgust on social media and in letters to newspapers in Australia, where successive governments, both Labor and Liberal-National, have done everything they can to help US administrations to silence Assange for good.

Assange's mother, Christine Assange, issued an open letter, revealing the "unending, gut-wrenching pain" she is suffering as her son is "cruelly psychologically tortured" and explaining her fear that he will be "buried alive in extreme solitary confinement."

Christine Assange referred to the stroke that her son suffered in October during the High Court hearing and the evidence that the CIA had plotted to assassinate him.

The open letter thanked "all the caring, decent citizens globally protesting Julian's brutal political persecution" and urged them to "please keep raising your voices to your politicians till it's all they can hear. His life is in your hands."

In Canberra's halls of power, however, as much as those in Washington DC and London, the ongoing incarceration of Assange and his possible death, either by assassination or damage to his health, are regarded as essential.

The purpose is not just to punish the WikiLeaks founder but to send a chilling message to dissuade anyone else from exposing the atrocities, spying and coup plotting of the US and its allies, especially as the US escalates its provocations against China and Russia.

Why did Australia's deputy prime minister feel compelled to publish an opinion piece in the Nine Media flagships, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Melbourne Age*, ostensibly opposing Assange's extradition?

Joyce's intervention was all the more curious because he was cooped up in hotel quarantine in Washington DC, after contracting COVID-19 on an earlier leg of his trip, which involved discussions with ministers from Boris Johnson's Tory government in the UK.

Joyce, the leader of the agri-business and mining-based National Party, has made similar utterances in the past, but he is currently a key figure in government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, which remains totally opposed to any intervention to secure Assange's release.

Joyce's action is a sure indication that he and others in the National Party are well aware of the support for Assange, including in their rural electorates, and the revulsion at this treatment. Despite his bumbling manner, Joyce is regarded as a canny "retail politician" who has a good nose for shifting sentiment on the ground.

In his newspaper op-ed, Joyce voiced unease about the precedent being set by Assange being dragged into the US to face espionage charges for actions that broke no Australian law.

The deputy prime minister wrote: "Assange was not in the US when the event being deliberated in a court now in London occurred. The question is then: why is he to be extradited to the US? If he insulted the Koran, would he be extradited to Saudi Arabia?"

But the real point of Joyce's column then followed: "I have no power in Britain or US over these matters. I have no standing in the British courts... They should try him there for any crime he is alleged to have committed on British soil or send him back to Australia, where he is a citizen."

This line flies in the face of the fact that Joyce is the leader of a coalition partner on which Morrison depends to cling to office. He could insist that the government intervene diplomatically to secure Assange's release, as it has in other cases where Australian citizens or residents have faced trumped-up charges at the hands of other governments.

In reality, Joyce's posturing echoes that of the entire government. In the words of the government's

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) in response to the British ruling: "Australia will continue to respect the UK legal process... Australia is not a party to the case."

The government in effect legitimises the British "legal process," which is in fact a pseudo-legal rubber stamp, aimed at ensuring Assange's rendition for courageously exposing US and allied war crimes.

The Labor Party opposition is backing these machinations, continuing its record of throwing Assange to the wolves. Labor leader Anthony Albanese last Friday refused to answer a journalist's question about whether Morrison should urge Biden to drop the espionage charges.

Instead, Albanese stuck to his previous duplicitous stance that appears to side with the growing demands for Assange's immediate release, but does not change Labor's support for his incarceration one iota. "I don't agree with a whole range of Julian Assange's views, but there needs to be a point in which you say that enough is enough," he said.

The SEP has held series of rallies and public meetings in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, as part of the decade-long global fight conducted by the Socialist Equality Parties to demand Assange's immediate, unconditional release.

Wednesday's online public meeting will take forward our campaign to connect the fight for Assange's liberty with the emerging struggles of the working class worldwide against the pandemic, social inequality and the danger of war.



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