

Labor-Greens bury Assange's plight ahead of Australian federal election

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In the lead-up to a federal election, likely to be held in May, the political and media establishment is maintaining a near-total blackout on the plight of Julian Assange. Not a single parliamentary party is raising the WikiLeaks founder in its election material, despite the fact that he is an Australian journalist, detained without charge in Britain, and facing life behind bars in the US for exposing American war crimes.

The exclusion of the issue from the official election campaign is a clear signal that whatever the outcome, the decade-long participation of Australian governments in the US-led vendetta against Assange will continue.

The agenda of all the parliamentary parties, moreover, is diametrically opposed to any, even nominal, defence of Assange's rights. They have joined hands in support of the aggressive US-NATO confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, while escalating tensions with China, the other country against which Washington is preparing conflict to maintain American imperialist hegemony.

While hypocritically declaiming against alleged Russian war crimes, the last thing any of them want is discussion about the fact that an Australian publisher sits behind bars for exposing the mass killings, torture and terrorising of entire populations by the US and its allies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A key role in the conspiracy of silence is being played by those MPs who previously criticised his persecution. The Bring Assange Home cross-party parliamentary grouping, now composed of 25 MPs, has been to all intents and purposes moribund throughout its two-year history.

Now, with an election approaching, its character as a toothless entity that will fight for nothing, and exists primarily to provide its members with phony democratic credentials, is crystal clear.

In one of the few concrete initiatives taken by any of the members of the grouping, Greens senators Peter Whish-

Wilson and Janet Rice said they push for an inquiry into the role of Australian governments and the country's foreign affairs bodies in Assange's mistreatment.

The inquiry was proposed after a *Yahoo News* report revealed last September that the US administration of President Donald Trump and the Central Intelligence Agency had discussed kidnapping or assassinating Assange in 2017, when he was a political refugee in Ecuador's London embassy. The Greens mooted the inquiry after the Australian government evaded questions on what it had known of the plot and discussions that had been held by senior Australian ministers and their US counterparts.

The inquiry proposal was intended to damp down concerns among Assange supporters that members of the parliamentary group were doing nothing to advance their stated aim of securing his freedom.

Hansard, however, records that while the inquiry motion was hyped on social media, it went nowhere in parliament. At the end of October, any discussion of it was deferred until early February, when parliament resumed after the summer recess.

But nothing was said of the inquiry for almost two months, until Whish-Wilson presented a notice to the Senate on March 29, stating: "I withdraw motions under my name and the name of Senator Rice with reference to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee and Mr Julian Assange."

This reporter contacted Rice and Whish-Wilson's offices, to find out whether the motion referenced above was the one relating to an inquiry, and why it had been withdrawn without any discussion. Whish-Wilson replied:

Yes we pulled the motion as Labor had indicated they wouldn't support an inquiry at this time. Note we obviously didn't test this with a vote on

the floor so can't say with 100% certainty they wouldn't have supported it—if pushed.

Also worth noting the Chair of the committee that would have inquired into Julian's treatment was the late Kimberley Kitching (who died a few weeks ago). If you ask Labor for an explanation, I'm sure this complication and the committee's workload going into an imminent election would be raised.

I'll certainly be trying in the new parliament, hopefully a new Labor Government will be more amenable-sympathetic to his cause, to raising this abuse of power.

The statement is an indictment of Labor, the Greens and the Bring Assange Home grouping. It is a damning refutation of claims that Assange's freedom can be won through plaintive appeals to the parliamentary parties.

Eight members of the Bring Assange Home group are Labor MPs. Four others are currently listed as "supporters," including Labor leader Anthony Albanese. It is unclear when Albanese was added to the list. He has never spoken a word publicly against Assange's persecution, or for his freedom.

And such is the "support" of Albanese and the other Labor MPs that they will block even a parliamentary inquiry into Assange's persecution!

Labor has long supported the US-led campaign against Assange. In 2010, its government, headed by Prime Minister Julia Gillard, falsely slandered Assange as a criminal, tried to illegally cancel his passport and pledged to work with the American intelligence agencies to destroy WikiLeaks. Albanese, who was a prominent member of the government, has never repudiated that record.

If anything, the Greens are outdoing Labor in their craven opportunism and phony posturing. Whish-Wilson and Rice have made statements condemning the torture of Assange, warning that he may die in prison and exposing the fact that he has committed no crime. But they would not even put a motion to the Senate, and force the Labor MPs to take a position on an inquiry.

Whish-Wilson, moreover, sympathetically conveys the fact that the "committee's workload going into an imminent election would be raised." And anyway, despite every indication to the contrary, "hopefully a new Labor Government will be more amenable-sympathetic to his cause."

In other words, the various statements of concern over Assange from Greens MPs are not for a mass audience, let alone a national election.

Instead, the comments are a sop to the widespread support for Assange; an attempt to prove that there is a constituency for the defence of democratic rights in parliament when there is not, and a record that the Greens can point to if the WikiLeaks founder is extradited or dies behind bars.

And they are not tied to any genuine fight, even for a toothless parliamentary inquiry, much less for Assange's freedom. While they are "concerned" about the relentless persecution of an Australian journalist, the Greens MPs would not let such an issue disrupt their cosy relations with the Labor Party.

This is all the more so ahead of an election, where the Greens are appealing for some sort of power-sharing arrangement in the event of a minority Labor government. Like the Greens-backed Gillard government, such a government would not alter the official hostility to Assange one iota.

The fight for Assange's freedom, like the struggle against war and growing authoritarianism, with which it is inextricably linked, must be based on the mobilisation of the working class. All over the world, including in Australia, there is mass hostility among workers to militarism, soaring inflation, social inequality and the erosion of civil liberties.

Defenders of Assange must turn to this emerging movement of the working class, not to the parliamentary parties that are either directly responsible for, or complicit in his persecution. The Socialist Equality Party alone advances this perspective.



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