

Australian Labor government stonewalls demands to free Assange

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During its first three weeks in office, Australia's Labor government has responded with a quiet hostility to demands that it defend Julian Assange.

Labor ministers have not mentioned Assange, unless directly questioned. And in response to those inquiries, they have made plain that they will continue the bipartisan complicity of the political establishment and state apparatus in the persecution of an Australian journalist and citizen.

This is all the more criminal, given the fact that Assange's circumstances are more dire than ever before. After over a decade of detention, his health is in a parlous state, expressed most alarmingly in a minor stroke last October.

Assange is also closer to extradition to the US than he has ever been. This week, British Home Secretary Priti Patel is due to reveal whether she will sign an extradition order, after the UK Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal for Assange.

Patel's decision is a formality, given the intense hostility of the British government to Assange, and its central role in his persecution. There is no guarantee that the British courts will allow the final avenue of appeal available to the WikiLeaks publisher within the UK legal system. He faces the prospect of either years more in the maximum-security Belmarsh Prison, if that appeal is heard, or a speedy rendition to the US, where he faces 175 years in prison for exposing American and allied war crimes.

Under these conditions, there have been calls for the Labor government to act, including from well-known journalist John Pilger and other public figures. *Ithaka*, a film chronicling the fight by Assange's family for his freedom was shown on the state-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) last week.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has mentioned Assange's plight exactly once since assuming office. Late last month, Albanese was asked whether he had raised Assange's plight with his persecutor-in-chief Joseph Biden, when they met at a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue summit in Tokyo. Was it Labor's position that the attempted extradition and prosecution of Assange should be ended, a

reporter asked.

Albanese's entire response was. "My position is that not all foreign affairs is best done with the loudhailer." It was the most the Labor leader has said about Assange this year, and yet he could still not bring himself to say the WikiLeaks founder's name or express even token concern over his plight.

The response was a cynical dodge. While saying absolutely nothing, Albanese was leaving open the possibility of his supporters asserting that, just maybe, he had made private representations to Biden on Assange's behalf.

Labor's position, however, was made crystal clear in comments on ABC radio by Foreign Minister Penny Wong on June 3. Asked the same question as Albanese, Wong replied: "What I'd say is the Australian government, actually under both parties, has consistently raised the issues associated with Mr Assange and his incarceration with the US and the UK."

In other words, Labor will do nothing differently to its Liberal-National Coalition predecessor. Former Prime Minister Scott Morrison infamously smirked and said it was "time to face the music" when Assange was brutally arrested by the British police in April 2019.

The Morrison government consistently rejected demands to use its diplomatic and legal powers to prevent Assange's extradition and secure his freedom. Instead it offered worthless "consular assistance," which amounted to monitoring the decline of Assange's health and the progress of his incarceration, from the standpoint of collecting intelligence and limiting the political fallout from the publisher's extradition or death.

To the extent that there are illusions that Labor has ever had a different policy to the Coalition on Assange, it is the product of a misinformation campaign. This has been spearheaded by the "Bring Assange Home" cross-party parliamentary grouping and several of its Labor members.

While its ostensible purpose is to secure Assange's freedom, the grouping has conducted virtually no activities

over the past two-and-a-half years. Its real function has been to promote the fraud that there is a constituency for democratic rights within parliament, when in fact there is none.

The Labor members of the grouping have played a particularly cynical role. The most vocal of them has been backbencher Julian Hill, who has functioned as a waterboy for Albanese. For two years, he denounced the Coalition government for refusing to defend Assange. At the same time, he orchestrated several stunts, aimed at falsely indicating that Labor would act to free the WikiLeaks founder, when it had no intention of doing so.

In February 2021, Albanese was asked his position on Assange at a closed-room meeting of Labor's parliamentary caucus. He purportedly replied: "Enough is enough. I don't have sympathy for many of his actions, but essentially I can't see what is served by keeping him incarcerated."

The first three words of Albanese's response were immediately relayed to the press, and hailed by Hill and others as a major step forward. There is no independent evidence that Albanese actually made the comment, and he has never repeated it publicly. Even if he did make the statement, it committed Labor to nothing.

Then in April 2021, Hill declared that Labor had passed a motion at its national conference, defending Assange. "Labor has made our position clear now," he said. The "policy position of the leader of the opposition, the alternative Prime Minister" Albanese, was for the prosecution of Assange "to be dropped."

When the WSWS asked Hill for a copy of the motion, which had appeared nowhere online, its contents belied his claims. The motion merely stated: "Labor believes that the Australian government should be doing everything necessary to ensure that Mr Julian Assange is treated fairly and humanely." It extraordinarily hailed the British courts, which have kept Assange imprisoned in a maximum-security prison without charge, for their "priority given to the health and welfare of Mr Assange."

Despite Hill's antics, Wong repeatedly made clear in the lead up to the May 21 election that Labor's position was indistinguishable from that of the Coalition. As the Australian Associated Press reported, in response to the UK Supreme Court refusing to hear Assange's appeal in April, Wong said his extradition to the US was "ultimately a decision for the UK home secretary."

In reality, the Australian government has a clear legal responsibility to use its powers to free a citizen being persecuted abroad. Australian governments deployed their diplomatic and legal powers to secure the release of journalist Peter Grete from an Egyptian prison in 2015; filmmaker James Ricketson from Cambodian detention in

2018; and academic Kylie Moore-Gilbert from Iranian incarceration last year.

Last week it was revealed that Myanmar's military junta would proceed with a frame-up trial of Australian economist Sean Turnell. In response, Albanese did not mumble about the inadvisability of using megaphones. Instead, he declared: "Sean Turnell should be released. That is the government's position. We will continue to make strong representation on that basis."

But Assange's persecution is being spearheaded by American imperialism, not the tinpot dictatorship in Myanmar.

Labor's hostility to Assange has always been bound up with its support for US-led militarism. In 2010, when Assange was denounced as a "hi-tech terrorist" by then US Vice President Joe Biden and others, Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard falsely claimed that Assange was guilty of crimes in Australia, threatened to illegally cancel his passport, and pledged to aid the American intelligence agencies in their campaign to destroy WikiLeaks.

The next year, in 2011, Gillard signed up to the US "pivot to Asia," a vast military build-up throughout the region, aimed at preparing for war against China.

A decade on and the war drive is far more advanced. Labor is fully committed to the confrontation with China. Albanese and Wong's first action in office was to attend the Quad summit in Tokyo, where they received their marching orders directly from Biden. Under these conditions, to imagine that Labor will demand Assange's freedom is a hopeless delusion.

As the Socialist Equality Party has insisted, the defence of Assange is inextricably tied to the fight against war, and the accompanying turn by the ruling elites to dictatorial forms of rule. The emerging struggles of the working class, in Australia and internationally, are the only viable basis for the fight for democratic rights and against the war policies of the major powers.

A Labor government would only fulfil its obligations to Assange if it were compelled to do so by a mass movement from below.



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