

Australia's Labor government rejects surging demands to free Assange

Oscar Grenfell
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Friday's announcement by British Home Secretary Priti Patel that she approved Julian Assange's extradition to the US has been met with an outpouring of anger and opposition, including in Australia.

The decision will be the subject of a final appeal within the British legal system by Assange's lawyers. But Patel's announcement underscores the increasingly imminent danger that Assange will be dispatched to the US, where he faces 18 Espionage Act charges, carrying sentences of up to 175 years in prison, for exposing US-led war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan and other allied abuses.

Since the announcement, Assange has repeatedly been among the top "trending" topics on Twitter in Australia, with many thousands of posts opposing his persecution. Unrelated social media postings by Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and other senior Labor politicians have been inundated with comments demanding that the government immediately act to free Assange, who is an Australian citizen.

Labor has responded with unconcealed hostility. In response to a journalist's question about the demands yesterday, Albanese stated: "There are some people who think that if you put things in capital letters on Twitter and put an exclamation mark, that somehow makes it more important. It doesn't." Labor, he said, "leads a government that engages diplomatically and appropriately with our partners," i.e., Britain and the US.

The couple of times Albanese has responded to questions about Assange, he has said as little as possible. The aim has been to commit the government to absolutely nothing, while leaving the field open for his apologists to claim that Labor is possibly making behind-the-scenes representations to the British and US administrations.

But Labor's real position has been clearly outlined by Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Richard Marles and Foreign Minister Penny Wong, both of whom have the closest of ties to the US state and are playing a central role in Australia's stepped-up integration into the US confrontation with China.

In a joint statement with Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus shortly after Patel's announcement, Wong declared that Australia was "not a party to Mr Assange's case, nor can the

Australian government intervene in the legal affairs of another country."

The statement presents the attempted extradition of Assange as a bona fide "legal case," when it is in fact nothing short of an extraordinary rendition. Assange is facing prosecution for publishing, as a journalist, true information that was in the public interest. This is clearly a frontal assault on press freedom and the most fundamental democratic rights.

The US pursuit of him, moreover, has involved innumerable attacks on Assange's legal and democratic rights. In addition to the US mounting a massive spying operation against the WikiLeaks founder, while he was a political refugee in Ecuador's London embassy, *Yahoo! News* reported last September that the Trump administration discussed kidnapping or assassinating him in 2017.

As for the British treatment of Assange, it has been denounced as state torture by outgoing United Nations Rapporteur Nils Melzer. The Australian citizen has been held in the maximum-security Belmarsh Prison for more than three years, the overwhelming amount of that time without charge.

Despite all this, Wong said Labor's position was the same as that of the previous Liberal-National Coalition government, which was openly hostile to Assange and refused to do a thing in his defence.

Marles similarly stated yesterday: "This is a matter for the United Kingdom. Like any Australian citizen facing legal proceedings abroad, he will be provided consular assistance." In practice, consular assistance has amounted to monitoring the deterioration of Assange's health and the progress of the US extradition request.

The claim that the Labor government is powerless to intervene has been refuted by a host of prominent public figures.

Kylie Moore-Gilbert was released from Iran last year, where she had been convicted of espionage offences that her supporters branded as a frame-up. In a lengthy Twitter thread, she noted that her freedom had been the result of high-level Australian diplomatic intervention.

So was the release of David Hicks from Guantanamo Bay in 2007, and the extraction of Australian journalist Peter Greste from an Egyptian prison in 2015. Moore-Gilbert wrote that "the

Australian people cannot accept” that the country’s governments would act to free herself and the others she referenced, “but you can’t convince our close allies to end their political prosecution of Assange.”

Independent federal parliamentarian Andrew Wilkie posted a statement, declaring: “Like many Australians I’ve given the new Federal Government plenty of time to sort this matter out. Well times up for the new Federal Government hinting at caring and then doing nothing. The new Australian Government is now to be condemned for abandoning an Australian hero journalist facing the very real prospect of spending the rest of his life rotting in a US prison.”

Well-known investigative journalist John Pilger denounced Albanese as a “coward” on Twitter, and added: “While Australia’s PM Anthony Albanese issues a spray of weasel ambiguities, Foreign Minister Penny Wong claims ‘we cannot intervene’ in the #Assange case. This is BS and Wong knows it. Australia has the diplomatic power to bring Julian #Assange home. Not doing so is treachery.”

Such statements from prominent figures reflect a groundswell of opposition from below. Despite a decade of slander and calumny, Assange is still widely regarded as a hero, whose persecution is a frontal assault on democratic rights and anti-war sentiment.

The fact that this sentiment has burst to the centre of political life has sparked concern within the political establishment.

An editorial in the *Age* on Sunday was headlined: “Now is the time for strong voices on Assange.” It noted that while in opposition, some Labor MPs condemned the Coalition government for refusing to defend the WikiLeaks founder. Now in office, however, Labor was taking essentially the same line. The *Age* warned that “Albanese’s muted response so far risks disappointing not only his own MPs but Assange’s ever widening support base.”

Longtime Labor figure Bob Carr told Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio yesterday that if Assange were extradited and tried in the US, it would “ignite anti-Americanism in Australia in a way we haven’t seen.” This would not be in the interests of either Australia or the US, he said.

Carr’s fear is that the pursuit of Assange threatens to create problems for the US-Australia alliance, under conditions in which it is crucial to Washington’s aggressive confrontation with China. As a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson noted yesterday, moreover, the persecution of Assange is an exercise in extraordinary hypocrisy. While claiming to lead a struggle for “freedom” against the “autocracies” of China and Russia, the US is seeking to destroy a journalist for exposing American war crimes.

Above all, Carr fears that the attacks on Assange will become the focal point of opposition to the US-Australian war measures targeting China, under conditions of widespread social anger intensified by the inflation crisis and the ruling elite’s austerity drive.

To try to head this off, Carr has claimed that Albanese may be discreetly raising the issue of Assange with US President Biden. He told WikiLeaks supporters earlier this month, “don’t criticise PM Albanese for saying he won’t use a megaphone” to defend Assange.

Carr’s credentials in the Assange case are such that no credence should be given to a word he says. As foreign minister from 2012–2013, he contemptuously rejected demands from Assange’s family to intervene, using exactly the same arguments deployed by the Coalition and the current Labor administration. WikiLeaks cables had revealed that Carr functioned as a secret informant of the US government around the time it played a key role in the ouster of the Whitlam Labor administration in 1975.

The International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) have from the outset, in 2010, defended Assange against the attacks of governments and the pseudo-left groups whose aim it was to silence him.

Since 2018, the SEP has held a series of rallies and meetings, demanding that the Australian government immediately exercise its legal and diplomatic powers to secure Assange’s freedom. The SEP has explained that an Australian government would only take such action if it were compelled to do so by a mass political movement, which is precisely what Carr is seeking to prevent.

Under conditions in which Labor has signed up fully to the US war preparations against China and is launching an austerity offensive against the working class, this assessment is clearer than ever.

The fight for Assange’s freedom must be rooted in the working class, the only constituency for the defence of democratic rights and the struggle against war. All over the world, including in Australia, workers are entering into major struggles, with strikes and protests erupting on a daily basis. We appeal to all workers and youth to take up the fight to free Assange as a key component of the defence of your own social and democratic rights.



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