

Why Australia's Labor government refuses to defend Julian Assange

Oscar Grenfell
6 July 2022

When the Labor Party scraped into office following the May 21 federal election, some supporters of Julian Assange voiced hopes that the new government would defend the WikiLeaks publisher because he is an Australian journalist and citizen undergoing persecution abroad.

The crudest and most thoughtless expression of these hopes came in the form of an update to a petition demanding that the Australian government act to free Assange. Over the course of almost three years, the petition has been signed by more than 730,000 people, and has served as an important focal point for the latent, mass support that exists for Assange.

But on July 4, the petition's founder declared that it was no longer necessary to issue any demands on the Australian government. The sole evidence provided was that Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese had purportedly signed the petition, and that some members of the government have hinted that it may engage in "quiet diplomacy" on behalf of Assange. "Now that we confirm that the Prime Minister of Australia is one of us and together with all of our collective 731,000 Signatories to this petition we will together move forward with direct representations to the responsible Public Officers in both the USA and Britain," the update declared.

It was necessary to "understand that the Australian Government does have a right to negotiate the matter of freedom of Julian Assange in the best way they see to secure his freedom... We do not intend to work against any action being taken in different ways by any individual Signatory"—i.e., Albanese.

"[W]e will move forward in a peaceful, harmonious and inclusive manner," the update declared, that is with regards to the Labor government.

To be blunt, such statements are exercises in wilful delusion. Since forming government, Labor has not issued anything that even could be described as weasel-words in support of Assange. Its attitude towards the WikiLeaks publisher is barely concealed hostility.

The greatest mistake defenders of Assange could make would be to allow a right-wing pro-war Labor government to lead them around by the nose. Such a course would serve to demobilise the mass backing that Assange has among workers and young people, and create the political conditions required for Labor to bury his plight and ensure that extradition from Britain to the US proceeds without hindrance.

The petition update promoted the latest comments on Assange by a member of the government. In an Australian Broadcasting Corporation "Law Report" radio program on June 28, Labor's Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus again stated that the Assange case had "gone on for too long." It was this comment that was highlighted on the petition.

But what, of substance, did Dreyfus actually say?

Introducing the subject of Assange, midway through the interview, the host noted warnings that the attempted US prosecution of Assange would set a dangerous precedent of US law being imposed globally.

Assange, an Australian citizen, is facing prosecution in the US, for documents he published while in Europe, exposing American war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan. Citing Assange legal advisor Greg Barns, the interviewer asked if Dreyfus was troubled by this attempt to extend the reach of American legislation to an Australian citizen with no legal connection to the US?

The attorney-general brushed the question aside. "The United States has long legislated in an extra-territorial way and I think that all other countries have understood that for a long time," he said. In other words, the US government can do what it likes.

Dreyfus continued: "It is not open to the Australian government to directly interfere with either the jailing of Mr Assange in the United Kingdom or the extradition request that has been made by the United States."

As with all other Labor ministers, Dreyfus presented Assange's imprisonment and threatened extradition as a bona fide, lawful procedure. But Assange's detention, in a maximum-security British prison, without conviction, has been denounced by outgoing United Nations Rapporteur Nils Melzer as state torture.

The US extradition effort is akin to a pseudo-legal lynching. Assange is to be imprisoned, for 175 years, under the draconian Espionage Act, for publishing true information revealing the illegal actions of the American government. Such an operation recalls dissidents being hurled into a dungeon cell, with the key thrown away, during medieval times.

Credible allegations are now on the public record, moreover, that the Trump administration and the CIA discussed kidnapping or assassinating Assange in 2017, before filing an indictment and an extradition request.

Dreyfus again made reference to the possibility of diplomatic representations on Assange's behalf.

In a highly revealing exchange, the interviewer noted: "The

government has said it would like to see this matter brought to an end, but hasn't exactly said how it would prefer it to come to an end." Would the government seek to have the charges against Assange dropped in the United States? she asked. "I am not going to canvas what will be the resolution of this case," Dreyfus replied.

In other words, the attorney-general's vague statements are worthless. Why would anyone believe that a government minister, who will not even state publicly that the charges against Assange should be dropped, would be fighting for his freedom behind closed doors?

Dreyfus' vague references to "representations" are like a bone to a hungry dog, meant to placate Assange's supporters, as is the cloak and dagger operation of Albanese possibly signing the petition.

The real position of Labor has been spelled out by two of its most prominent leaders, Foreign Minister Penny Wong and Defence Minister Richard Marles.

Marles stated last month: "This is a matter for the United Kingdom. Like any Australian citizen facing legal proceedings abroad, he will be provided consular assistance."

The position is identical to that of the previous Liberal-National Coalition government. Consular support means monitoring the extradition case and the decline of Assange's health. It is the antithesis of a diplomatic and political intervention to free Assange.

For his part, Albanese has sought to dodge the issue of Assange for the past six weeks. He refuses to mention the WikiLeaks founder's name, even when directly questioned about the topic. The only passionate comments he has made on the case were in an angry denunciation of Twitter users calling on the Labor government to take action.

It is hardly a mystery why Labor refuses to defend Assange.

The primary focus of the new government has been a foreign policy blitz, orchestrated in the closest of collaboration with the Biden administration, which is seeking Assange's extradition.

Wong and Albanese have been on one foreign visit after another, seeking to shore-up US dominance in the Indo-Pacific, and to further American imperialism's confrontation with China, which threatens nuclear war.

The highpoint came last week, when Albanese attended the NATO summit in Madrid. There, he gave full support to a new NATO doctrine, which labels Russia and China as threats and calls on member states to prepare "for high-intensity, multi-domain warfighting against nuclear-armed peer-competitors."

The persecution of Assange is retribution for his exposure of past war crimes. But it is also a preparation for new, and even greater crimes, associated with these US-led plans for what is nothing short of a global war. The aim is to intimidate the mass anti-war sentiment that exists among workers and young people, and to establish a precedent for further frame-ups and victimisations. The Labor government is fully committed to Washington's war measures, so it is hostile to Assange.

There are also domestic components. Labor has backed every piece of anti-democratic legislation introduced over the past twenty years, on the bogus pretext of the "war on terror," and more lately the McCarthyite campaign against supposed "foreign

interference."

Amid an unprecedented crisis of world capitalism, the fuses of democracy are short circuiting and governments everywhere are turning to authoritarianism. The sharpest expression of that was the attempted fascist coup by Donald Trump on January 6, but similar processes are evident in every country.

There is no difference between the Labor government's contemptuous attitude towards Assange and its hostility towards working people. With a soaring cost of living, Labor has rejected calls for across-the-board pay rises, and has insisted that the national deficit will be paid for through sweeping cuts to essential social spending.

At the same time, the government continues the profit-driven "let it rip" COVID policies that are resulting in hundreds of deaths every week and an untold number of mass infections. Victims of floods this week in New South Wales have been offered only a pittance by the new government. Instead, it is committed to unprecedented military spending, of more than half a trillion dollars over the decade and tax cuts for the rich.

The persecution of Assange, in other words, is inextricably tied to the broader questions of capitalist crisis, war, austerity and mounting authoritarianism.

The other response to the global economic breakdown is that of the working class. All over the world, workers are entering into major struggles, including tens of thousands of rail staff in Britain, teachers, nurses and others in Australia. This emerging movement is the key constituency for the struggle against war and the fight to defend democratic rights, including to free Julian Assange.

As the Socialist Equality Party has explained, a Labor government will only fulfill its obligations to Assange, if it is forced to do so by a mass movement from below.

The SEP is holding a meeting this Sunday, at 3 p.m. (AEST) to discuss how to build such a movement.

Register today:
https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_Zlegb7BRQMzjX_aDZpv4g



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact