

Australian Prime Minister Albanese refuses to meet with Assange's family

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In a revealing development last Wednesday, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese refused to meet with the family of incarcerated WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange when they visited the Australian federal parliament in Canberra.

Assange's father John Shipton and his brother Gabriel Shipton met with Independent and Greens MPs, but were reportedly unable to secure meetings with Albanese, Foreign Minister Penny Wong or Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus.

The snub expresses, again, the real attitude of the Labor government to Assange, Australia's most famous political prisoner. In line with its commitment to US-led militarism, including the confrontations with Russia and China, Labor is intensely hostile to Assange because of his exposure of US-led war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

While making highly ambiguous statements about the Assange case having "dragged on too long," the Labor administration has refused to use its diplomatic and legal powers to secure his freedom since it was installed after the May 21 election.

This amounts to a green light for Assange's extradition from Britain to the US, where he faces Espionage Act charges and 175 years in prison for publishing true information about the illegal wars and global diplomatic conspiracies of American imperialism.

In comments to the *Guardian* after their visit, both Shiptons condemned the Labor government's failure to defend Assange and demanded that it immediately intervene.

Gabriel Shipton recalled one of the few occasions on which Albanese explicitly referenced the WikiLeaks founder. Asked about the Assange case last December, Albanese purportedly told a shadow cabinet meeting, "enough is enough"—a refrain cited publicly by several Labor MPs.

But Shipton noted: "It is months ago now that he said this stuff and made the statement that enough is enough, but when is enough, enough? Julian's still in prison. He's been there for three years and he is not a convicted criminal."

Shipton added: "They could pick up the phone and call Joe Biden and make it a non-negotiable. We are strategically vital to the US at the moment, they need our resources, if it was made a non-negotiable, Julian would be here tomorrow."

The Labor government, however, is serving as the closest of partners with the Biden administration. Albanese and Wong have met repeatedly with the US president. The primary focus of their first months in office has been on foreign policy.

Labor has functioned as an attack dog for the Biden administration throughout the Asia-Pacific, with Wong continuously traveling the region to demand that its leaders sign up unequivocally to the US-led aggression against China.

Shipton pointed to the obvious hypocrisy at the heart of Labor's refusal to defend a persecuted citizen and journalist. "We're dealing with this prosecution or persecution that in any normal circumstance would be seen as totally illegal, and if it was Iran doing it to somebody, or China, or Vietnam, the government would be calling them out," he said.

Shipton continued: "It is not just about Julian's life and his wellbeing, it is a matter of principle, and if Australia wants to be the sort of country that calls out nations on their press freedom record, they could definitely be more vocal."

John Shipton commented on a recent Declassified Australia article. It cited internal briefings to the Labor government, indicating that the sole focus of Labor's "diplomacy" in the Assange case, was to consider a possible prison transfer from the US to Australia.

This would only be an option after Assange had been extradited and convicted on frame-up charges in a US court, a process that could take years or decades. It would, moreover, be entirely conditional on the agreement of the US government.

John Shipton said this scenario was “grotesque.” He pointed to the spate of extraordinary abuses carried out as part of the US pursuit of Assange. They have included the theft of Assange’s legal documents, unlawful spying on him and discussions within the Trump administration and the American Central Intelligence Agency in 2017 on kidnapping or assassinating him in London.

For Labor to refuse to intervene until after Assange’s extradition was “the most feasible way for them to continue to sit on their hands and do nothing.”

Such a course of action would also amount to a death sentence. Assange’s psychologists and doctors have testified, under oath, that he would take his life were he to face imminent dispatch to his US persecutors. In addition, the WikiLeaks publisher’s physical health is failing, expressed most sharply in a minor stroke last October.

On the same day the Shiptions visited parliament, Greens Senator David Shoebridge noted in question time that Labor MPs had claimed the government was engaged in “quiet diplomacy” on Assange’s behalf. “Quiet diplomacy can’t be no diplomacy,” Shoebridge stated, before asking: “What exactly is the government doing to secure the release of this Australian citizen, journalist and whistleblower?”

In reply, Trade Minister Don Farrell stated again that the case had “gone on for too long” and should be “brought to a close,” without giving any indication of how this would take place.

Farrell said Australia was not a party to the extradition case, which was between Britain and the US, and “respected” the legal processes of both parties. This line replicates that of the previous Liberal-National Coalition government. It amounts to a green light for the extradition and a declaration that Labor will do nothing.

Assange’s extradition hearings are not a routine “legal matter” but a monstrous frame-up. They involve the persecution of an Australian journalist for his publishing activities. This is a frontal assault on the most fundamental democratic norms, including press freedom.

In numbers of cases, Australian governments have actively used their diplomatic and legal powers to secure the freedom of citizens persecuted abroad, even when such attacks have taken a pseudo-legal form.

This was the case with Peter Greste, a journalist freed

from an Egyptian prison in 2015, after being framed-up on “national security” charges. The same occurred with James Ricketson, a documentary filmmaker who had phony “espionage” charges leveled against him in Cambodia, and Kylie Moore-Gilbert, an academic who was accused by Iran of being a spy.

The claim that Australia cannot intervene in the legal case is being advanced by Labor MPs across the board, including those who previously postured as defenders of the WikiLeaks founder.

It was repeated in a recent *Consortium News* interview by Labor backbencher Julian Hill. He insisted there were “limits to what we can do because Australia and the Australian government are not parties to the case, that’s just a fact.” Hill also defended Albanese’s supposed “quiet diplomacy.”

Hill has changed his tune since Labor took office. In August 2020, for instance, he stated: “The UK claims to be a rule of law country guaranteeing a fair trial, open justice and due process. What a joke!... The persecution and treatment of Julian Assange are unconscionable. This is inherently political and our government is too cowardly to defend him, to even demand that he gets a fair trial.”

Hill could now say the same about Albanese, the Labor government and himself.

For their part, the Greens posture as defenders of Assange. But they have rejected calls for a party campaign fighting for his freedom and buried the WikiLeaks publisher’s plight during the election.

The Greens’ entire orientation is to deepen their collaboration with the Labor government, expressed last week in their backing for Albanese’s climate bill, which will do nothing to address global warming and is premised on defending the interests of the coal and gas barons.

As the Socialist Equality Party has insisted, the fight for Assange’s freedom requires a struggle against the entire political establishment, and its program of war and authoritarianism. This must be based on mobilising the Australian and international working class, the constituency for a genuine fight against capitalist reaction and in defence of democratic rights.



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