

Australian Labor government refuses to defend Assange as it backs US plans for war against China

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Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong all but confirmed last Thursday that the Labor government is backing the US attempt to extradite WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange and imprison him for life because he exposed American war crimes. At the very least, Wong made plain that Labor will not lift a finger to defend the persecuted Australian citizen and publisher.

Wong's remarks were a response to a question from Greens Senator David Shoebridge during Senate hearings. They were the most explicit statement of the current Labor government's hostility to Assange yet.

Shoebridge asked if Prime Minister Anthony Albanese had spoken to US President Joe Biden and his British counterpart Rishi Sunak when the three gathered in San Diego last month. There they announced that, under the trilateral AUKUS pact against China, Australia would acquire nuclear-powered submarines at a cost of \$368 billion.

Wong did everything possible to avoid a direct answer to the question. But that in itself is an answer. The only possible inference is that Albanese did not mention the WikiLeaks founder and has no intention of doing so.

Wong's non-denial of this fact exposes Labor's extraordinary duplicity on the Assange case. Since it was elected in May last year, the government has avoided saying anything much about the WikiLeaks founder.

But when compelled to do so, Albanese and others have claimed to be using "quiet diplomacy" to somehow address his plight. Public comment on the matter, the argument goes, could disrupt these sensitive backroom negotiations. But, as is now apparent, no such backroom negotiations are being held. "Quiet diplomacy" is no diplomacy.

In her reply to Shoebridge, Wong declared "there are limits to what that diplomacy can achieve." She repeated Labor's vague slogans. It was "the government's view" that "Mr Assange's case has dragged on too long and should be brought to a close."

But Assange's case could be "brought to a close" in any

number of ways. He could die in Britain's maximum-security Belmarsh Prison, where doctors have warned for the past four years that his health has deteriorated. Or he could be extradited to the US, where he faces a secret trial and a sentence of 175 years' imprisonment.

Wong made clear that this is essentially the perspective of the Labor government. It supports Assange's imprisonment in Britain, despite the fact that he has not been convicted of a crime and authoritative rights organisations have demanded his release. And it supports the US government's "right" to extradite and try an Australian journalist for publishing true information that undermined the American national security-state.

Wong declared: "What I would say is this—and you would know this, Senator Shoebridge, as a lawyer. We are not able, as an Australian government, to intervene in another country's legal or court processes."

When Shoebridge began to challenge this assertion, an increasingly agitated Wong exclaimed: "Senator Shoebridge, there is a thing called the rule of law. There is a principle called the separation of powers. No amount of bellowing at me from that end of the chamber is going to change the fact that a court has to determine the legal process. So, we can raise these issues, as I have and as the prime minister has. But we are not able to alter the judicial processes of another country."

Every word of that statement is an obscene falsification. Wong defends the legal lynching of Assange. In so doing, she self-righteously claims to be respecting the "rule of law."

In reality, Assange has been the victim of the most heinous violations of the rule of law. It is now publicly documented that while Assange was an internationally-recognised political refugee in Ecuador's London embassy, the Trump administration and the CIA plotted to kidnap or assassinate him. Let Wong comment on how these preparations for a political hit in London conform to the "rule of law."

It is also well established that the same CIA operation involved unlawful spying on Assange's communications, including privileged discussions with his lawyers. Now, the very same US government which considered killing Assange and illegally surveilled him, is seeking his extradition!

Amid interjections, Wong became ever more belligerent. In response to one statement from the Greens, apparently suggesting that Labor secure Assange's freedom, Wong exclaimed: "Senator Whish-Wilson, how would you propose that we do that? Send the Australian Army into a court? I mean, really."

When another Greens MP noted that Assange is a political prisoner, Wong angrily responded: "No, there are legal processes which are still on foot..."

The claim that the Australian government cannot intervene is a sham. Over the past 20 years, Australian governments have aggressively intervened in a host of countries to secure the release of detained Australian citizens.

The current Labor government, and Ms Wong herself, have no such scruples about interfering in a number of other nations. Since its election in May, Labor has functioned as an aggressive attack dog of the US confrontation with China.

One of Wong's primary occupations, as foreign minister, has been to continuously bully, harass and threaten the impoverished leaders of the Pacific Islands nations, to ensure that they are in line with the US and its allies. In April 2022, while in opposition, Labor effectively backed US threats to take military action against the Solomon Islands, if it allowed any Chinese military basing. There were no such scruples about the "rule of law" in that instance.

As in the Pacific, so in the Assange case, Wong is faithfully parroting the lies of the Biden administration. To the extent that the US government has commented on Assange's extradition, it has presented the matter as a legal question, solely under the purview of the Department of Justice. The Biden administration, so the story goes, is not even a party to the extradition, because of the "separation of powers" cited by Wong.

In reality, it is the US government that is seeking Assange's extradition. The campaign against him, and WikiLeaks, has involved the entire US state apparatus, spearheaded by the FBI and CIA, the main police and spying agencies of the executive branch. That is made plain by the central role that Trump and his Secretary of State Mike Pompeo played in initiating the extradition. Biden himself, as far back as 2010, branded Assange as a "high-tech terrorist."

Labor's complicity was further underscored by former MP Rex Patrick. He reported yesterday, in *Michael West Media*, the result of a recent freedom of information request, showing that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

had not once corresponded with the Australian embassy in Washington about diplomacy on Assange's behalf.

In an apparent attempt to dampen the fallout from Wong's statements, Australia's new high commissioner to the UK, Stephen Smith, said he would soon visit Assange in prison. Smith, a former Labor defence minister, has the closest ties to the current government.

Smith's comments pointed to the pathetically token character of Labor's assistance. The commissioner would ask Assange "questions which go to his health and wellbeing" and nothing more.

Labor's hostility to Assange is intimately connected to its complete support for US-led imperialist war, including the advanced preparations for conflict with China.

That underscores the bankruptcy of those who have promoted illusions that Albanese and Labor would intervene in defence of Assange. The delusion-mongering reached its apogee in the lead-up to the San Diego AUKUS announcement. Several prominent supporters of Assange presented this as an "opportunity" for Albanese to raise the WikiLeaks founder's plight with Biden and Sunak.

Did they really think Albanese, while committing to a potential nuclear war with China, was about to demand the release of an anti-war publisher? Among those peddling this line were the various Greens MPs who questioned Wong in the Senate. While criticising aspects of Labor's policy, the Greens continue to collaborate with the government, even as it plots war abroad and participates in the slow murder of Assange.

That further demonstrates that the fight for Assange's freedom requires an independent movement of the working class, directed against the entire political establishment. Such a struggle, in defence of the most fundamental democratic rights, is inseparable from a fight against war and the capitalist system that is its cause.



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