

Australian Labor government's claim it cannot free Assange is a lie

Oscar Grenfell
4 April 2023

Last week, Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong effectively declared that her Labor government could do nothing to secure the freedom of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange, who is imprisoned without charge in Britain and faces extradition to the United States.

As the WSWS noted, Wong's comments in the Senate were the most explicit by a senior Labor minister on the government's attitude to Assange. Her remarks largely dispensed with the fraud that Labor was using "quiet diplomacy" to somehow address Assange's dire plight.

Summing up the essence of her argument, Wong asserted that Labor could not free Assange, because he was subject to "legal processes" in another country. To try to influence or end those proceedings would undermine the "rule of law" and the "separation of powers."

Wong declared: "[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."

In the first instance, Wong's presentation of the case against Assange as a bona fide "legal process" is an infamous lie. Assange is the first journalist in more than a hundred years to be charged under America's draconian Espionage Act. For publishing true information, exposing war crimes and other violations of international law, he faces 175 years imprisonment. Even establishment corporate outlets, such as the *New York Times*, have warned that the prosecution would strike a body blow to freedom of the press.

It is now on the public record, moreover, that the Trump administration only issued an indictment against Assange in late 2017, after plans for an illegal US assassination or kidnapping of Assange had fallen through.

Authoritative international organisations have branded the US prosecution as a frame-up. In 2019, then United Nations rapporteur Nils Melzer labelled the persecution of Assange as "psychological torture."

"In 20 years of work with victims of war, violence and political persecution I have never seen a group of democratic

States ganging up to deliberately isolate, demonise and abuse a single individual for such a long time and with so little regard for human dignity and the rule of law," Melzer stated.

In other words, the fact that Assange is a persecuted Australian citizen and journalist is beyond doubt, as is the sham character of the "legal process" that he faces.

Wong's contention is also refuted by a lengthy record. On multiple occasions, Australian governments have exercised their diplomatic and legal prerogatives to secure the freedom of a citizen facing state attack abroad. In a number of instances, this has involved compelling foreign governments to terminate "legal processes" not dissimilar to those involving Assange.

* In 2007, the Liberal-National Coalition government brokered a deal with the US for the return of Australian citizen David Hicks from the American military prison in Guantanamo Bay.

* In 2012, Melinda Taylor was appointed by the International Criminal Court to defend Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, after his father's Libyan regime had been overthrown the previous year by a US-NATO military intervention. Taylor was arrested by the US puppet government in Libya and accused of spying. Then Labor Foreign Minister Bob Carr personally travelled to Tripoli to secure her rapid release.

* In 2014, then *Al Jazeera* journalist Peter Greste was convicted by an Egyptian court of espionage. The military regime sentenced him to seven years imprisonment on bogus charges. The following year, Greste was freed after intensive interventions by the Australian government.

* In 2018, Australian documentarian James Ricketson was convicted of espionage by a Cambodian court which handed him a six-year prison sentence. Less than a month later, he was pardoned after an Australian government campaign against the frame-up.

* From September 2018 to November 2020, Australian academic Kylie Moore-Gilbert was imprisoned in Iran on espionage charges that she has said were bogus. The

Australian government conducted a complex global operation for her release, which culminated in a 2020 prisoner exchange that would have involved the cooperation of multiple governments.

* In 2021, Sean Turnell, an Australian economist and former economic policy advisor to State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, was arrested by the military junta that had seized power in Myanmar. In 2022, court proceedings began against Turnell on charges of violating the Official Secrets Act, i.e., espionage.

When a conviction was recorded against Turnell in June, Foreign Minister Wong issued a statement declaring: “The Australian Government rejects this week’s court ruling in Myanmar against Australian Professor Sean Turnell. It is more than sixteen months since Professor Turnell was detained by the Myanmar military. He remains imprisoned in Myanmar, and we will continue to call for his immediate release.”

When Turnell was sentenced to three years imprisonment in September, Wong stated: “Australia rejects the ruling in Myanmar against Professor Turnell and we continue to call for his immediate release. We do not accept the charges against him... We will continue to take every opportunity to advocate strongly for him until he is returned to his family in Australia.”

Through an aggressive campaign, Wong and the government secured Turnell’s freedom last November.

So much for Wong’s claim that Australia cannot, and would not, intervene in the “legal processes” of another country.

What is most striking about the above list are the parallels of virtually all of the cases with Assange’s. In each instance, except for Hicks, accusations or charges of espionage were levelled against journalists, academics or political figures, of a politically-motivated and bogus character.

In each of the cases, most notably that of Turnell, the Australian government rejected the frame-up publicly and took concrete actions to end it. Wong may claim that Britain and the US, unlike Libya, Egypt, Iran and Burma are “rule of law” countries, but in fact the parallels simply underscore that the methods of transparent frame-ups associated with tinpot dictatorships and military juntas have been adopted by the major imperialist powers.

It was not only in Turnell’s case that Wong has shown a willingness to intervene in the affairs of other countries. Throughout her brief tenure as foreign minister, Wong has repeatedly toured the Pacific Islands. There she has lectured, hectored and bullied the leaders of these tiny and impoverished states, insisting that they align with the US and Australia against China.

Last year, when the US began imposing extensive

sanctions against Russia over the Ukraine war, Australia was among the first allies to follow. In an opinion piece at the time, Wong declared that in the defence of human rights, “I start from this basis: to do all we can, in the ways that we can. To be motivated by principle and act with purpose. Just as we bring all aspects of Australian power to our foreign policy, we employ every strategy at our disposal towards upholding human rights, consistent with our values and with our interests.”

For Assange, Wong and her government offer nothing but a shrug of the shoulders and descriptions of an Orwellian frame-up as a just “legal process.”

The reason for this is no riddle. To the extent that Australia, like the other imperialist powers, invokes “human rights,” it is used as a battering ram to advance predatory and aggressive geo-political interests. In the case of the sanctions, that is to further the US-led and provoked war against Russia in Ukraine. In the Indo-Pacific region, the Australian government invoked “human rights” to justify its frontline role in the US preparations for war with China.

The Assange case underscores the utter fraud of such declarations. The persecution of the WikiLeaks publisher demonstrates the fact that the militarist program of the major powers is incompatible with democratic rights. He is being prosecuted to intimidate the mass anti-war sentiment that exists among workers and young people all over the world.

Lessons must be learnt from Wong’s explicit statements that the Labor government will not free Assange. His freedom will not be secured through fawning appeals to right-wing capitalist governments that are preparing even greater war crimes than those exposed by Assange and WikiLeaks.

Rather, it requires an independent political movement of the working class directed against all of the governments and the capitalist profit system they defend. The basis for such a movement exists in the growing struggles of the working class around the world. Such a fight, moreover, is inseparable from the struggle to build a mass international anti-war movement to prevent the horrors of war with Russia and China that are being plotted by American imperialism and its allies, including in the Labor government.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact