

Australian prime minister feigns concern for Assange but defends “national security” secrecy

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Speaking to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) this week, Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese gave his most extensive comments on the plight of Julian Assange since coming to office in May 2022. Albanese feigned concern for the WikiLeaks publisher, but defended the entire anti-democratic framework of “national security” secrecy under which he is being persecuted.

Albanese is in London for the coronation of King Charles. He is also holding discussions with the British government, centring on AUKUS, the aggressive militarist pact between the two countries and the US, aimed at preparing for war against China.

In the same city, Assange has been incarcerated in the maximum-security Belmarsh Prison for more than four years, most of that time on remand. The sole purpose of his detention is to facilitate a US extradition request. The American government is seeking to imprison Assange for up to 175 years for exposing its war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan and its global diplomatic conspiracies.

Albanese’s comments have been presented widely as his “strongest” in defence of Assange. Throughout his prime ministership, Albanese has sought to avoid even mentioning the WikiLeaks publisher, even though Assange is an Australian citizen and the world’s most significant political prisoner.

Albanese’s long silence, which included his tenure as opposition leader, was clearly a product of political hostility to Assange and WikiLeaks. But as demands for the Labor government to defend Assange grew, Albanese and his colleagues changed tack. They could not speak openly about Assange, supposedly because that would compromise unspecified “quiet diplomacy” they were conducting on his behalf.

Documents obtained via freedom of information requests by lawyer Kellie Tranter have not turned up a single trace of this “quiet diplomacy.” That includes correspondence between the relevant Australian government bodies and its

counterparts in the US and Britain.

In the ABC interview, Albanese repeated his refrain that “enough is enough” in relation to the Assange case and “this matter needs to be brought to a close.” These formulations are deliberately ambiguous. They do not even indicate how the case should be “brought to a close,” much less demand that the Biden administration drop the prosecution.

Albanese added: “It needs to be worked through, we’re working through diplomatic channels, we’re making very clear what our position is on Mr Assange’s case.” But again, it is not at all “clear” what the Labor government’s position actually is. Moreover, almost a year of purported “quiet diplomacy” has not altered the course of Assange’s persecution by one iota.

Asked about this, Albanese replied: “I know it’s frustrating. I share the frustration. I can’t do more than make very clear what my position is.” He claimed that the US government was “clear” on Labor’s position, but would not even commit to raising Assange when Biden visits Australia later this month.

Albanese expressed “concern” for Assange’s health, but did not indicate he would do anything about it. It is over three years since hundreds of doctors first warned that the deterioration of Assange’s medical condition could result in his death behind bars, and demanded he be released from Belmarsh Prison.

In the comments that some Assange supporters have presented as most hopeful, Albanese stated: “I think that when Australians look at the circumstances, look at the fact that the person who released the information [Chelsea Manning] is walking freely now, having served some time in incarceration but is now released for a long period of time, then they’ll see that there is a disconnect there.”

Again, this is miles away from a demand that the Biden administration end its prosecution, or a defence of a persecuted Australian journalist. It is more in the manner of, “it is unfortunate that this is occurring, but what can one

do?”

That was, in fact, the entire thrust of Albanese’s remarks. Labor had raised the issue, he claimed, made its “position clear” and Assange’s fate was in the hands of Britain and the US. That is diametrically opposed to the repeated aggressive diplomatic and legal interventions Australian governments have previously mounted to free citizens imprisoned abroad.

The fraudulent character of Albanese’s purported defence of Assange was underscored by the fact that his comments were immediately endorsed by opposition Liberal Party leader Peter Dutton. Dutton, a former policeman, is an extreme right-wing figure, who speaks most openly for the repressive state forces that are seeking Assange’s destruction.

Above all, Albanese’s remarks were aimed at placating the growing public support for the WikiLeaks founder and subordinating it to a “quiet diplomacy” that could not be any quieter. Among some prominent Assange supporters, Albanese’s remarks have had their desired effect. They have proclaimed that the Labor government has now demonstrated its commitment to Assange’s freedom, presenting this as a fact to be celebrated.

Such positions, it must be stated, are a self-deluding fantasy that obstructs a genuine fight for Assange’s freedom, lets those involved in his persecution off the hook and creates favourable conditions for a US extradition. Unfortunately, it is not hard to envisage such individuals proclaiming one “victory” after another, right up until Assange is dispatched to his US persecutors.

Several questions must be posed: If Albanese were waging a determined struggle for Assange’s freedom, would he be fawning over King Charles and British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, the figures who hold the key to Assange’s cell? Would he be preparing to roll out the red carpet for Biden when the US president visits Australia in several weeks? Would he not make demands of the British and US governments, as Australian administrations have when defending other persecuted citizens?

Those who promote the illusion that Assange’s freedom will be granted by one or another benevolent faction of the establishment, without any genuine political struggle, invariably detach the attempted US extradition from its broader political context.

As the WSWS has explained, the US is pursuing Assange, not only as an act of retribution. It is seeking to establish a precedent for the suppression of social and political opposition, especially opposition to war. This forms part of a broader turn to authoritarianism by governments around the world, amid the deepest crisis of the capitalist system since the 1930s.

The imperialist powers are preparing for another catastrophic world war. That is the significance of the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, along with Washington’s confrontation with China, which is viewed as the chief threat to American imperialist hegemony.

Australia, under Albanese, is on the frontlines of these war preparations. Last month, Labor endorsed a Defence Strategic Review, calling for Australia’s largest military build-up since World War II. The review is explicit that this is in preparation for a US-led war against China.

As in the last century, war is incompatible with democratic rights. It requires the suppression of anti-war opposition, because governments are aware that workers and young people are hostile to militarism, and that the program of war will intensify a resurgence of the class struggle that is already well underway.

This basic point was essentially made by Albanese himself.

He stated: “I’m not going to sit here as someone who chairs our National Security Committee and say it’s fine if you publish all of the details about our National Security Committee deliberations because if you did that Australian lives would be put in danger.

“There are real consequences for that... I’m a big supporter of freedom of the press, but with that also comes a responsibility to take into account the consequences of whether information which is not available to the public, what the consequences would be if we had just a free for all.”

That is precisely the position of the Biden administration. Such “national security” limitations on press freedom are determined, not democratically, but by governments and the intelligence agencies themselves.

Albanese’s comments thus legitimised the attempt to prosecute Assange. They also signalled that there will be many more Assanges, in Australia and internationally. The Labor government is currently presiding over several frame-up national security cases, including the prosecution of whistleblower David McBride, who exposed Australian war crimes in Afghanistan.

All this again underscores the fact that Assange’s freedom, and the broader defence of democratic rights, depends on the mobilisation of the working class against the capitalist governments and their program of war and authoritarianism.



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