

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

Oscar Grenfell
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In a gratuitous display of contempt, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese yesterday refused to meet with Stella Assange, the wife of Julian Assange, Australia's most prominent political prisoner. The snub came even as Stella was inside the federal parliament, having travelled to the country to campaign for her husband's freedom.

Asked by independent MP Andrew Wilkie why he would not meet with Mrs Assange, Albanese brushed aside the question, declaring: "Who I meet with is determined by the priorities that my office has."

Over the past month, Albanese has met with a multitude of business tycoons. He attended the wedding of right-wing radio shock jock Kyle Sandilands, alongside a convicted drug dealer and reputed crime boss. Most recently, Albanese fawned over US President Joe Biden in Tokyo on the weekend. Biden is overseeing the attempt to extradite Assange from Britain, and imprison him for 175 years for exposing American war crimes.

Albanese proclaimed in parliament, he was not interested in meeting Assange's wife, which he said would be akin to a "demonstration" and "grandstanding." Albanese sought to dress up the refusal by reiterating vague comments that "enough is enough" in relation to the Assange case, and he cannot see that anything is served by the WikiLeaks founder's continued incarceration.

While Albanese claims he has made this position clear to the US administration, there is no evidence of that, including in extensive correspondence obtained under freedom of information requests between various American and Australian government bodies. Labor continues to give carte blanche to the very administration seeking Assange's destruction.

The obvious question is: if Albanese won't even meet with Assange's wife, a basic act of respect and courtesy that he has extended to thousands of others over the course of his year in office, why would anyone think the prime minister is waging a fight for the imprisoned Australian journalist's freedom behind closed doors?

As part of her visit to Australia, Stella Assange yesterday

addressed the National Press Club in Canberra.

The speech was a powerful plea for Assange's freedom, an exposure of the draconian conditions under which he is detained in Britain's maximum-security Belmarsh Prison and a clear outline of the fundamental issues of democratic rights at stake in the attempted prosecution of her husband.

Stella noted a groundswell of support for Assange. She stated: "I would like to thank the overwhelming dedication of the Australian people, who have brought about a sea change in awareness and solidarity for Julian's plight. This unity in support for my husband is a source of enormous encouragement for our family. It nurtures Julian's ability to continue on."

She added: "The reality is that to regain his freedom, Julian needs the support of his home country. This is a political case, and it needs a political solution."

In discussing her presence in Australia, and also what she speaks about with her husband, Stella stressed Assange's connection to Australia. He had been raised in the country, and had shared his extensive memories, from surfing in Byron Bay, to beekeeping in Melbourne's Dandenong Ranges and riding a horse in the New South Wales Northern Rivers.

"That's how I imagine Julian when he is free," she said.

"Today, Julian's feet only ever feel the hard, dull, even cement on the prison floor. When he goes to the yard for exercise, there is no grass, no sand. Just the bitumen pavement surrounded by cameras and layers of razor wire overhead.

"I can tell you exactly what Julian is doing right now. It is 3 a.m. in London. Julian is lying in his cell, probably awake and struggling to fall asleep. It's where he spends twenty-two hours a day, every day. Julian's cell is about three by two meters. He uses some of his books to block out the unpleasant draft coming from the window in the cold winter nights."

Stella outlined the draconian security procedures required for her and her two children to visit their father. They had to pass innumerable checkpoints, searches and scans for their

visits. The children had only ever seen their father in the inhospitable prison visiting room. For the elder of the two, now six years old, “Prisons feature in his dreams and his nightmares.”

Turning to the case, Stella stated: “A 175 year sentence is a living death sentence. A prospect so desperate that the English court found that it would drive him to take his own life, rather than live forever in hell. We must do everything we can to ensure that Julian never, ever, sets foot in a US prison. Extradition in this case is a matter of life and death.”

She explained: “For most people, Julian is a symbol. A symbol of staggering injustice, because he is in prison on trumped up charges for exposing the crimes of others. A symbol because he faces a bewildering 175 year sentence for publishing the truth. A symbol of a sophisticated form of state violence dressed up in complexity and indirection that not even Franz Kafka could have imagined.

“For the press and the public, Julian’s case is the most brutal attack on press freedom that the Western world has seen in the last 70 years. A foreign government is using the political offences in its statute books to indict a foreign national abroad, because of what he or she published in a different country.

“Accurate, damning publications exposing their war crimes. If sovereignty is to mean anything, if jurisdiction is a proper legal and political reality, the case against Julian cannot be understood as anything other than an absurdity.”

Despite the dire threat to press freedom, the address was largely subjected to a media boycott. Only a handful of nationally-recognised journalists attended. Several prominent publications sent junior staff, fresh out of university, armed only with arrogance and obnoxious questions based on the slanders that have been used to attack Assange.

The shameful display underscored the fact that broad sections of the official media function as nothing more than state propagandists. While they are cheering on each new step in Australia’s integration into the US preparations for war with China, this corrupted layer is hostile to a genuine journalist who exposed war crimes.

In the Q&A, Stella, together with Jennifer Robinson, one of Assange’s lawyers, elaborated on the issues in the case.

Two questions repeated the fraud that WikiLeaks had in 2016 received material from the Democratic National Committee via Russia. The questioners, despite professing to be journalists, were hostile to the 2016 publications, even though they contained true and newsworthy information.

In response, Stella emphasised what had been revealed. The 2016 publications had shown that the campaign of Hillary Clinton had subverted the Democratic Party primaries to scuttle the candidacy of Bernie Sanders. This

was carried out, even though internal DNC polling showed Sanders would defeat Donald Trump, whereas Clinton would not.

More broadly, Stella emphasised the core precept that journalists have a responsibility to publish information that is in the public interest. To suppress such information would be a violation of journalistic ethics.

In reply to another question, Robinson noted the historic significance of the 2010 publications for which Assange faces prosecution. They had exposed massive war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, including thousands of civilian deaths that had been covered up by the US military. For those very same releases, for which he now faces 175 years imprisonment, Assange and WikiLeaks in 2011 received a Gold Walkley award, the highest honor in Australian journalism.

Both Stella and Robinson thanked Albanese and the Labor government for their statements and noted that this marked a shift from previous administrations. There is no question that the tepid statements of the Labor officials reflect, in an extremely limited and distorted form, the vast popular support for the WikiLeaks publisher.

However, all experience has shown that no confidence can be placed in the capitalist governments, to extend a benevolent hand and free Assange. Albanese was a senior member of the Gillard Labor government, which in 2010 and 2011 actively participated in the persecution of Assange.

The current Labor government, moreover, is dramatically escalating Australia’s frontline role in the US preparations for war against China. This policy is incompatible with democratic rights and is being accompanied by a slew of reactionary “national security” prosecutions within Australia, directly overseen by Labor.

As the Socialist Equality Party has stressed, an Australian government will only fulfill its obligations to free Assange if it is compelled to do so by mass opposition from below. That means the development of a movement of the working class, against the Labor government and its program of war, austerity and authoritarianism.



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