

Australian Labor MP calls for Assange to plead guilty to frame-up US charges

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In an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald* on Wednesday, Julian Hill, a Labor Party member of federal parliament effectively called for Julian Assange to plead guilty to US charges over his exposure of massive war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Hill presented this as the only likely means of ending Assange's protracted incarceration in Britain and his looming dispatch to the US, where the WikiLeaks publisher would face a stacked national security trial and up to 175 years imprisonment.

The comments are highly significant. Hill has been the most outspoken of all Labor MPs in his purported defence of Assange. His statements condemning the attempted US prosecution and demanding Assange's freedom have given succor to claims that at least a segment of the Labor Party defends Assange and democratic rights more broadly.

But now, the jig is up. Hill, like the Labor government as a whole, has washed his hands of any responsibility for Assange's plight. Nor is Hill or the government hostile in the slightest to the Biden administration, which is overseeing the legal lynching of Assange, an Australian citizen. On the contrary, Labor is bending over backwards to accommodate every demand of the Biden administration, above all relating to its war drive against China.

So who, according to Hill, is responsible for ending the persecution? Essentially Assange himself. He must bow to the US or he will languish in prison for the rest of his days.

"The reality is that Australia cannot force the United States to [release Assange], and if they refuse, then no Australian should judge Mr Assange if he chooses to just cut a deal and end this matter," Hill stated.

"His health is deteriorating and if the US refuses to do the right thing and drop the charges then no one would think less of him for crossing his fingers and toes, pleading guilty to whatever nonsense he has to and getting the hell out of there."

The presentation is cynical in the extreme, as is everything associated with Hill, a lifelong career politician desperate to clamber from the backbench into the higher ranks of a pro-war, pro-business government.

Behind the references to Assange's health, the message is clear enough: "The Australian government has done all it can, or will do; you're on your own, plead guilty or face the wrath of the Americans."

The main point is that what the Australian government has done on Assange's behalf is remarkably little, if anything at all. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has made very sporadic public statements, along the lines of "enough is enough" in the Assange case and it is "time for the matter to be brought to a close."

Albanese claims to have made these positions "clear" to the Biden

administration, even though they are deliberately vague and ambiguous positions to start with. There is no record of such communications, so the only basis on which to believe they even occurred is trust in Albanese's assertions.

Hill's statements make explicit what has been plain to observers for some time. To the extent that Albanese has actually suggested to the Biden administration an end to the prosecution of Assange, he has been rebuffed. One can be sure that if the exchanges occurred, the advocacy on Assange's behalf was as timid as is humanly possible.

Government representatives have noted that Assange is subject to "legal proceedings" involving the US and Britain, i.e., the extradition attempt, to which Australia is not a party. This, they claim, complicates any intervention.

But there is not the slightest obstacle to Albanese, Hill or anyone else branding the US case as an infamous frame-up, publicly demanding that it end and warning of repercussions if it does not. They haven't made such statements because they don't want to.

Such diplomatic and political interventions have been conducted by Australian administrations before, to pressure foreign governments to end the persecution of an Australian citizen and release them. But they have almost always been "enemy states" in the crosshairs of US and Australian imperialism, such as Iran, Myanmar and the like.

The Labor government is giving the Biden administration everything it wants, from signing a \$368 billion deal to acquire nuclear-powered submarines under the militarist AUKUS pact with Britain and the US, to allowing the American military to station its most potent and nuclear-capable strike assets in northern Australia. Labor is completing Australia's transformation into a frontline state of the advanced US-led preparations for war with China.

The US has rejected any suggestion of freeing Assange, but all of this proceeds entirely unhindered. Hill's comments were made in the lead-up to Australia-US Ministerial Consultations, with the Labor government rolling out the red carpet for Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin this week.

The timing was not accidental. Hill was preempting any suggestion that Labor would raise the issue of Assange with these top officials of the Biden administration. The case was closed, the ball is in Assange's court.

In the *Herald* article, Hill revealed that he attempted to visit Assange in Belmarsh Prison on July 1. The prison authorities effectively scuttled the meeting with bureaucratic obstruction, in another indication of the draconian conditions under which Assange is being held.

But that is not the most significant aspect of the matter. The most interesting thing was what Hill wanted to discuss with Assange. He

told the *Herald* “I’m not privy to the negotiations that may be occurring but frankly the parliamentarians would back him to the hilt in cutting a deal if that’s what he chose. That’s a message that I wanted to convey personally and hear from him what he wants.”

It is hard to read such statements as anything but highly sinister.

Hill presents the issue as though he would be giving his approval to Assange to strike a plea deal. But why does Assange need the personal approval of a little known member of parliament? More generally, who in the world cares what a Labor backbencher thinks about any matter of import?

The unmistakable impression is that as with his public comments, Hill was delivering not his sympathy and approval, but sending a clear message from the Labor government. That message is essentially that all avenues for your freedom are now foreclosed, your only option is to plead guilty.

The intention of Hill’s visit casts grave doubt on his purported concern for Assange’s health. It is well established that Assange suffers severe depression as a consequence of what former United Nations official Nils Melzer described as the “psychological torture” of the WikiLeaks publisher. It is also known that Assange has been acutely suicidal in the recent past.

Would a Labor parliamentarian, who has previously been outspoken in defence of Assange, visiting the WikiLeaks founder to tell him that the government could and would do no more on his behalf improve Assange’s medical condition or worsen it? To ask the question is to answer it.

There is little doubt that Hill’s proposed visit was cleared with the Labor leadership, including Albanese himself. But a question presents itself. Has Hill discussed this new line, on the desirability of a plea deal, with any representatives of the American government?

It is on the record that Hill and other parliamentarians held at least one closed-door meeting with US ambassador to Australia Caroline Kennedy, to discuss the Assange case. Nothing has ever been reported of Kennedy’s remarks, including by Hill.

The line on a plea deal directly serves the interests of the Biden administration. For Assange to plead guilty would be the best of all possible worlds for the White House. The decade-long pursuit of Assange, which included innumerable breaches of the law, would be retroactively legitimised. Assange and WikiLeaks would be forever neutralised.

The American state would have a far-reaching precedent for attacks on journalism, and anti-war opposition, without the political headache of an extradition and prosecution that would inflame the widespread support that exists for Assange.

Of course it remains entirely possible that the discussion of a possible plea deal is simply a ruse, designed to lull Assange’s supporters into complacency and to create favorable political conditions for an extradition. Moreover, if an onerous deal were offered, and Assange were to reject it, he could be blamed for the extradition and prosecution, a position that the comments of Hill already hint at.

And aside from all this, the details of a hypothetical deal are entirely unknown. There is every possibility that Assange would have to accept some term of imprisonment, even if served in another country such as Britain or Australia. A plea deal that required his incarceration in the US could be simply another route to perpetual imprisonment.

Perhaps knowing that he was on thin ice, Hill, in his comments to the *Herald*, sought to turn the tables. It was not the Labor government that one should be angry with, for abandoning Assange to his fate.

Instead, Hill explained: “It worries me greatly that there are some Assange supporters who would rather he be a martyr than a free man, but ultimately it’s important for everyone to respect what Julian himself chooses to do.”

In that category Hill presumably includes his opponents on the left, such as this publication. But his line could also be applied to figures inside the Assange camp. Assange’s Australian lawyer Stephen Kenny, for instance, has repeatedly condemned suggestions of a plea deal, insisting that Assange being forced into such a situation must be avoided at all costs, above all by the Labor government undertaking its political and legal obligation to secure his freedom.

Hill’s cynical remark about such people wishing for Assange to be martyred is an obvious attempt to silence statements like those of Kenny.

It is also part of his broader attempt to create a new binary for supporters of Assange. The fight for an end to the prosecution and for Assange’s unconditional freedom are excluded. The choices, based on the actions of Hill’s own government, are a guilty plea or permanent incarceration. And Hill has the temerity to claim that these impossible alternatives, for which his administration bears responsibility, are an exercise in “respect” for “what Julian himself chooses to do”!

Certain lessons must be drawn from Hill’s evolution. It underscores the bankruptcy of a whole perspective. Hill was for an extended period one of the poster boys for an approach on the part of the official Assange campaign that has consisted of lobbying official politicians. But such support as has been gained has proven to be token, for the record and easily dispensed with.

In the end, the outcome of such lobbying exercises is not to shift the political establishment to the left, i.e., towards a genuine defence of Assange, but to shift to the right oneself in a desperate effort to curry favor and avoid embarrassing potentially powerful allies.

The real powerful ally in the fight for Assange’s freedom, the defence of all democratic rights and the fight against imperialist war is the international working class. As it wages a proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, and prepares for a disastrous conflict with China in the Indo-Pacific, the Biden administration is also at war with its population. But they are beginning to fight back, in a powerful series of strikes involving not only key sections of the industrial working class, but also tens of thousands of actors and writers.

It is to that emerging movement that defenders of Assange and civil liberties must turn.



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