

Australian parliamentarians lobby for Assange in Washington

Oscar Grenfell

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A cross-party group of six Australian members of parliament travelled to Washington last week to lobby for an end to the prosecution of WikiLeaks publisher and Australian citizen Julian Assange.

The trip took place under conditions where Assange is closer to being extradited to the United States than ever before. Having spent years in the maximum-security Belmarsh Prison in London, Assange has just one route of appeal left within the British legal system. A date has yet to be set for a hearing to determine whether that appeal will be allowed to proceed, but Assange's wife, Stella Assange, has indicated that it will likely occur soon.

The visit is also after the prospect that the Biden administration is preparing to dispense with the prosecution has been dashed. For months, there has been chatter about the possibility of Biden offering Assange a plea deal, but last month former British diplomat and whistleblower Craig Murray, who is close to WikiLeaks, indicated that there had been no approach by the US authorities to Assange's legal representatives.

As the Australian parliamentarians arrived in the US last Wednesday, a full page advertisement appeared in the *Washington Post* calling for an end to the prosecution. It was signed by 63 federal Australian politicians from all the major parties.

The ad stated: "Together with a large and growing number of Australians, we believe it is wrong in principle for Mr. Assange to be pursued under the Espionage Act (1917), and that it was a political decision to bring the prosecution in the first place." Assange has "already suffered," and continuation of the attempted prosecution is "unjust."

The ad recalled previous statements by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, who has said "enough is enough" in the Assange case and it should be "brought to a close." It concluded by declaring: "We believe the right and best course of action would be for the United States'

Department of Justice to cease its pursuit and prosecution of Julian Assange," or at the very least to abandon the current extradition proceedings.

The six who took part in the visit were former Nationals leader and previous deputy prime minister Barnaby Joyce, Liberal senator Alex Antic, independent Monique Ryan, Labor MP Tony Zappia, and Greens senators Peter Whish-Wilson and David Shoebridge.

The MPs held a closed-door meeting with representatives of the Department of Justice, which is directly overseeing the attempt to prosecute Assange for his exposure of US-led war crimes. Little has been revealed about the contents of that discussion.

The parliamentary group received some media coverage, including several news reports on their visit and television interviews. They made various points about the implications of the US prosecution for civil liberties and for democratic rights.

In an appearance on *Democracy Now!*, for instance, Whish-Wilson stated: "[W]e feel that his extradition process that's underway is a very dangerous global precedent for press freedoms. It's an extraterritorial overreach by the US government, and not something you would expect from, you know, the beacon of global democracy. With all respect to your listeners, it's something you might expect from a totalitarian regime."

They also repeatedly noted the widespread popular support for Assange in Australia, where substantial majorities in polls have indicated that they want the WikiLeaks publisher to be free. That popular sentiment was undoubtedly the impetus for the visit, with the parliamentarians conscious of a groundswell of anger over the prosecution.

Assange's family and close supporters were no doubt pleased that the visit occurred. It did have the benefit of again raising Assange's plight, which has been subjected to frequent and extended media blackouts in Australia,

Britain and the US itself.

To be uncritical, though, would be a mistake. The tour by the career politicians had nothing to do with combining the support for Assange with developing public opposition to social inequality, war or the broader assault on democratic rights.

Needless to say, these representatives of big business did not address meetings of American workers about the need to defend Assange. They would not have had anything to say to such an audience, or any basis upon which to make an appeal.

Instead, the tour was framed in generally right-wing terms. The importance of the “friendship” between the US and Australia was repeatedly emphasised. That is a reference to the militarist alliance between the two countries, which currently centres on advanced preparations for a catastrophic war against China.

Notably, the Greens MPs, Shoebridge and Wish-Wilson, were as fulsome as anyone in their praise of this “friendship.” That underscores the fraudulent character of their occasional nationalist posturing against aspects of the alliance, especially the \$368 billion AUKUS agreement for Australia to acquire a fleet of nuclear-powered attack submarines from the US and Britain.

Rather, the MPs pitched Assange’s persecution as a potential barrier to the deepening of the war drive. They warned that it could incite popular hostility to the alliance in Australia, and be used by China and other US rivals to expose Washington’s fraudulent invocations of human rights and democracy.

The references to a supposedly broad “cross-party delegation” cannot obscure the fact that this group was a rather motley crew.

The Labor government claims to have made representations in private to the US for an end to the prosecution of Assange. To the extent that those assertions are true, the limited representations have clearly been rebuffed. Labor, whose commitment to Assange’s liberty was always very tenuous and expressed in the most tepid form, has simply dropped the matter. Albanese and other leaders of the government have not mentioned the WikiLeaks founder publicly for months.

It is no surprise that the only Labor representative was Tony Zappia, a backbencher with a very limited public profile.

The complicity of the Labor government in Assange’s persecution has helped right-wing figures pose as defenders of Assange and democratic rights. Alex Antic is on the far-right wing of the Liberal Party. Joyce is also a

reactionary, whose political record is associated with the persecution of refugees and other vulnerable layers, as well as aggressive support for the interests of the country’s largest corporations. Both figures, in other words, have nothing to do with the fight for civil liberties.

The implications were made clear by two incidents.

In at least one interview, Joyce used the Assange case to pursue a bizarre vendetta against US actors Johnny Depp and Amber Heard. He has, for years, denounced the pair for allegedly bringing two dogs to Australia without declaring them to customs. Joyce said that just as the US would not accept the extradition of Depp and Heard for that purported wrongdoing, Australians should not accede to Assange’s dispatch to Washington.

The comments only served to lower the tone and downplay the implications of the US pursuit of Assange.

More significant was the fact that the six parliamentarians, including the Greens MPs, held a private meeting with Marjorie Taylor Greene who has nothing to do with defending democratic rights. The Republican was a key backer of Donald Trump’s attempted coup on January 6, 2021. Her other credentials include denouncing Black Lives Matter as a “domestic terrorist organisation” and declaring that Jewish-controlled space lasers were responsible for wildfires in California.

The MPs, in other words, sought to tap into the sewer of the American fascistic right. This is clearly not the constituency for defending the democratic rights of an anti-war publisher.

The tour, in its own way, highlighted the dead-end of backroom diplomacy and politicking. After more than 12 years of the US pursuit of Assange, this was all the Australian political establishment could come up with.

It underscores the fact that a real fight for Assange’s freedom must be based in the working class, the overwhelming mass of the population, which is being propelled into struggle against the very governments that are persecuting him.



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