

Official documents show Australian government doing nothing to free Assange

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With Prime Minister Anthony Albanese in Washington for high-level talks, illusions that his Labor government would do anything to free WikiLeaks publisher and Australian citizen Julian Assange have been dashed.

There is not the slightest indication that Albanese will raise Assange's plight when he meets with US President Joe Biden. The American government is proceeding with its attempt to extradite Assange from Britain, and prosecute him on Espionage Act charges that carry a maximum sentence of 175 years imprisonment.

Instead, Albanese's trip centres on full support for the eruption of militarist violence being spearheaded by Washington. That includes full support for the unfolding Israeli genocide in Gaza and associated American threats against Iran; continued backing for Washington's war against Russia in Ukraine, and an aggressive commitment to US-led preparations for a catastrophic war against China.

That this agenda is diametrically opposed to the fight to secure the freedom of an anti-war publisher, who exposed US and allied war crimes in Afghanistan, is obvious.

Further evidence of Labor's refusal to defend Assange was provided last Thursday by former independent senator Rex Patrick. In an article co-authored with Philip Dorling and published by *Michael West Media*, Patrick reported on the results of recent freedom of information (FOI) requests for Australian government documents relating to Assange.

The headline sharply summed up what those documents exposed: "Jail, then jail, and more jail. Labor's Assange strategy revealed."

Patrick and Dorling note that Labor's Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus has postured as a supporter of media freedom, but has said hardly anything about Assange's plight during his more than year-long tenure.

They report: "Perhaps the first glaring thing that comes from the latest FOI disclosure on the US espionage prosecution of Julian Assange is just how little Australia's first law officer has been engaged with the matter.

"A request for all briefings and submissions provided to Dreyfus by his department between June 2022 and

September 2023 netted just five documents; only one ministerial submission, two parliamentary question time briefs, one 'hot topic' brief, and another set of talking points. Five documents across fifteen months."

The other striking thing about the list of documents is that they appear to have little or nothing to do with the complex legal intricacies associated with trying to liberate a publisher being framed up on major criminal charges in the US. They seem to all relate, primarily, to public relations, i.e., the appearance that the government is doing something, as opposed to the government actually taking action.

The documents contain no indication of substantive diplomatic activity, directed towards encouraging the US to end the prosecution of Assange. Nor do FOI documents obtained from the Australian embassy in the US.

Patrick and Dorling write: "Prime Minister Albanese's platitudes that the case has gone on too long and should be brought to a close are shown to be just that, platitudes. One of the Government's standard talking points in Dreyfus' briefings is to say that 'not all foreign affairs are best conducted with a loud hailer.' In this case, however, the documents provide no evidence that any quiet conversations have been had, either."

The most substantive internal government document to have been released, relating to Assange, remains a June 2022 departmental briefing note by Dreyfus.

The sole references in that document to any action by Labor relate to a period *after* Assange has been extradited to the US, tried before a national-security kangaroo court and convicted. Under those conditions, the document floats the possibility of a transfer that could see Assange dispatched from a US prison to an Australian one.

Assange's family, together with medical experts, has warned he would not survive extradition to the US. A successful prosecution of the WikiLeaks founder, for publishing true documents exposing war crimes, would be a body blow to freedom of the press and free speech, not just within the US but globally. It would set a precedent for the US, and any number of autocratic regimes, to charge

journalists in absentia and seek their prosecution for merely publishing material.

The dry Labor briefing is indifferent to the vast implications of Assange's extradition, both for the WikiLeaks founder himself and for democratic rights generally.

Even within that framework, the document is miserable—its forecasts of a transfer are not worth the paper they are written on. “[W]e won’t know the circumstances, the sentence or the proposed US terms of transfer,” until Assange’s conviction in an American court, the briefing notes.

The briefing does not even indicate that the attorney-general would necessarily agree to such a transfer. It remarks that his approval would be necessary, and then states that it would be “inappropriate to pre-empt this through any sort of in-principle informal decision...”

As Patrick and Dorling state, there is no indication that the Labor government’s position, of essentially accepting Assange’s extradition and inevitable conviction, has changed in the slightest.

Instead, they state: “What the Attorney-General’s briefings reveal is a firmly established position not to engage on the Assange case until after he has been extradited to the United States, put to trial, convicted, sentenced and has exhausted all appeal rights. Only then does the Australian Government think it might play a role. Only then will the Attorney-General consider the possibility that Assange might be transferred to serve a sentence of imprisonment in Australia.”

Even if all this were to come to pass, the documents still indicate that Assange would arrive in Australia a prisoner, and would remain a prisoner.

Important lessons must be drawn from the fresh confirmation of the Labor government’s complicity in the persecution of Assange.

Patrick and Dorling write: “Despite 15 months of lobbying by Australian MPs and Senators across the political spectrum... the released briefings show the Government is engaged in no substantive action on the Assange case...”

What is revealed is the bankruptcy of an orientation to securing democratic rights, including Assange’s freedom, through backroom lobbying efforts of capitalist governments and parliamentarians. This approach, which has dominated the official WikiLeaks defence efforts for the past five years, has failed, precisely because governments around the world, including in Australia, are hurtling towards ever-greater authoritarianism and repression.

The Labor government, for instance, is proceeding with the prosecution of whistleblower David McBride, who faces life imprisonment for exposing Australian war crimes in

Afghanistan. While it claims it cannot intervene more directly in the Assange case, because he is in Britain and is being sought by the US, no similar constraints, real or imagined, exist in McBride’s case. Dreyfus could end the prosecution whenever he wanted to.

Patrick and Dorling also state: “Curiously, Australia’s extremely close ties with the United States, now reinforced by the AUKUS partnership, appear to inhibit rather than facilitate action on the Assange case. The Australian side won’t move beyond platitudes, and the US side, most recently through Secretary of State Antony Blinken, has publicly refused to consider changing course...”

Their reference to this being a curiosity reflects the illusion, among some Assange supporters, that Australia’s alliance with the US could have been leveraged to secure the WikiLeaks’ founder’s release.

However, the US-Australia alliance has the character of a conspiracy against the population, both in Australia, and increasingly, throughout the region. Its central function at present is to advance Washington’s massive confrontation with China, to which Australian imperialism and the Labor government are fully committed.

Such a militarist and pro-war program is incompatible with a defence of Assange. In fact it requires a further assault on anti-war sentiment, as recently exemplified in the attempts of state and federal Labor governments to illegalise protests opposing the Israeli genocide in Gaza.

The key lesson is that Assange’s freedom will only be won through an insurgent movement from below. The fight for his liberty must be linked to the development of a powerful international anti-war movement of the working class. As the eruption of imperialist violence and the crackdown on civil liberties demonstrates, such a movement must be directed against the entire capitalist social order, which is plunging humanity towards barbarism.



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