

Australian parliament passes a vague motion on Julian Assange

Mike Head
14 February 2024

In an attempt to assuage continuing popular outrage over the 15-year persecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, the Australian House of Representatives yesterday voted 86-to-42 for an ambiguous resolution.

The motion did not call for the dropping of the reactionary US Espionage Act charges against Assange. Instead, it said that the House “underlines the importance of the UK and USA bringing the matter to a close so that Mr Assange can return home to his family in Australia.”

This is the latest in a series of efforts by the Albanese government and a “cross-party” group of parliamentarians, including from the Liberal-National opposition, as well as the Greens and others, to put on the appearance of seeking Assange’s freedom, while not criticising, let alone opposing, the protracted operation by the US and UK governments to lock away Assange for life.

The resolution was proposed by independent MP Andrew Wilkie with the evident agreement of the Labor government, whose ministers and other members voted for it. The move appeared to be carefully orchestrated. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese was seen congratulating Wilkie on the floor of the assembly.

Since 2019, when British police illegally dragged Assange out of the Ecuadorian embassy in London, where he had been granted political asylum, he has been incarcerated in intolerable conditions. He has been held mostly in solitary confinement, in Belmarsh Prison, one of Britain’s harshest, despite never having faced trial or been convicted of anything, while the US government seeks his extradition to face charges that could result in him being sentenced to 175 years in prison.

In Australia and globally, Assange is widely regarded as a hero for publishing thousands of secret diplomatic cables and other documents that exposed some of the war crimes, mass surveillance and political-military conspiracies committed in the Middle East and around the world by the US ruling class and its imperialist allies.

As a result of the 2010 and 2011 work of WikiLeaks, some corporate media organisations internationally published parts of the information, which showed that the US military engaged in atrocities as part of the 2001 and 2003 invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, including the “Collateral Murder” video, showing a US helicopter gunship killing journalists and other civilians.

Next Tuesday, Assange will commence a last-ditch two-day hearing of an appeal to the UK High Court against the UK government’s green light for his extradition. If that fails, he could be extradited to the US within days. His lawyers have lodged an appeal to the European Court of Human Rights, but it is unclear whether the UK government would even accept the European court’s jurisdiction in the case.

Speaking to yesterday’s motion, Wilkie said it was “an unprecedented show of political support for Mr Assange by the Australian parliament.” It would “send a very powerful signal to Washington that Australia stands as one saying that this matter has gone on long enough.”

But the resolution echoed numerous previous utterances by the Albanese government, pretending to be asking the Biden administration to “bring this matter to an end.”

During the perfunctory half-hour set-piece “debate,” Labor backbencher Josh Wilson provided a glimpse of the political motivations behind the resolution. He

began his contribution by declaring: “Make no mistake, the Australian community wants to see Julian Assange go free.”

Conscious of the anger among workers and youth over Assange’s brutal mistreatment, the Labor government is seeking to cover its back by supporting a supposed “free Assange” resolution before next week’s British legal proceedings.

This is not the first time that such a manoeuvre has been made. Last September some 60 Australian federal politicians urged the US Department of Justice to drop Assange’s prosecution, warning of “a sharp and sustained outcry in Australia” if he were extradited.

At the same time, the government and the rest of the parliamentary establishment is just as anxious not to call into question Australian imperialism’s commitment to its military alliances with the US and the UK, above all, the AUKUS pact against China.

In his remarks, Wilson went out of his way to praise the US and UK, along with Australia, as “liberal democracies at their best.” He insisted, on behalf of the co-convenors of the parliamentary Assange group, that they had “always found an openness in the United States and in the United Kingdom to have these conversations” about Assange.

These “liberal democracies” are fully committed to the intensifying US war operations and associated crimes, which vastly deepen those previously laid bare by WikiLeaks. That includes the US-NATO-instigated war against Russia in Ukraine, the US-backed and supplied Israeli genocide in Gaza, the US bombings in Syria, Jordan and Yemen, and the operations to provoke a war against China.

Wilkie’s resolution emphasised the bipartisan character of the pitch being made. It noted that “both the Australian Government and Opposition have publicly stated that this matter has gone on for too long.”

Nevertheless, opposition leader Peter Dutton and his fellow Coalition frontbenchers ultimately voted against the motion, which included a statement that the material published by WikiLeaks “revealed shocking evidence of misconduct by the USA.”

The corporate media uncritically reported the parliamentary resolution as confirming that the Labor government was working behind the scenes to free Assange. References were made to Albanese’s claim

last October that he had raised the treatment of Assange in private talks with US President Joe Biden.

That charade imploded when Albanese was asked about it on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Insiders” television program. The interviewer, David Speers, asked: “Time that Joe Biden stepped in and ordered that the case be dropped?”

Albanese replied, emphatically: “No. Joe Biden doesn’t interfere with the Department of Justice. Joe Biden is a president who understands the separation of the judicial system from the political system.”

This confirmed that the Labor government has long signalled that it will do nothing to block Assange’s dispatch to the US. The pleas of “enough is enough” and “this matter should be brought to a conclusion” are a façade, aimed at diverting the popular support for Assange behind dangerous illusions in the very forces responsible for his torment.

What the Biden administration intends for Assange was shown on February 1, when alleged WikiLeaks whistleblower Joshua Schulte was sentenced to 40 years’ imprisonment over Espionage Act and other “national security” offenses. The 35-year-old was convicted in 2022 of transmitting documents to WikiLeaks, exposing the Central Intelligence Agency’s hacking and global spying operations.

Schulte had already served more than five years in barbaric conditions, under Special Administrative Measures—a form of detention involving almost total isolation and sensory deprivation. That is the kind of dungeon into which Assange will be thrown, unless he is freed.

Assange’s freedom requires the mobilisation of the working class in Australia, the UK, US and globally in his defence. There is immense anti-war sentiment. Around the world, masses of people are engaging in protests against the genocide in Gaza. This opposition must be fused with a movement fighting for Assange’s freedom, against all the governments and the capitalist system responsible for militarism and war.



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