

Despite briefing by Julian Assange's lawyer, Australian politicians still refuse to defend him

By Mike Head
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This week has provided an important experience for those hoping that stepped-up lobbying of parliamentary leaders would produce a shift in the Australian establishment's refusal to oppose the US-led persecution of Julian Assange, an Australian citizen.

On Wednesday, Assange's London-based lawyer, Jennifer Robinson, had meetings in Canberra with politicians, including a "working dinner" with Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese. It followed a 10-minute private meeting the previous week between Albanese and Assange's father, John Shipton.

Inside parliament house, Robinson gave a detailed briefing to about 30 members of parliament and staff members, explaining in the clearest possible terms what is at stake for media freedom and democratic rights in the Trump administration's Espionage Act charges against the WikiLeaks founder. The briefing reportedly included MPs from the ruling Liberal-National Coalition, as well as Labor, Greens and "crossbenchers."

As Robinson explained, the vendetta against Assange began in 2010 when WikiLeaks published the devastating material leaked by the courageous whistleblower Chelsea Manning. The exposures included the infamous "Collateral Murder" video, 90,000 incriminating reports on the US-led invasion of Afghanistan and 400,000 on the Iraq War, 800 Guantanamo Bay detainee assessment briefs, and 250,000 secret US State Department cables revealing illegal killings, coup plots, regime-change operations and mass surveillance.

This week's intensive efforts in Canberra, however, failed to convince any of the politicians to oppose the Trump administration's application to extradite the

WikiLeaks founder to face charges that could see him jailed for life, or even executed, for revealing these US crimes.

Despite agreeing to a meal with Robinson at a Canberra restaurant, Albanese issued no media release after the event, and refused to respond to a request by the WWSWS for any comment.

Labor's shadow attorney-general, Mark Dreyfus, who met Robinson separately, continued to back the operation to railroad Assange into a US prison. "Mr Assange's detention and any legal proceedings are a matter of current consideration in accordance with the British justice system and it would be inappropriate to comment while that process is underway," Dreyfus said.

Assange's treatment by this "British justice system" has been a legal charade, clearly driven by the political agenda of the UK and US governments. Assange was illegally dragged out of London's Ecuadorian embassy, where he was granted political asylum in 2012, and rapidly sentenced to 50 weeks' imprisonment on minor bail charges, followed by the British government's almost instant authorisation of the US extradition application.

Albanese and Dreyfus remained lockstep with the government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison. Morrison's office informed the media on Wednesday that he would not raise the issue of Assange when he hosts US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defence Secretary Mike Esper at annual Australia-United States Ministerial (Ausmin) talks in Sydney this weekend.

Morrison took the same position in June, when he refused to mention Assange's plight when he met with US President Donald Trump at the G20 summit in

Osaka.

During her parliament house briefing, Robinson distributed a fact sheet that demonstrated that the US was seeking to prosecute Assange for “regular journalistic activity.” She warned: “Mr. Assange is at great risk of human rights abuses should he be extradited to the US, therefore urgent political representations are highly appropriate and necessary in this matter given Australia’s human rights obligations.”

The lawyer’s exposure of this legal travesty was underscored on the same day when a US judge dismissed a Democratic National Committee civil suit against Assange, ruling unequivocally that WikiLeaks’ publication of leaks was essential journalistic activity protected by the US Constitution’s First Amendment.

Yet none of the MPs who attended Robinson’s briefing made a public comment, and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the corporate media largely blacked out the event and the lack of any response.

The silence included Greens Senator Peter Whish-Wilson, who co-sponsored the parliament house briefing with Labor backbench MP Susan Templeman.

After the briefing, Whish-Wilson stood beside Robinson at a media conference and said Morrison “must raise the issue of Assange” with Pompeo and Esper. “He must be brought home,” Whish-Wilson stated.

But neither Whish-Wilson nor Templeman issued any statement of support for Assange or any call for the government to intervene. Questioned by the WSWS, Whish-Wilson’s spokesperson said the Greens were being “low-key” because “any mention of Assange immediately polarises people.”

This response points to concerns within the parliament over saying anything that could contribute to growing popular opposition to the Trump administration’s extradition bid and the Australian political establishment’s willing complicity in it.

The silence of the MPs is inextricably tied to their commitment to the Australian ruling elite’s military and strategic alliance with the US.

That connection was plain the next day when Albanese was asked on Sky News about this weekend’s Ausmin talks. “I’ll be meeting with Mr Pompeo on Sunday and I look forward to that

meeting,” he emphasised. “I’ll be meeting the Defence Secretary on Monday morning. The US alliance is an important thing for Australia.” Albanese reiterated Labor’s longstanding adherence to the US alliance as a key “pillar” of the party’s foreign policy.

Together with the Coalition, Labor and the Greens are intent also on covering up their own direct role, from the beginning, in supporting the persecution of Assange, first by the Obama administration and now Trump’s White House.

The Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard laid the path for every Australian government since. Prime Minister Gillard denounced WikiLeaks’ publication of secret documents as “illegal” and sought to help US agencies prosecute Assange, even as American politicians and sections of the media were calling for his assassination.

Moreover, in 2012, the Greens supported moves to facilitate Assange’s extradition to the US if he managed to get back to Australia. They voted for Labor government amendments to Australia’s extradition legislation, permitting the government to override restrictions on extraditing people accused of “political offences” against foreign governments.

This week’s events confirm that the Australian government will take action to defend Assange only if it is compelled to do so by a mass movement of the working class.

The immense power of the working class internationally must be mobilised to secure the release of both Assange and Manning, and defend all democratic rights. That is the purpose of the call issued by the *World Socialist Web Site* for the formation of a Global Defence Committee.

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