

Australian Labor Party shuts down parliamentary discussion on Assange

By Oscar Grenfell
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In a highly revealing incident, the Labor Party's manager of opposition business, Tony Burke, shut-down a discussion in the federal parliament's House of Representatives on the plight of persecuted WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange on Tuesday evening.

Burke interrupted a speech by Nationals MP Barnaby Joyce calling for Assange to be defended as an Australian citizen and journalist. Using provisions that allow for speeches to be ended if they extend beyond allotted time, or if the majority of the parliament wishes that they conclude, Burke "moved that the speaker no longer be heard."

The motion was carried by a voice vote, silencing Joyce and preventing any further discussion. Burke's motion was doubtless supported by Liberal-National Coalition MPs, who have rejected calls for their government to uphold its responsibility to intervene on Assange's behalf.

Joyce later tweeted: "Labor's Tony Burke moved that 'I no longer be heard' on my speech on the rights of press freedom pertinent to Julian Assange case. Paradox? Irony? No hypocrite!"

Labor's act of political censorship is all the more striking, given that it occurred just days after a group of more than 60 eminent doctors stated that Assange's health has deteriorated to an extent that his life is threatened. They warned that he was not receiving adequate medical care in the maximum-security Belmarsh Prison, where he has been jailed since April.

Burke, moreover, suppressed debate on Australia's most famous political prisoner in the immediate lead up to hearings in February for his extradition to the US, where he faces a maximum sentence of 175 years imprisonment for WikiLeaks' publishing activities.

Burke's action, which was not accompanied by any substantive remarks, further exposes Labor's key role in the international political conspiracy to deny Assange his

legal and democratic rights.

Joyce referenced this in his speech, noting that it was the Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard that in 2010 initiated Australia's collaboration in the US-led vendetta against the WikiLeaks founder.

Under conditions where senior US politicians were calling for Assange to be assassinated for exposing their war crimes, Joyce recalled that "Gillard wanted to take away Mr. Assange's passport and charge him with a crime. The problem was, he hadn't committed a crime—not in Australia. And this process goes on."

The Nationals MP warned of the dire implications of the Trump administration's attempt to prosecute Assange under domestic American law, despite the fact that he has never lived or worked in a US jurisdiction. Joyce stated that this would create an "appalling precedent" and enable any government to declare "we believe you've committed a crime in our country, even though you were never here, and Australia has to extradite you to our country to face those charges."

Joyce pointed to the consequences of Assange being extradited to the US for press freedom. He said that Assange, as a journalist, had received leaked information from US army whistleblower Chelsea Manning, which he and many other media organisations then published.

Noting that WikiLeaks 2010 publications, for which Assange has been charged, were reported on, and co-published by Australian media outlets, Joyce said: "If Mr. Assange committed a crime by reason of reporting what was given to him by Manning, then surely everybody who reported what was obviously printed by Mr. Assange also committed a crime. Therefore, every newspaper and every editor in this nation has committed a crime. Maybe they should all be deported to the United States to face the music there!"

Joyce condemned the double-talk of the corporate press, which threw Assange to the wolves and joined in his

persecution. Referencing a current campaign by the major media conglomerates against government attacks on press freedom, he commented: “I have to say that hypocrisy reigns supreme when people from the fourth estate, who have campaigned about protection of journalism, seem, in many instances, to have lost their tongues on this issue.”

The Nationals MP then reviewed precedents for government action in defence of citizens facing imprisonment and prosecution abroad. He began outlining the 2006–2007 intervention of the Howard Coalition government, of which he was a prominent MP, which resulted in David Hicks being returned from the US military prison in Guantanamo Bay to Australia

Not accidentally, it was at this point that Burke moved to shut-down the discussion. The reference to the Hicks case exposed the fraudulent character of the claims made by Labor, and the government, that they are powerless to intervene against Assange’s persecution.

Since Assange was arrested by the British police on April 11, after his expulsion from Ecuador’s London embassy, Labor MPs have desperately sought to avoid any discussion of his plight. They have issued weasel words about the provision of unspecified and worthless “consular assistance” to Assange.

Senior Labor MPs, such as Tanya Plibersek, have, at the same time, promoted the lies used to justify the denial of Assange’s rights, including the discredited attempt to frame-him on allegations of sexual misconduct in Sweden and the bogus claim that he is a “Russian agent.”

It is a glaring exposure of the thoroughly rotten character of the Labor Party that, on the issue of Assange, it is well to the right of Joyce, a conservative nationalist and populist.

Over decades, Labor has established itself as the party most closely aligned with the intelligence agencies and military apparatuses of Australia and the US. Its leader Anthony Albanese is campaigning on the basis that a Labor government would be better placed to serve the interests of the corporate and financial elite than the Coalition.

Joyce and fellow Nationals MP George Christensen have been among the few parliamentarians to have publicly condemned the persecution of Assange and called for his extradition to be blocked. For years, however, both of them participated in the official conspiracy of silence surrounding Assange’s plight, including when Joyce was deputy prime minister.

Their recent comments are a response to a groundswell of support for Assange among ordinary people, and

hostility to the refusal of Australian governments to defend him. Both Nationals MPs are acutely sensitive to explosive anger over the destruction of social conditions and government attacks on democratic rights, along with intense opposition to the entire political and media establishment, especially in the regional electorates that they represent.

They have joined with nine other MPs to form a cross-parliamentary group in support of Assange. It has been boycotted by the Liberal Party, and by every prominent Labor MP. The two Labor parliamentarians in the grouping are little-known backbenchers.

For their part, the Greens who have joined the group—party leader Richard Di Natale, Adam Bandt and Peter Whish-Wilson—have issued only a handful of token statements expressing concern over Assange’s plight since the beginning of the year.

The refusal of Labor and the Coalition government to uphold Assange’s rights as a citizen is inextricably tied to the political establishment’s support for the US alliance, especially Australia’s central role in Washington’s confrontation with China. It is also bound up with the escalating assault on democratic rights domestically, including the bipartisan passage last year of foreign interference laws which contain provisions targeting whistleblowers and investigative journalists.

The record establishes that an Australian government will only intervene to block Assange’s extradition and secure his freedom if it is compelled to do so by a mass movement of workers, young people and defenders of democratic rights. This underscores the urgency of mobilising the widespread support for Assange, including through campaigns, the passage of workplace resolutions, the formation of defence committees and the organisation of public meetings and rallies.

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