

Australia: Queensland parliament forum reflects growing support for Assange

By Mike Head
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About 80 people participated in an event at Queensland's state parliament house in Brisbane on Wednesday night, responding to a call to "hear the facts about the prosecution of Julian Assange and to call on Australia to stop the extradition."

The meeting was convened by the newly-established Bring Julian Assange Home Queensland Network. It was an indication of the growing support, across broad layers of the population, for the demand that the Australian government use its diplomatic and legal power to halt the extradition to the US of the WikiLeaks founder and journalist on US Espionage Act charges that would see him imprisoned for life.

Chaired by former Liberal Party parliamentarian and right-wing media commentator Ross Cameron, the forum was oriented toward gathering support from diverse sources to urge members of parliament, state and federal, to oppose the extradition on the grounds that Assange is an Australian citizen who faces an unfair trial.

On the panel were Craig Tuck, a former Assange campaign lawyer, human rights campaigner Aloysia Brookes and ex-Greens and Australian Democrats senator Andrew Bartlett. Video messages of support were screened from Pentagon Papers whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg, well-known journalist Mark Davis and CIA torture whistleblower John Kyriakou.

While largely focussed on lobbying parliamentarians, the meeting gave expression to the deep-felt concern of working class and professional people over the persecution of Assange for telling the world the truth about the horrific war crimes, lies and anti-democratic operations of the US political and intelligence establishment.

Before the panel members spoke, several audience members were given the opportunity to explain why they were concerned about Assange's plight.

Alyssa Porter, a counsellor who came with her daughter

and two of her daughter's high school friends, said that as soon as she had become aware of Assange's activity she was "extremely proud" of him and would "never stop" seeking to free him. "More people need to know about him and why he should be free," she said to applause.

Phillip Adams, who has organised an online petition, signed by more than 215,000 people, demanding the release of Assange and a halt to the extradition, said he had understood what was happening in the world because of the exposures made by Assange and WikiLeaks. "I felt ashamed of having been fooled by the official claims of 'weapons of mass destruction' in Iraq," he said. "I think Julian Assange will walk free because the complicit tools of these crimes no longer 'own' the media space."

Tuck, the first panel speaker, said the heart of the issue was that Assange was an Australian citizen and "Australia must engage." He warned that even if Assange's legal team won the extradition case on medical grounds, the US government and its agencies could still try to render him to the United States. "Canberra has the power to prevent the extradition, and not buckle to a foreign power," the lawyer said.

Speaking next, Bartlett said many politicians had been "uneasy about speaking out" for Assange and felt they had to "prioritise" other issues. He appealed to people "across the spectrum" to urge Prime Minister Scott Morrison to "apply pressure" to Britain, to at least get Assange out of an isolation prison cell.

Brookes concentrated her remarks on demolishing some of the myths concocted about Assange, including that he had placed lives in danger by "dumping" unredacted data on the internet. She explained that Assange had actually spent hours blacking out names before the *New York Times* and other corporate newspapers published the thousands of documents obtained by WikiLeaks.

Brookes said it was important to remember why Assange was being victimised. WikiLeaks had exposed

war crimes, torture squads and lies about civilian casualties, yet no one had been held to account for these crimes.

In his video message, Ellsberg emphasised that if Assange were extradited, “free speech and freedom of the press has disappeared.” As panellists explained, the Nixon administration attempted to prosecute Ellsberg under the US Espionage Act for leaking the Pentagon Papers, which documented the lies and crimes of the Vietnam War.

A court dismissed the case, however, because it was “tainted” by the administration’s burglary of Ellsberg’s medical files. This was a direct precedent for the illegality of Assange’s extradition because of the CIA’s use of a Spanish firm to bug Assange’s conversations with his lawyers inside the Ecuadorian embassy.

Kyriakou, who was jailed for exposing the CIA’s use of torture, warned that if Assange were extradited he would have no chance of a fair trial. Instead, he would be the “first domino” facing a “kangaroo court,” creating a “nightmare scenario” for all investigative journalists. Assange would “be tried in the Eastern District of Virginia, home to the CIA and FBI, the Pentagon and Defence contractors—no national security defendant has ever won a case there.”

In his video, Davis confirmed that, as a journalist, he had personally witnessed Assange spending all night redacting names from files to avoid any harm to individuals.

During question time, members of the audience asked what it would take to “turn the tide” and free Assange. Panel members urged people to raise their voices and, in Brookes’s words, “speak the truth.” Tuck also warned that the extradition process could take “years,” with appeals to higher courts.

At the end of the meeting, Peter Pyke, a former state Labor Party MP who initiated the forum, insisted that the fight could be won by lifting the campaign to “the parliamentary level.” It was there, he said, that the political power existed.

As evidence, Pyke read a letter he had received from former Labor Party prime minister and foreign minister, Kevin Rudd, which was also published in some media outlets this week. Rudd’s letter, which states that he opposes Assange’s extradition, certainly represents a reaction in ruling circles to the mounting popular support for Assange.

Rudd was ousted as prime minister, and replaced by Julia Gillard, in mid-2010 by Labor Party powerbrokers,

whom WikiLeaks later exposed as “protected sources” of the US embassy. Rudd was removed because he had suggested that Washington should make some accommodation to the economic rise of China. He later returned to office, as foreign minister from September 2010 to February 2012, and then prime minister from June to September 2013, and would have been in a position to intervene on Assange’s behalf, but did not do so.

Rudd’s letter is contradictory. He underscores his commitment to the Australian ruling elite’s military and strategic reliance on Washington. He says he is “deeply opposed to the leaking of classified diplomatic or intelligence communications” because they are classified for a purpose, “namely to maintain our national security and that of our allies.” But he opposes Assange’s extradition because “an effective life sentence is an unacceptable and disproportionate price to pay.”

Many members of the audience took copies of *World Socialist Web Site* articles that Socialist Equality Party supporters circulated. The articles highlighted the significance of the open letter issued this week by more than 65 doctors around the world calling for Assange’s transfer to a university teaching hospital in order to prevent him dying in jail after years of psychological torture and denial of adequate medical treatment at the hands of the British government.

The articles explained that, as exemplified by the brave stand taken by the doctors, the movement to free Julian Assange, and the courageous whistleblower Chelsea Manning, must come from below—from the international working class, which is increasingly entering into powerful struggles around the world against social inequality, government corruption and corporate power.

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