

Australian Labor MP feigns concern over US extradition of Julian Assange

By Oscar Grenfell
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In a hearing of the Senate Estimates Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade last Thursday, senior Labor parliamentarian Penny Wong broke her long standing silence over the plight of imprisoned WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

Wong, who is Labor's Senate leader and shadow foreign minister, posed several questions to representatives of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), feigning concern over the fate that awaits Assange if he is extradited from Britain to the US.

She began by asking them to outline the charges against the WikiLeaks founder. The exchange had an absurd, pantomime-like character given that the US indictment containing 17 Espionage Act charges and another charge against Assange was publicly released in May last year.

Wong, along with Labor leader Anthony Albanese and every other senior party representative, has refused to condemn the charges, which are a frontal assault on press freedom and freedom of speech. Instead they have joined the Liberal-National Coalition government in pledging worthless and unspecified "consular assistance" to Assange, while doing nothing to defend him.

The Labor representative then asked about potential sentences that Assange would face. The DFAT officials stated that the Espionage Act charges and the other count of computer intrusion provided for a maximum term of 175 years imprisonment. They said that they did not know whether the US would seek a cumulative sentence. Wong blandly noted that if they did, it would effectively amount to life imprisonment.

Wong however, immediately moved on. She asked whether the charges would carry the death penalty, given what she described as "our bipartisan commitment" to oppose extraditions to face capital punishment. The officials said that they did not.

Would it be possible, Wong asked, that Assange might face additional charges once he arrived in the US that

attract capital punishment? The DFAT officials said that this could not be excluded. Wong queried whether the Australian government had made representations on this issue with Britain. When they said they had not, she feigned frustration.

The exchange demonstrated that Labor has no opposition to Assange's threatened extradition. It would be happy for him to be dispatched to a CIA prison for his role in exposing US-led war crimes and global diplomatic conspiracies, provided that he merely rotted behind bars and was not executed. A slow-motion assassination of Assange, they calculate, would be less likely to provoke popular opposition, including in Australia.

Wong's intervention was even more damning when examined in its context. She spoke immediately after Foreign Minister Marise Payne, along with DFAT's chief legal officer James Larsson and first assistant secretary Andrew Todd, had explicitly endorsed the abuses of Assange's legal and democratic rights during the first week of British extradition court hearings on February 25.

Greens Senator Whish-Wilson had noted that Assange was held throughout the proceedings in a bullet-proof glass box at the back of the court that prevented him from participating in the hearing or instructing his lawyers. Todd declared that the court had found that such "procedures" were "standard."

In reality, the defence and even the prosecution lawyers had stated that this was not the case and had proposed that Assange be allowed to sit with his counsel. The fact the request was rejected only underscored the bias of the presiding judge, Vanessa Baraitser.

The DFAT bureaucrats similarly described as "standard" the fact that Assange was handcuffed 11 times and stripped naked twice on the opening day of the hearing. They had been informed that only the theft of his legal documents by prison staff on the evening of February 25 was not "standard" and had been a

“mistake.”

Payne and the DFAT officials restated their lying claims that the government is powerless to intervene in defence of Assange. In reality, the government has clear responsibilities under legal and international law to intervene in defence of a citizen who is being persecuted for his political opinions and activities.

To justify their position, they were compelled to present the show-trial underway in London as an exercise in due process and the rule of law. Larsson declared that the government had “a very high level of confidence in the British legal process.” They had seen “no evidence to suggest that” Assange was “receiving treatment that is different from any other person in his circumstance.”

Larsson did not and could not name any such “person.” No other journalist is being held by Britain in a maximum-security prison, without having been convicted of an offense, and faces extradition to the US to be tried before a counter-terror court and life-imprisonment for publishing documents exposing war crimes.

The Australian government, Larsson declared, took the position that it would only intervene in legal proceedings if there was a “gross violation of rights.” This is clearly the situation facing Assange, who has endured a decade of arbitrary detention and has no prospect of a fair trial if dispatched to the US.

But Larsson baldly declared that it was not. The DFAT officials and Payne would say nothing on the revelations that Assange and his lawyers had been illegally spied on by the CIA, when he was a political refugee in Ecuador’s London embassy. They evaded a question from Whish-Wilson, who cited United Nations Special Rapporteur Nils Melzer’s warning that the Assange case was a “modern show-trial, featuring politically-motivated prosecutors, denial of justice, manipulated evidence, biased judges, unlawful surveillance, denial of defence rights and abusive prison conditions.” Payne and the DFAT officials pathetically complained that Melzer had not written directly to the Australian government.

Wong’s line of questioning demonstrates that Labor is at one with the government in its defence of what Melzer has described as the “psychological torture” of Assange.

Labor, in fact, has played one of the central roles in the campaign of “public mobbing” and “psychological torture” that Melzer has condemned. In 2010, when senior US politicians were calling for Assange’s assassination, Greens-backed Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard branded WikiLeaks as a criminal organisation and pledged to assist the US attempts to destroy it.

In other words, Labor set the line that has been pursued by every government since. It established the pattern for 10 years of Australian governments collaborating in the US-led vendetta against Assange.

Wong, as shadow foreign minister, has said nothing in defence of Assange since his arrest in April last year. She has only mentioned the WikiLeaks’ founder on a handful of occasions, echoing government talking points about meaningless “consular assistance.”

Labor, like the government, refused to respond to letters from over 100 eminent medical doctors, demanding that it intervene to secure Assange access to proper medical care. Wong and her colleagues were indifferent to the doctors’ warnings that Assange could die in prison if he was not urgently moved out of solitary confinement in Belmarsh Prison and to a university teaching hospital.

Wong has also lent credence to the slanders directed against the WikiLeaks founder. Shortly after his brutal arrest, she pointed to a “very interesting and useful article” by Peter Greste, which falsely claimed that Assange was not a journalist, in keeping with the US indictment against him. Tanya Plibersek, another senior Labor leader, reshared a Tweet describing Assange’s supporters as “cultists” and branding him as a “fascist” who had “undermined democracy.”

The record demonstrates that anyone counselling supporters of Assange to place their hopes in Labor is perpetrating a political fraud. They are false friends, seeking to divert mounting opposition to Assange’s persecution behind the very parties responsible for his dire plight.

Labor’s central role in the torture of the WikiLeaks founder is of a piece with its character as the preeminent party of the US-Australia military alliance, the intelligence agencies and the corporate elite.

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