

UK MPs submit early day motion on Assange

By Thomas Scripps
18 July 2020

Nineteen UK MPs have tabled an early day motion in Parliament which reads: “This House notes the July 2020 statement by the National Union of Journalists, the International Federation of Journalists, Reporters Without Borders and others in relation to the WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and affirms its commitment to press freedom and public-interest journalism.”

The primary sponsor of the motion is Labour MP and former Shadow Justice Secretary Richard Burgon. He is joined by former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, former Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, former Home Secretary Diane Abbott, former Business Secretary and Education Secretary Rebecca Long-Bailey and fellow Labour backbenchers Apsana Begum, Tahir Ali, Claudia Webbe, Clive Lewis, Bell Reberio-Addy, Ian Lavery, Kate Osborne, Ian Mearns, Ian Byrne and Grahame Morris.

Signatures have also been gathered from single MPs of other opposition parties. Kenny MacAskill has signed for the Scottish National Party, Caroline Lucas for the Green Party, and Liz Saville Roberts for Plaid Cymru, the Party of Wales. The most extraordinary recruit is Gavin Robinson of Northern Ireland’s sectarian Democratic Unionist Party.

The signatories have all either hitherto kept a criminal silence over Assange’s persecution, or, in the case of Corbyn, McDonnell, Abbott and Long-Bailey, found their voice only after losing leading positions in the Labour Party. Their motion “notes” the statement of the UN et al, opposing Assange’s extradition less than two months before the second and concluding phase of his hearing in London begins. It makes no call for Assange’s immediate release or for guarantees on his safety. It is presented to a Parliament which is guaranteed to reject it out of hand. There is no “commitment to press freedom and public-interest journalism” for Parliament to affirm precisely because

of the rotten parties of big business whose MPs fill its benches.

Every party represented in the House of Commons is deeply hostile to democratic rights in general and to WikiLeaks and Assange in particular. The 15 Labour MPs making up the bulk of the motion’s support are in a party headed by Sir Keir Starmer who, in his former role as Director of Public Prosecutions, organised the arbitrary detention of Assange in the Ecuadorian Embassy by means of a bogus Swedish rape investigation. During his tenure, UK prosecutors wrote to Swedish prosecutors considering dropping the Assange case, “Don’t you dare get cold feet!!!”

It is precisely because they have been reduced to an ineffectual minority thanks to years of capitulation to the Blairites, including on Assange, in the name of maintaining “party unity,” that the “left” Labourites feel at liberty to support the motion. They and their handful of allies do not intend to wage any genuine fight—for fear of unleashing popular opposition which would threaten the capitalist parties to which they are loyal. A previous early day motion on Assange was put forward by former Labour MP Chris Williamson—now driven out of the party on slanderous charges of anti-Semitism—in September 2019. This comparatively much stronger resolution read:

That this House condemns the on-going mistreatment and imprisonment of investigative journalist Julian Assange by the UK; agrees with the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention that his treatment appears to contravene the principles of necessity and proportionality envisaged under human rights standards; opposes any attempt to extradite Mr Assange to the United States, either directly from the UK or by onward extradition from Sweden; believes that his case

has broader consequences for media freedoms, freedom of speech and civil liberties in the UK; and calls on the Government to ensure that Mr Assange is released, that his physical integrity and freedom of movement are respected and that he is afforded the right of compensation for his mistreatment by the UK.

Only three other Labour MPs, and one Independent, put their names down in support. Corbyn, McDonnell, Abbott, Burgon and Long-Bailey all refused to sign. Corbyn's first statement on Assange in 10 months came in February 2020, in the dying days of his Labour leadership, after he had excluded the issue entirely from the December 2019 General Election. Earlier that month, McDonnell put in an appearance at a pro-Assange event in London having maintained total silence for the last decade.

Like these "for the record" statements, the true purpose of the eleventh-hour early day motion to acknowledge what UN officials have been saying for years is to save face. The last few months have seen the persecution of Assange further exposed as a vicious, anti-democratic conspiracy.

The first phase of his extradition hearing held this February was a legal travesty, characterised by continued abuse of Assange's democratic rights, including his right to freely access legal counsel, as he remains imprisoned in Belmarsh and was subjected to strip searches on his way to court. Ongoing court cases in Spain have provided more evidence of CIA-organised spying on conversations between the WikiLeaks founder and his lawyers and have revealed that plans were discussed for his poisoning or kidnap while he was in asylum in the Ecuadorian Embassy.

Doctors continue to warn in leading medical journals that Assange is suffering the effects of severe psychological torture. He has also been held in prison on remand throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, despite his severely compromised health. He was deemed ineligible for a temporary release scheme for vulnerable prisoners because, in the words of the Ministry of Justice, "he is not serving a sentence"!

The MPs supporting the early day motion have been notified by their advisers that they must make some token effort to dissociate themselves from this historic

crime if they are to make any "progressive" pretence in the future.

At the same time, the motion serves a political purpose in channelling popular support for Assange behind bankrupt appeals to Parliament and letter-writing campaigns to local MPs. Nothing could be more disastrous for the campaign to free Assange and safeguard WikiLeaks. The British state, its courts and its formally democratic institutions are committed to the defence of British imperialism, whose crimes WikiLeaks exposed before the world. The rotten record of the Labour Party under Corbyn on Assange is proof that none of its representatives have any intention of defending him.

The real constituency for a struggle for democratic rights is the international working class, now entering into major strikes and protests against brutal state violence and homicidal government policies across the world. Assange's freedom depends on the intervention of this tremendous social force. The Socialist Equality Party calls on all those who agree with this perspective to join the Global Defence Campaign today.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>