

Inglorious Inertia: Australia's Albanese Government and Julian Assange

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The sham that is the Assange affair, a scandal of monumental proportions connived in by the AUKUS powers, shows no signs of abating. Prior to Prime Minister Anthony Albanese assuming office in Australia, he insisted that the matter dealing with the WikiLeaks publisher would be finally resolved. It had, he asserted, been going on for too long.

Since then, it is very clear, as with all matters regarding US policy, that Australia will, if not agree outright with Washington, adopt a constipated, non-committal position. "Quiet diplomacy" is the official line taken by Albanese and Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong, a mealy-mouthed formulation deserving of contempt. As Greens Senator David Shoebridge [remarks](#), "'quiet diplomacy' to bring Julian Assange home by the Albanese Government is a policy of nothing. Not one meeting, phone call or letter sent."

Kellie Tranter, a tireless advocate for Assange, has done [sterling work](#) uncovering the nature of that position through Freedom of Information requests over the years. "They tell the story – not the whole story – of institutionalised prejudgment, 'perceived' rather than 'actual' risks, and complicity through silence."

The story is a resoundingly ugly one. It features, for instance, stubbornness on the part of US authorities to even disclose the existence of a process seeking Assange's extradition from the UK, to the lack of interest on the part of the Australian government to pursue direct diplomatic and political interventions.

Former Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop [exemplified that position](#) in signing off on a Ministerial Submission in February 2016 recommending that the Assange case *not* be resolved; those in Canberra were "unable to intervene in the due process of another's country's court proceedings or legal matters, and we have full confidence in UK and Swedish judicial systems". Given the nakedly political nature of the blatant persecution of the WikiLeaks founder, this was a confidence both misplaced and disingenuous.

The same position was adopted by the Australian government to the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD), [which found](#) that same month that Assange had been subject to “different forms of deprivation of liberty: initial detention in Wandsworth prison which was followed by house arrest and his confinement at the Ecuadorian embassy.” The Working Group further argued that Assange’s “safety and physical integrity” be guaranteed, that “his right to freedom of movement” be respected, and that he enjoy the full slew of “rights guaranteed by the international norms on detention.”

At the time, such press outlets as *The Guardian* covered themselves in gangrenous glory in [insisting](#) that Assange was not being detained arbitrarily and was merely ducking the authorities in favour of a “publicity stunt”. The conduct from Bishop and her colleagues did little to challenge such assertions, though the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade did confirm in communications with Tranter in June 2018 that the government was “committed to engaging in good faith with the United Nations Human Rights Council and its mechanisms, including the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention.” Splendid inertia beckoned.

The new Australian High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, Stephen Smith, has kept up that undistinguished, even disgraceful tradition: he has offered unconvincing, lukewarm support for one of Belmarsh Prison’s most notable detainees. As the ABC [reports](#), he expressed pleasure “that in the due course of next week or so he’s agreed that I can visit him in Belmarsh Prison.” (This comes with the usual qualification: that up to 40 offers of “consular” support had been previously made and declined by the ungrateful publisher.)

The new High Commissioner is promising little.

“My primary responsibility will be to ensure his health and wellbeing and to inquire as to his state and whether there is anything that we can do, either with respect to prison authorities or to himself to make sure that his health and safety and wellbeing is of the highest order.”

Assange’s health and wellbeing, which has and continues to deteriorate, is a matter of court and common record. No consular visit is needed to confirm that fact. As with his predecessors, Smith is making his own sordid contribution to assuring that the WikiLeaks founder perishes in prison, a victim of ghastly process.

As for what he would be doing to impress the UK to reverse the decision of former Home Secretary Priti Patel to extradite the publisher to the US, Smith was painfully predictable.

“It’s not a matter of us lobbying for a particular outcome. It’s a matter of me as the High Commissioner representing to the UK government as I do, that the view of the Australian government is twofold. It is: these matters have transpired for too long and need to be brought to a conclusion, and secondly, we want to, and there is no difficulty so far as UK authorities are concerned, we want to discharge our consular obligations.”

Former Australian Senator Rex Patrick summed up the position rather well by [declaring](#) that Smith would be far better off, on instructions from Prime Minister Albanese, pressing the current Home Secretary Suella Braverman to drop the whole matter. Even better, Albanese might just do the good thing and push US President Joe Biden and his Attorney-General Merrick Garland to end the prosecution.

Little can be expected from the latest announcement. Smith is a man who has made various effusive comments about AUKUS, an absurd, extortionately costly security pact appropriately described as a war-making arrangement. The Albanese government, having placed Australia ever deeper into the US military orbit, is hardly likely to do much for a publisher who exposed the war crimes and predations of the Imperium.

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