

Educating the US Imperium: Australia's Mission for Assange

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An odder political bunch you could not find, at least when it comes to pursuing a single goal. Given that the goal is the release of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange makes it all the more striking. Six Australian parliamentarians of various stripes will be heading to Washington ahead of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's October visit to test the ground of empire, maybe even plant a few seeds of doubt, about why the indictment against their countryman should be dropped.

That indictment, an outrageous, piffling shambles of a document comprising 18 charges, 17 based on that nasty, brutish statute, the Espionage Act of 1917, risks earning Assange a prison sentence in the order of 175 years. But in any instrumental sense, his incarceration remains ongoing, with the United Kingdom currently acting as prison warden and custodian.

In the politics of his homeland, the icy polarisation that came with Assange's initial publishing exploits (former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard was convinced Cablegate was a crime) has shifted to something almost amounting to a consensus. The cynic will say that votes are in the offing, if not at risk if nothing is done; the principled will argue that enlightenment has finally dawned.

The Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and the Opposition leader, Peter Dutton, agree on almost nothing else but the fact that Assange has suffered enough. In Parliament, the tireless work of the independent MP from Tasmania, Andrew Wilkie, has bloomed into the garrulous Bring Julian Assange Home Parliamentary Group.

The Washington mission, which will arrive in the US on September 20, comprises former deputy prime minister Barnaby Joyce, the scattergun former Nationals leader, Labor MP Tony Zappia, Greens Senators David Shoebridge and Peter Whish-Wilson, Liberal Senator Alex Antic and the competent independent member for Kooyong, Dr. Monique Ryan.

What will be said will hardly be pleasing to the ears of the Washington establishment.

Senator Shoebridge, for instance, [promises](#) to make the case that Assange was merely telling the truth about US war crimes, hardly music for guardians from Freedom's Land. Sounding like an impassioned pastor, he will tell his unsuspecting flock "the truth about this prosecution".

Joyce, however, tried to pour some oil over troubled waters by [insisting](#) on ABC News that the delegates were not there "to pick a fight". He did not necessarily want to give the impression that his views aligned with WikiLeaks. The principles, soundly, were that Assange had not committed any of the alleged offences as a US national, let alone in the United States itself. The material Assange had published had not been appropriated by himself. He had received it from Chelsea Manning, a US military source, "who is now walking the streets as a free person".

To pursue the indictment to its logical conclusion would mean that Assange, or any journalist for that matter, could be extradited to the US from, say, Australia, for the activities in question. This extraterritorial eccentricity set a "very, very bad precedent", and it was a "duty" to defend his status as an Australian citizen.

The Nationals MP also noted, rather saliently, that Beijing was currently interested in pursuing four Chinese nationals on Australian soil for a number of alleged offences that did not, necessarily, have a nexus to Chinese territory. Should Australia now extradite them as a matter of course? (The same observation [has been made](#) by an adviser to the Assange campaign, Greg Barns SC: "You've got China using the Assange case as a sort of moral equivalence argument.")

Broadly speaking, the delegation is hoping to draw attention to the nature of publishing itself and the risks posed to free speech and the journalistic craft by the indictment. But there is another catch. In Shoebridge's [words](#), the delegates will also remind US lawmakers "that one of their closest allies sees the treatment of Julian Assange as a key indicator on the health of the bilateral relationship."

US lawmakers need to know that one of their closest allies sees the treatment of Julian Assange as a key indicator on the health of bilateral relationship.

We will keep working till we can bring him home.

— David Shoebridge (@DavidShoebridge) [September 4, 2023](#)

Ryan [expressed](#) much the same view. "Australia is an excellent friend of the US and it's not unreasonable to request to ask the US to cease this extradition attempt on Mr Assange." The WikiLeaks founder was "a "journalist; he should not be prosecuted for crimes against journalism."

While these efforts are laudable, they are also revealing. The first is that the clout of the Albanese government in Washington, on this point, has been minimal. Meekly, the government awaits the legal process in the UK to exhaust itself, possibly leading to a plea deal with all its attendant dangers to Assange. (The [recent floating of that idea](#), based on remarks made by US ambassador to Australia Caroline Kennedy, was scotched by former British diplomat and Assange confidante Craig Murray [in an interview](#) with WBAI radio last

week.) Best, then, to leave it to a diverse set of politicians representative of the “Australian voice” to convey the message across the pond.

Then there is the issue of whether the delegation’s urgings will have any purchase beyond being a performing flea act. US State Department officials [remain glacial](#) in their dismissal of Canberra’s “enough is enough” concerns and defer matters to the US Department of Justice. The unimpressive ambassador Kennedy has been the perfect barometer of this sentiment: host Australian MPs for lunch, keep up appearances, listen politely and [ignore their views](#). Such is the relationship between lord and vassal.

In Washington, the perspective remains ossified, retributive and wrongheaded. Assange is myth and monster, the hacker who pilfered state secrets and compromised US national security; the man who revealed confidential sources and endangered informants; a propagandist who harmed the sweet sombre warriors of freedom by encouraging a new army of whistleblowers and transparency advocates.

Whatever the outcome from this trip, some stirring of hope is at least possible. The recent political movement down under shows that Assange is increasingly being seen less in the narrow context of personality than high principle. Forget whether you know the man, his habits, his inclinations. Remember him as the principle, or even a set of principles: the publisher who, with audacity, exposed the crimes and misdeeds of power; that, in doing so, he is now being hounded and persecuted in a way that will chill global efforts to do something similar.

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