

Mission to Free Assange: Australian Parliamentarians in Washington

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It was a short stint, involving a six-member delegation of Australian parliamentarians lobbying members of the US Congress and various relevant officials on one issue: the release of Julian Assange. If extradited to the US from the United Kingdom to face 18 charges, 17 framed with reference to the oppressive, extinguishing Espionage Act of 1917, the Australian founder of WikiLeaks risks a 175-year prison term.

Nationals MP Barnaby Joyce, Labor MP Tony Zappia, Greens Senators David Shoebridge and Peter Wish-Wilson, Liberal Senator Alex Antic and the independent member for Kooyong, Dr. Monique Ryan, are to be viewed with respect, their pluckiness admired. They came cresting on the wave of a [letter](#) published on page 9 of the *Washington Post*, expressing the views of over 60 Australian parliamentarians.

“As Australian Parliamentarians, we are resolutely of the view that the prosecution and incarceration of the Australian citizen Julian Assange must end.”

This is a good if presumptuous start. Australia remains the prized forward base of US ambitions in the Indo-Pacific, the spear pointed against China and any other rival who dares challenge its stubborn hegemony. The AUKUS pact, featuring the futile, decorative nuclear submarines that will be rich scrapping for the Royal Australian Navy whenever they arrive, also makes that point all too clear. For the US strategist, Australia is fiefdom, property, real estate, terrain, its citizenry best treated as docile subjects represented by even more docile governments. Assange, and his publishing agenda, act as savage critiques of such assumptions.

The following views in Washington DC have been expressed by the delegates in what might be described as a mission to educate. From Senator Shoebridge, the continued detention of Assange [proved to be](#) “an ongoing irritant in the bilateral relationship” between Canberra and Washington. “If this matter is not resolved and Julian is not brought home, it will be damaging to the bilateral relationship”.

Senator Whish-Wilson [focused on the activities](#) of Assange himself. “The extradition of Julian Assange as a foreign journalist conducting activities on foreign soil is unprecedented.” To create such a “dangerous precedent” laid “a very slippery slope for any democracy to go down.”

Liberal Senator Alex Antic [emphasised](#) the spike in concern in the Australian population about wishing for Assange’s return to Australia (some nine out of 10 wishing for such an outcome). “We’ve seen 67 members of the Australian parliament share that message in a joint letter, which we’ve delivered across the spectrum”. An impressed Antic remarked that this had “never happened before. I think we’re seeing an incredible groundswell, and we want to see Julian at home as soon as possible.”

On September 20, in front of the Department of Justice, Zappia [told reporters](#) that, “we’ve had several meetings and we’re not going to go into details of those meetings. But I can say that they’ve all been useful meetings.” Not much to go on, though the Labor MP went on to state that the delegation, as representatives of the Australian people had “put our case very clearly about the fact that Julian Assange pursuit and detention and charges should be dropped and should come to an end.”

A point where the delegates feel that a rich quarry can be mined and trundled away for political consumption is the value of the US-Australian alliance. As Ryan [reasoned](#), “This side of the AUKUS partnership feels really strongly about this and so what we expect the prime minister [Anthony Albanese] to do is that he will carry the same message to President Biden when he comes to Washington.”

The publisher’s brother, Gabriel Shipton, also [suggests](#) that the indictment is “a wedge in the Australia-US relationship, which is a very important relationship at the moment, particularly with everything that’s going on with the US and China and the sort of strategic pivot that is happening.” Assange, for his part, is bound to find this excruciatingly ironic, given his lengthy battles against the US imperium and the numbing servility of its client states.

Various members of Congress have granted an audience to the six parliamentarians. Enthusiasm was in abundance from two Kentucky Congressmen: Republican Senator Rand Paul and Republican House Representative Thomas Massie. After meeting the Australian delegation, Massie [declared](#) that it was his “strong belief [Assange] should be free to return home.”

Georgian Republican House member Marjorie Taylor Greene [expressed](#) her sense of honour at having met the delegates “to discuss the inhumane detention” of Assange “for the crime of committing journalism,” insisting that the charges be dropped and a pardon granted. “America should be a beacon of free speech and shouldn’t be following in an authoritarian regime’s footsteps.” Greene has shown herself to be a conspiracy devotee of the most pungent type, but there was little to fault her regarding these sentiments.

Minnesota Democrat Congresswoman Ilhan Omar also met the parliamentarians, discussing, according to a [press release](#) from her office, “the Assange prosecution and its significance as an issue in the bilateral relationship between the United States and Australia, as well as the implications for freedom of the press both at home and abroad.” She also reiterated her view, one expressed in an [April 2023 letter](#) to the Department of Justice co-signed with six other members of Congress, that the charges against Assange be dropped.

These opinions, consistent and venerably solid, have rarely swayed the mad hatters at the Justice Department who continue to operate within the same church consensus regarding Assange as an aberration and threat to US security. And they can rely, ultimately, on the calculus of attrition that assumes allies of Washington will eventually belt up, even if they grumble. There will always be those who pretend to question, such as the passive, meek Australian Foreign Minister, Penny Wong. “We have raised this many times,” Wong [responded](#) to a query while in New York to attend the United Nations General Assembly. “Secretary [of State Antony] Blinken and I both spoke about the fact that we had a discussion about the views that the United States has and the views that Australia has.”

Not that this mattered a jot. In July, Blinken [stomped](#) on Wong’s views in a disingenuous, libellous assessment about Assange, reminding his counterpart that the publisher had been “charged with very serious criminal conduct in the United States in connection with his alleged role in one of the largest compromises of classified information in the history of our country.” The libel duly followed, with the claim that Assange “risked very serious harm to our national security, to the benefit of our adversaries, and put named sources at grave risk – grave risk – of physical harm, and grave risk of detention”. That gross falsification of history went unaddressed by Wong.

Thus far, Blinken has waived away the concerns of the Albanese government on Assange’s fate as passing irritants at a spring garden party. However small their purchase, six Australian parliamentarians have chosen to press the issue further. At the very least, they have gone to the centre of the imperium to add a bit of ballast to the effort.

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