

Voices of Concern: Aussies for Assange's Return

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With Julian Assange now fighting the next stage of efforts to extradite him to the United States to face 18 charges, 17 of which are based on the brutal, archaic Espionage Act, some Australian politicians have found their voice. It might be said that a few have even found their conscience.

Australia's Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce was sufficiently exercised by the High Court judgment overturning the lower court ruling against extradition to demand an end to the matter. In his [opinion piece](#) for the Nine newspaper group on December 14, he argued that rights were "not created in some legal sonic boom at one undefined point of our existence nor switched off like the power to a fridge because of a fear or a confusion as to the worth of their contents."

The deputy PM proved mature enough to admit that "whether you like him or despite him", the importance of the case transcended his situation. "So we must hope for the British courts to do so, and we will judge its society accordingly." (They have not and, accordingly, should be judged.)

The Nationals leader has little time for the role of whistleblowing or disclosing egregious misconduct by a State; less time for Assange as the publisher in history, the exposé of crimes by a great power. "They are a separate matter to the key issue: where was this individual when he was allegedly breaking US law for which the US is now seeking his extradition from London?"

Joyce's reasoning, while jejune on the historical contributions of WikiLeaks, has the merit of unusual clarity. He argues that the UK "should try him there for any crime he is alleged to have committed on British soil or send him back to Australia, where he is a citizen." Assange never pilfered any US secret files; did not breach Australian laws and was not in the US when "the event being deliberated in the court now in London occurred." To extradite him to the US would not only be unjust but bizarre. "If he insulted the Koran, would he be extradited to Saudi Arabia?"

The move by the Nationals leader also brought a few voices of support from the woodwork. Liberal backbenchers Jason Falinski and Bridget Archer are encouraging diplomatic

intervention. Falinski [suggested](#) that the Morrison government “do what it can to get an Australian citizen back to Australia as quickly as possible” though he refused to entertain “a public spat with America”. Archer [believed](#) that “he should be released and returned to Australia”.

The announcement that Caroline Kennedy would be heading Down Under as the new US ambassador to Australia was also seen as an opportunity. Former Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr [suggested](#) to that Prime Minister Scott Morrison take the chance to discuss the Assange case with Kennedy. (This, from a man who [once claimed](#) that Assange “has had more consular support in a comparable time than any other Australian” while admitting that he did not “know whether this is the case.”)

Morrison might, suggests Carr, point out that Australia had its own challenges in facing war crimes allegations, notably “war crimes trials pending for Australian troops in Afghanistan who might have done the very things Assange exposed in Iraq.” Washington’s treatment of the publisher could well “turn this guy into a martyr.”

Carr sees such advice as part of the capital of trust between allies. It was a “small transaction under the architecture of what each sees as a mutually beneficial relationship.” It might even show that Australia was capable of behaving “like a sovereign nation” in “one tiny corner of our alliance partnership”. If Canberra were unable to “take up the cause of an Australian passport holder, what scope for any independent action do we allow ourselves?”

The former foreign minister shows, at stages, flashes of ignorance about aspects of the proceedings (the US prosecution, for instance, made a special point in *not* mentioning the [Collateral Murder video](#) in its proceedings), he is at least cognisant of the monstrous defects in the case, not least the fact that a good deal of the indictment [is based on falsified accounts](#) from former WikiLeaks volunteer, Sigurdur “Siggi” Thordarson.

The latest stirring of principled awareness in Australia should be treated warily. Australian governments tend to protect their citizens with a begrudging reluctance, except in the rarest of cases. They are notorious in playing the game of surrender and capitulation. In the context of the US-Australian alliance, one given an even more solid filling with the AUKUS security pact, the hope that Australia would ever be able to exercise sovereign choices on any issue that affects US security is almost inconceivable.

The lamentable behaviour from Canberra regarding Assange’s welfare has also been brought to light by the tireless exploits of lawyer Kellie Tranter. Using Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, Tranter [developed a timeline](#) revealing how Australian officials were updated on Assange’s condition (legal and physical) yet did little in the way of addressing it. Kit Klarenberg, making use of Tranter’s findings, [also discusses](#) the extent Australian officials knew about Assange’s plight.

In April 2019, for instance, the lawyer Gareth Pierce, acting for Assange, wrote to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) warning that the publisher’s possessions were being held by the Ecuadorian authorities. These included a stash of privileged legal documents. DFAT, while claiming it would chase the matter up, concluded in May 2019 that Assange’s possessions were “under the authority and jurisdiction of the Judicial System of the Republic of Ecuador”. Australian diplomats, it followed, were unable to intervene. The result: Assange’s documents, held by the Ecuadorians, [were seized by the FBI](#).

As extradition proceedings were taking place, Peirce [wrote](#) to the Australian High Commission that consular representatives would have “undoubtedly noted what was clear for everyone present in court to observe” – that the publisher was “in shockingly poor condition ... struggling not only to cope but to articulate what he wishes to articulate.” DFAT’s report of those proceedings, intentionally or otherwise, was stonily silent on the issue.

Throughout, DFAT maintained that Assange had refused consular assistance or support. This was a point the publisher took up [in a meeting](#) at Belmarsh prison with consular officials on November 1, 2019, claiming that to be misguided nonsense. He also noted concerns by the prison doctor about his state, being “so bad that his mind was shutting down”, the appalling state of isolation which made it impossible for him “to think or to prepare his defence.”

Little then, can be expected from the compliant minions in Canberra desperately keen not to soil or sour relations with Washington. But it is at least mildly heartening that a few members of the Morrison government have woken up to the fact that this grotesque act of persecution against a publisher should end.

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Featured image: Julian Assange in Belmarsh Prison in 2019 (Source: WSWS)

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