

# Assange lawyer delayed while flying to Australia

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An Australian lawyer who previously acted on behalf of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange arrived in Sydney this morning after being delayed while boarding her flight in London, apparently because she had been placed on an “inhibited” travel list. The incident raises fresh questions about the Gillard Labor government’s close involvement in the Obama administration’s global operation to railroad Assange to jail.

Jennifer Robinson, who helped represent Assange in his British legal challenge against extradition to Sweden on concocted sexual assault accusations, was stopped at Heathrow airport on Thursday. Robinson was told by her airline, Virgin, she could not board a plane to Australia until she was cleared by the Australian High Commission in London.

Interviewed by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation on her arrival at Sydney airport, Robinson said airline staff had taken her passport and told her they could not check her in for the flight. An immigration security guard said to her: “You must have done something controversial because we have to phone the embassy.” Virgin staff told her that there had been a similar problem previously with an American journalist.

Robinson, an Australian citizen, quickly publicised her situation via twitter, reporting: “Just delayed from checking in at LHR [London Heathrow Airport] because I’m apparently ‘inhibited’—requiring approval from Australia House... to travel.” Robinson’s message said she had been put on a “certain government agency’s” list.

The lawyer tweeted to the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), asking: “Please explain: What is the ‘inhibited’ travel list? And why am I now apparently on it?” After a delay, Virgin staff said

she could board the flight because her check-in pass had already been printed.

Robinson told the ABC that many questions were posed, including “in what circumstances does an Australian citizen require [government] approval to fly back home?” She expressed concerns that the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) may be conducting surveillance of lawyers, as well as political activists.

If such a secret travel ban list exists, it violates basic legal and civil rights. There has been no suggestion that Robinson, who is in possession of a valid Australian passport, has committed any offence. There is no precedent for an Australian citizen being arbitrarily prevented from travelling home on political or other grounds.

Australian authorities issued statements that raised more questions than they answered. DFAT declared via twitter that it was “not aware” of any Australian government restriction applying to Robinson. The immigration department insisted: “No Australian agency prevented Ms Jennifer Robinson from boarding her flight at Heathrow Airport in London earlier today. Further, no Australian agency manages an ‘inhibited’ list.”

Likewise, the US embassy in Canberra denied that any US travel list used the phrase “inhibited” or anything similar.

In fact, the term “inhibited” is used by US security agencies. *Crikey* web site journalist Bernard Keane reported that a US Department of Homeland Security document, dated October 28, 2008, states: “Inhibited status... means the status of a passenger or non-travelling individual to whom TSA [Transport Security Administration] has instructed a covered aircraft operator or a covered airport operator not to issue a

boarding pass or to provide access to the sterile area.”

Robinson is an internationally-known lawyer and has worked on cases of human rights abuses in Papua, Indonesia and elsewhere. She has also attended hearings for Private Bradley Manning, the US soldier accused of leaking classified US diplomatic cables to WikiLeaks.

The Commonwealth Lawyers Association (CLA), which had invited Robinson to address an international legal conference in Sydney today, said in a statement: “If these reports are accurate, then the CLA believe they raise profound issues concerning the independence of lawyers and their clients.”

The timing of the incident raises further questions. A decision is expected any day on Assange’s appeal against being sent to Sweden. From there, he is set to be extradited to the United States, where he was indicted by a secret grand jury in December 2010 on charges under the reactionary Espionage Act of 1917.

Even if he wins the UK case, the US authorities are likely to unseal their grand jury indictment and seek his extradition direct to the US. Just six weeks ago, the Gillard government quietly finalised the passage of legislation that would cut off any attempt by Assange to avoid extradition to the US by returning to Australia if his UK appeal succeeds.

The Extradition Act amendments, which were rubberstamped in the Senate with the support of the Greens, allow the government to override restrictions on extraditing people accused of “political offences”—such as terrorism and espionage—against selected foreign governments.

The initial move to halt Robinson’s departure from London may indicate the mechanisms that the Gillard government has established with the US and British governments to stymie any attempt by Assange to quickly fly back to Australia if he wins his UK Supreme Court challenge.

Far from protecting the legal rights of Assange, also an Australian citizen, Gillard and her ministers have backed the Obama administration’s vendetta against him from the outset. Just as the US grand jury was being secretly convened 16 months ago, Gillard branded the WikiLeaks publication of US cables as “illegal”—an unsubstantiated and highly prejudicial allegation.

The Labor government is completely at one with

Washington and Canberra in seeking to lock Assange away and crush WikiLeaks. That is because the thousands of documents that WikiLeaks has published have helped expose the US-led war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as other abuses, conspiracies, war preparations and repression organised around the world by the imperialist powers, including Australia.



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