

Ex-Australian foreign minister calls for release of Julian Assange to halt damage to US alliance

Mike Head
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In a revealing intervention, former Foreign Minister Bob Carr has urged the Australian government to ask the Trump administration to drop its extradition proceedings against imprisoned WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, for fear of further eroding public support for the US military and intelligence alliance.

Carr's call, published today as an opinion column in Nine (previously Fairfax) Media newspapers, is expressed in the most deferential language. Canberra is a "good ally" to Washington, he emphasises, to the point of dispatching a warship to the Persian Gulf, risking a conflict with Iran, and hosting "two communications bases that probably make Australian territory a nuclear target...

"All said, we are entitled to one modest request: that in the spirit with which Barack Obama pardoned Chelsea Manning, and given President Trump's own objection to 'endless wars' in desert sands, it would be better if the extradition of Assange were quietly dropped."

Carr's statement is, first of all, a symptom of the alarm within the ruling class about the mounting popular demand for Assange's freedom, both in Australia and internationally. A life-long supporter of the US alliance, he specifically warns that the treatment of Assange is dangerously undermining support for it. He refers to a survey by the Lowy Institute, a pro-US think-tank, showing support for the alliance had "fallen from 78 percent to 66 percent and that only 25 percent of Australians had confidence in the US President. Among Australians under 29 years it was almost non-existent."

Carr voices concern about the naked assertion by Washington of its right to extradite any journalist, anywhere in the world. "If the American bid succeeds, this extra-territorial reach will be brought home sometime in 2020 when we see Assange in shackles, escorted across

a British airfield into a CIA aircraft to be flown to Virginia."

Carr, who was foreign minister in the last Labor government, from March 2012 until its landslide defeat in September 2013, says the danger is that Assange is being turned into a "martyr" just like Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the Pentagon Papers in 1971. Those documents exposed the lies and war crimes committed by successive US administrations in the Vietnam War, and ultimately leading to the political crisis that forced the resignation of President Richard Nixon.

"How better to seed sourness about the alliance than running a year's trial in British courts against this Aussie maverick, followed by a battle in American courts, with liberal media defining it as an issue of freedom, transmuting him into a second Daniel Ellsberg [sic]," Carr writes.

Despite the end of Assange's sentence for supposedly skipping bail by seeking political asylum in Ecuador in 2012, to avoid extradition to Sweden and likely rendition to the US, he remains incarcerated in London's notoriously brutal Belmarsh prison. He is being held in solitary confinement and sedated in what doctors globally and UN Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer have condemned as psychological torture and a threat to his life.

Like Ellsberg, Assange faces charges under the US Espionage Act that could see him locked away for life, if not placed on death row. Ellsberg ultimately escaped imprisonment when a federal judge declared a mistrial because of the Nixon administration's illegal bugging of his medical files.

Chelsea Manning, the young US soldier convicted of giving WikiLeaks tens of thousands of damning files documenting US war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq and

anti-democratic interventions around the world, is also back behind bars. Contrary to Carr's statement, Obama's administration did not pardon her after jailing her in military prisons for seven years, but only commuted her sentence. This left her open to being imprisoned again—now indefinitely—to try to compel her to testify against Assange.

Carr's media column is all the more extraordinary because of the political reversal involved. As foreign minister, Carr repeatedly refused to defend Assange. In fact, he played a pivotal part in the assistance provided to Washington's persecution of Assange by the Greens-backed Labor minority government of Julia Gillard.

Gillard's government pioneered the refusal of every Australian government over the past decade to exercise its legal and diplomatic powers to intervene on behalf of Assange, as an Australian citizen. Gillard declared publicly that WikiLeaks' exposures were "illegal" and launched an unsuccessful investigation into charging Assange under Australia's own draconian espionage and official secrets laws.

Gillard had been installed in office in mid-2010, ousting Kevin Rudd, as the result of a backroom coup. Labor Party and trade union leaders who were later identified, in documents published by WikiLeaks, to be "protected sources" of the US embassy in Canberra, were centrally involved. Rudd had no difference at all with the US alliance, but he had suggested that the US should make some room for the rise of China.

Carr, like all his fellow cabinet ministers, falsely denied any knowledge of the US grand jury established by the Obama administration to pursue Espionage Act charges against Assange. Instead, he adhered to the line of the US and British governments that Assange was only facing extradition to Sweden for questioning on what were trumped-up allegations of sexual assault.

"As foreign minister I explained that the dispute between Sweden and Assange was something in which Canberra had no standing," Carr writes in an attempt to justify Labor's complicity. "His supporters did not like to hear that."

Right up until Assange was dragged out of his asylum inside Ecuador's London embassy last April, every Australian government insisted it had "no evidence" of US attempts to extradite the Australian citizen. In reality, as far back as 2012—when Carr was in office—declassified cables, obtained under Freedom of Information laws, revealed that Australian embassy officials in Washington had informed the Gillard government in detail about US

plans to prosecute Assange.

The Labor Party, which committed Australia to the US "pivot to Asia" against China and expanded US military access across the country under Gillard, has never shifted from its hostility toward WikiLeaks.

What then accounts for Carr's about-face? It can be understood only in the context of the deepening movement against US militarism, as well as the mass uprisings that have erupted globally against the yawning social inequality, attacks on working class conditions, corporate corruption, authoritarian regimes and environmental disasters being produced by the capitalist profit system.

The growing support for Assange is a key aspect of this seething discontent. In the lead-up to his extradition trial in February, protests demanding his freedom are emerging in many parts of Australia. And there is growing support for the campaign launched by the WSWS to mobilise working class opposition globally.

Another indicator of the concern in ruling circles came with a call on Friday by Mexico's President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador for Assange to be released from prison in London, to end his "torture" in detention (see: "Mexican president calls for Julian Assange's freedom").

At rallies and public meetings over the past 18 months, the Socialist Equality Party has raised the demand that the Australian government intervene diplomatically and legally to secure Assange's release and ensure his right to return to Australia with a guarantee of protection from extradition to the US.

There must be no illusions in the Australian political and media establishment, however. From Gillard's government to the current Liberal-National Coalition government of Scott Morrison, it is directly responsible and culpable for Assange being incarcerated.

That is why everything depends on turning to the working class and young people, as part of the struggle to overturn the profit system and its drive to austerity, police-state repression and war. The defence of free speech and all basic democratic rights is bound up entirely with the fight against capitalism, that is, for socialism.



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