

Australian Labor government greenlights extradition of former pilot to US

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This week it was revealed that the Labor government had approved a US extradition request for Daniel Duggan, an Australian citizen and former American Air Force pilot. The matter still needs to be heard before a magistrate, with Duggan then able to appeal an adverse ruling to the country's Federal and High Courts.

However, Labor's decision, setting in motion the extradition proceeding, demonstrates the determination of the Australian political and state apparatus to dispatch Duggan to the US. There he faces national security charges, including money laundering and breaches of arms export controls, potentially carrying a sentence of a decade or more in a maximum-security American prison. The charges also carry massive fines.

The government and other Australian authorities have said as little as possible on the case. But, as Duggan's lawyers and family have emphasised, everything publicly revealed so far brands the charges as trumped-up and politically-motivated.

That assessment was confirmed by the release early this month of a previously-sealed US indictment of Duggan, first issued by a Grand Jury under the Trump administration in 2017. It confirms that Duggan's sole "offense" was to have allegedly trained Chinese pilots while working for a South African based company. The indictment claims that these violations occurred in October-November 2010, March 2012, November 2012, and "other times both known and unknown to the Grand Jury."

Duggan has effectively been charged with arms trafficking offenses. In reality, however, the concrete content of those charges is the training itself. A substantial portion of the indictment is dedicated to asserting that the provision of military "services" is a violation of US arms control legislation.

The only basis for the money laundering charge appears to the fact that the South African company and Duggan

transferred funds relating to the provision of those services. In other words, the transactions have only been criminalised on the basis that the services were a violation of US arms controls.

Duggan's lawyers had previously stated that it was unclear whether his extradition was being sought under the 2017 indictment or a superseding indictment. The unsealing of the 2017 charges, however, indicates that is the basis for the extradition request.

The obvious question is: why is Duggan being pursued now, 10 years after the supposed offenses and five years after an indictment was first issued?

Duggan's wife Saffrine Duggan has launched a petition demanding his freedom and calling on the Labor government to block the extradition. In it, she points to the essential issue underlying the case, writing: "Daniel has been caught in a geo-political storm for working in China, doing work that has been done there for decades by Western, African and European pilots for decades with the full knowledge of these Governments."

Further, she stated: "Daniel now finds himself a victim of the United States Government's political dispute with China, by no fault of his own."

The change over the subsequent decade since Duggan committed the trumped-up "offenses," is that successive US administrations have deepened a full-scale confrontation with China in preparation for a catastrophic war aimed at asserting American imperialist hegemony.

The first stage of this offensive, the unveiling of the US "pivot to Asia," occurred under the Obama administration in 2011. That military-build up has since developed into an aggressive campaign on every front, involving the development of a web of alliances directed against China, continuous diplomatic and military provocations and trade war measures.

The Trump administration, under which the indictment against Duggan was filed, ratcheted-up this war drive

substantially. This included the establishment of a China Initiative, supposedly targeting Beijing's espionage operations. It was disbanded earlier this year, after findings that its activities involved racial profiling and the concoction of evidence. The timing indicates that this initiative may have been connected to the case against Duggan.

Whatever the fate of Trump's initiative, the anti-China campaign is being further intensified by the Biden administration, which is seeking Duggan's extradition.

In other words, everything indicates that like countless former military personnel, Duggan was lawfully plying his trade on the private market. His mistake was to do so as the US was launching a major shift in its geo-political policies.

Thousands of other former servicemen, from the US and its allies, including Australia, continue to work in the murky private sector. Their activities go unquestioned provided they are in the service of a state aligned with Washington. That includes the despotic Gulf states and other regimes accused of serious human rights violations.

It is increasingly clear that Duggan's extradition is part of an internationally coordinated effort involving the US, Britain and Australia, directed against former military personnel who have done work in China. The intent seems to be to send a message that such activities, passively tolerated before, will no longer be accepted under today's increasingly wartime conditions.

Duggan was arrested at his home in Orange, a regional New South Wales (NSW) town, on October 21. He was detained at the request of the US authorities, acting through the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

That was the very same week that the British defence ministry issued an unprecedented warning against its former pilots continuing to provide services to China. Britain has not laid any charges against pilots involved in such activities, yet. Its government, however, has stated that it is looking at tightening laws governing the activities of former service people, along with confidentiality provisions.

The Australian Labor government, to the extent that it has commented on the case at all, has presented itself as a bystander to a legal process.

But Duggan's treatment indicates that the top levels of the state apparatus, including the government, are heavily involved. He was arrested by the Australian Federal Police then taken to an undisclosed NSW prison, where he was held in segregation as a "high-risk inmate." He was reportedly to be transferred to Goulburn Supermax,

as an "extreme high risk restricted inmate," a designation usually used for crime bosses and terrorists. Duggan has no prior criminal history.

Earlier this month, Duggan's lawyer Dennis Miralis described the conditions of his detention as "extraordinary, unprecedented, unjustifiable," and likely the result of "foreign interference."

In November, the Australian Federal Police raided the home of a British national and former air force pilot in Adelaide. He has not been charged. According to some reports, he was the chief operating officer of the South African company that Duggan allegedly worked for. The chief operating officer and eight other individuals are described in Duggan's 2017 indictment as his "co-conspirators," but are not named. They include South African, British and US nationals, as well as one Chinese individual.

As his wife has emphasised, Duggan is an Australian citizen. He appears to have renounced his US citizenship in early 2012, meaning he has only a tenuous legal connection to the country seeking his extradition for "offenses" committed outside its borders.

The Labor government's collaboration with this operation is another indication of its lockstep support for the US confrontation with China and an associated onslaught on key democratic rights.

That collaboration is also notable from the standpoint of Julian Assange, an Australian citizen imprisoned in Britain and facing extradition to the US. There is no exact parallel between the Duggan and Assange cases. Duggan, a former military man, faces trumped up charges for defence contracting. Assange, a journalist, is being pursued for the legitimate and courageous exposure of the historic war crimes of the US and its allies.

The Labor government, nevertheless, is facilitating an extradition to the US of Duggan, an Australian citizen, under bogus "national security" offenses spearheaded by the US intelligence agencies. That further exposes as a fraud any suggestion that it will intervene to block Assange's extradition and to secure his freedom, when he is being pursued by the very same agencies on fraudulent "national security" charges.



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