Australian spooks and their media mouthpieces bemoan Assange’s freedom

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The sudden freedom of Julian Assange last week and his return to Australia have greatly agitated former senior intelligence and government figures, along with their mouthpieces in the media.

The response sheds further light on several issues.

Firstly, it demonstrates that the US decision to accede to a plea deal was a substantial backdown, which has angered the American intelligence agencies and their associates internationally. Secondly, it shows that while Assange’s freedom is a victory, the assault on democratic rights continues and deepens. And thirdly, it again underscores the fact that Australian officials were politically prejudiced against Assange, conditioning their complicity in his fourteen-year persecution.

Assange had scarcely landed in Australia last week, when Dennis Richardson, the nation’s former intelligence chief, gave interviews denouncing him and promoting the slanders used to justify the protracted US persecution.

Richardson launched his attack from something of an angle. Under conditions where Assange could have died behind bars, the former official begrudgingly acknowledged that the WikiLeaks founder had been deprived of his liberty for long enough.

Instead, Richardson complained that Assange had received a “celebratory” welcome. While Richardson specifically referenced a phone call Prime Minister Anthony Albanese made to Assange, it was clear that he was also voicing concern and hostility to the widespread popular support for Assange’s release.

Richardson has had a myriad of high-level intelligence and defence postings and is close to the American state. He was director of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the domestic spy agency, between 1996 and 2005, before being appointed Australia’s ambassador to the US. Richardson was later the secretary of the Defence Department, and since his formal retirement has been selected to lead various official reviews and inquiries.

It is unusual for a former intelligence boss to publicly denounce a private individual, which is what Assange now is. Such remarks carry with them an air of menace, given that ASIO, created amid the Cold War, has always been centrally preoccupied with monitoring and disrupting anti-war activists, socialists and dissidents.

Richardson’s intervention was followed by a frothing article in the Sydney Morning Herald by George Brandis, Liberal Attorney-General from 2013 to 2017. Brandis too bitterly complained that Assange was being treated as a “hero” and declared: “Of course, the fact that Assange is a criminal is of no concern to his admirers.”

Much of Brandis’ article was a tortured repeat of the US

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claim that WikiLeaks publications may have resulted in the deaths of informants and others. This was complicated by the US admission in court last week that there were “no personal victims” of Assange and no evidence that anyone had been physically damaged in any way by WikiLeaks exposures.

Brandis darkly hinted that perhaps there were such victims, though unknown, and then repeated the line of the US Department of Justice that even if no one had been harmed, they could have been.

Most significantly, Brandis menaced: “If Assange had committed the same offence against Australian law, he would have been prosecuted under the Criminal Code. His culpability is no less because he committed the same offence against American law.” That is not only a defence of the right of the US to charge journalists anywhere in the world, it also signals that sections of the Australian political establishment are themselves committed to the “Assange precedent” of prosecuting reporters.

Like Richardson, Brandis was another official in a position that meant he was supposed to assist Assange. As Australian high commissioner to the UK until 2022, he claimed to be overseeing “consular assistance” to the WikiLeaks publisher. The value of such assistance can no doubt be measured by Brandis’ latest comments.

Going even further with the menacing tone was a Herald article by its international and political editor Peter Hartcher, headlined “Assange may be out of jail, but in Australia he’s on probation.”

Hartcher wrote that “Although we haven’t heard directly from Assange himself yet, Assangeism came into plain view from the very first moments. Assange’s clenched fist pumping the air was not a gesture of a contrition or humility; it was a statement of triumphal defiance.” Assange had brought with him a “movement” and a “campaign” for a full US pardon.

Hartcher contrasted the “responsibility” of the official press, with the “recklessness” of WikiLeaks. Hartcher’s own “responsibility” has consisted of aggressively promoting the line of war hawks in the US and Australia, who are preparing a conflict with China aimed at assuring the dominance of American imperialism.

For years, Hartcher has been at the forefront of a McCarthyite campaign against “Chinese interference,” including with a 2016 article that described opponents of the US build-up against Beijing as “rats, flies, mosquitoes and sparrows.” Last year, Hartcher co-authored the “Red Alert” series. Based exclusively on the statements of US and Australian government-funded war hawks, it demanded the stationing of US nuclear weapons in the Northern Territory and the introduction of mass conscription to prepare for conflict with China within several years.

According to the Herald, advocating nuclear war is “responsible,” exposing massive war crimes is “reckless.” Some of the commentaries above noted that while it sought to

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