

# Australian ruling elite fawns over alleged war criminal Ben Roberts-Smith

Oscar Grenfell  
25 June 2026

Since former special forces soldier Ben Roberts-Smith was charged with five war crimes, allegedly committed during the neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan, he has been accorded extraordinary treatment by the political, legal and media establishment.

The official attitude to Roberts-Smith goes far beyond adhering to the presumption of innocence, to which he is legally entitled. It amounts to a brazen embrace of an individual accused of the most heinous violations of international law.

Earlier this month, it was revealed that after his arrest in April, Roberts-Smith was personally ushered into Sydney's Silverwater prison by its governor, Patrick Aboud, as though he were a visiting dignitary.

Despite being accused of murder and earlier police allegations of witness interference prior to his being charged, Roberts-Smith was granted bail. Aboud personally escorted Roberts-Smith out and hatched a plan for him to leave via the back entrance with prison personnel stationed to shield him as he left, to escape media attention.

Roberts-Smith was at liberty in time for Anzac Day, the militarist national holiday, and attended a commemoration event on the Gold Coast where corporate reporters politely interviewed him.

The accord reached a new level this week, with the red carpet almost literally rolled out for Roberts-Smith by a quasi-government institution. The federally funded Australian War Memorial invited the alleged war criminal to its reopening on Tuesday evening, after a major renovation.

That posed a problem, however. While Roberts-Smith was rapidly released from prison, under conditions of a ballooning remand population, he is still subject to bail conditions that limit his movements.

Roberts-Smith's lawyers duly applied for a variation of those conditions, to permit him to attend the event, even though there could hardly have been an argument that it was essential business. But despite that, the prosecutors, who rarely give an inch to people charged with far more minor offences, did not oppose the application.

They waved it through, even while acknowledging there was a risk of an "inadvertent breach" of conditions, which could have occurred had Roberts-Smith come into contact at the war memorial with former soldiers who may testify against him.

Having been arrested in New South Wales, Roberts-Smith was bailed to the state of Queensland, where he lives. And then for the war memorial event, he was allowed to travel well over a thousand kilometres to the Australian Capital Territory.

The court having removed all legal obstacles to his attendance, there was still the question of political sensitivities. The opening of the war memorial was to be presided over by Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and to be attended by other senior members of his government. There were questions raised as to whether consorting with someone charged with murder would be appropriate for individuals in their office.

The concerns were brushed aside by Defence Minister Richard Marles. Noting that Roberts-Smith was a recipient of the Victoria Cross military award, Marles declared: "It's a very significant moment for the nation, and [for] the Victoria Cross recipients to be invited to this is absolutely appropriate."

Among other things, Roberts-Smith is accused of shooting a disabled Afghan prisoner to death. He and other special forces are alleged to have used the victim's prosthetic leg as a receptacle for alcohol. In another incident, Roberts-Smith is alleged to have kicked an Afghan villager off a cliff, before instructing one of his comrades to shoot him dead.

After all the paths had been cleared for him, in the end, Roberts-Smith did not attend the event, citing "illness."

But the episode had the positive effect of exposing the militarist and utterly reactionary character of the Labor government. It was, in fact, a Labor government in office when all of the alleged Australian war crimes were committed in Afghanistan, coinciding with its embrace of the US troop surge in that country which included Australian participation in American "kill or capture" raids.

The welcome mat for Roberts-Smith, whatever the ultimate outcome of his criminal trial, was a retrospective legitimisation of the neo-colonial assault on Afghanistan.

More broadly, it was a signal of military hawkishness, under conditions where Labor is an active participant in a global war that is already underway. Labor has supported the US-Israeli genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, was among the most enthusiastic supporters of Trump's criminal assault on Iran and is completing Australia's transformation into a frontline state for a US war against China.

At the same time, it greenlit the prosecution of David McBride, a former military lawyer who blew the whistle on alleged war crimes in Afghanistan. While Roberts-Smith is feted, despite the charges against him, McBride is behind bars, accused, not of perpetrating crimes but of revealing them to the public.

Labor's response also underscored its central role in a lurch to the right by the entire political establishment, under conditions of a crisis of the two-party system.

Amid the crisis of the opposition Liberal-Nationals and widespread hostility to the pro-business Labor government, the far-right populist One Nation party has come to prominence. Alongside its demonisation of immigrants, One Nation has openly identified itself with Roberts-Smith, featuring placards of him during campaigns and alleging that the criminal charges amount to a betrayal.

One Nation's most prominent supporter is the mining magnate Gina Rinehart, the country's wealthiest individual. A longtime supporter of Roberts-Smith, she unveiled dwellings for homeless veterans in Perth yesterday. They are named "Ben Roberts-Smith Beach Houses."

Other figures in a developing right-wing ecosystem, cultivated by sections of the ruling elite, have also come to Roberts-Smith's defence.

One such, Karl Stefanovic, was terminated today as the longtime host of Channel Nine's breakfast show, "Today." In a side project, Stefanovic had launched a podcast, on which he interviewed far-right figures, including the British anti-immigrant street thug Tommy Robinson, as well as leading One Nation figures Pauline Hanson and Barnaby Joyce.

In the course of interviewing Roberts-Smith supporters, Stefanovic lamented that "I don't know how anyone can now go and fight for us in the SAS or in any department of the defence force without the thought in the back of your mind that you're not necessarily going to be protected."

There was a danger, he said, that "The actions of you one day in war may be something down the track that you have to account for in a civilian court of law."

While the Robinson interview was seemingly a bridge too far for Nine, Stefanovic's statements calling into question

the foundations of international law were deemed acceptable.

Far beyond the issue of Roberts-Smith's personal fate, a narrative is being constructed of the military as an institution that should be above the law and permitted to do what needs to be done, regardless of the legalities. That is not only an argument in favour of unbridled militarism abroad, but also of authoritarianism domestically.

Ironically, the only component of the political establishment that appears to be torn by the Roberts-Smith saga is the opposition Liberal-National Coalition. But that is not by virtue of any opposition to war.

Instead, Liberal MP Andrew Hastie, a far-right figure and one with leadership aspirations, is an antagonist of Roberts-Smith. Hastie, a former special forces operative, testified against Roberts-Smith, during the unsuccessful defamation actions brought by the latter against Nine publications that had accused him of war crimes.

The tactical rift threatens to deepen the existential crisis of the Coalition. It is competing with One Nation, which threatens to displace it, in a lurch to the right. But Hastie's legal involvements are a potential barrier to the Liberal-Nationals embracing Roberts-Smith, who has become a symbol of that lurch to the right. The prospect of not only sharp divisions but even splits within the Coalition over this question is posed.

For the working class, the stampede to the right must be viewed as a warning. The political establishment in Australia, as internationally, is turning to authoritarianism, in line with the program of war and austerity determined by the crisis of the global capitalist system. Opposition to war and the defence of democratic rights can only go forward through a political movement directed against all the official parties and the profit system itself.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**