

Australian spooks and their media mouthpieces bemoan Assange's freedom

Oscar Grenfell  @Oscar_Grenfell

🕒 3 July 2024

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.

The WikiLeaks publisher, Richardson declared on Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) radio, was "guilty of a criminal offense in a liberal democracy. We're not talking about a journalist who has been imprisoned on trumped-up charges in China or Russia."

The offence to which Assange pled guilty was receiving and publishing classified information. That is standard journalistic practice. Richardson was implying that national security journalism is an offense, the very position that the US state was seeking to establish with its pursuit of Assange.

Along with being a frontal assault on press freedom, a foundational cornerstone of “liberal democracy,” the US vendetta against Assange was itself a criminal frame-up. Most notoriously, the American CIA spied on Assange’s privileged legal discussions while he was an internationally recognised political refugee, and together with then President Trump discussed assassinating him in 2017.

Having extolled “liberal democracy,” Richardson struck a discordant note. He favorably referenced the fact that “[in] Australia, we jail people who actually leak classified material.” This was in contradiction, he indicated, with the welcome for Assange.

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 comments are also notable, because from 2010 to 2012, he was the head of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). That was the government body that should have aided Assange at the time, as he was being condemned as a “terrorist” by US government leaders and even threatened with assassination for exposing US war crimes as a journalist.

Richardson, more than a decade on, was essentially repeating the talking points of the Gillard Labor government he served as DFAT head, which slandered Assange as a criminal, threatened to confiscate his passport and pledged to assist the US campaign against him.

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 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 claim credit for Assange’s release, the current Labor government has also struck a note of caution. Albanese and Foreign Minister Penny Wong both extolled “national security” secrecy laws in their remarks on Assange last week, with Wong pointedly adding: “We expect those laws to be observed by all citizens and by all entities.”

Labor’s involvement in Assange’s release was a limited one. It never called for the charges against him to be dropped, only suggesting to the US that the case be “brought to a close.”

Even an ABC article this week promoting Labor as having played a decisive role pointed only to a suggestion by Albanese that Assange's lawyers negotiate with the US Department of Justice. The thought had surely occurred to them before. The suggestion underscored Labor's hands-off approach, and the fact that it accepted Assange's liberty to be conditional on a guilty plea.

The attacks on Assange have a desperate and pathetic air to them. They have the character of the intelligence agencies and a compliant press vomiting up all of the slanders against Assange one last time, as a cathartic exercise to cope with the trauma of him being freed.

But they are also a warning that the conditions that gave rise to the massive witch-hunt of Assange, of vast social inequality and global war, not only persist but are deepening. Labor, as it is backing the genocide in Gaza, the US-NATO proxy war against Russia and the plans for conflict with China, is also cracking down on anti-war opposition. In addition to the vilification of opponents of the genocide, that included supporting the imprisonment of whistleblower David McBride in May for exposing Australian war crimes in Afghanistan.

That underscores the importance of the call by the WikiLeaks founder's wife Stella Assange for an ongoing fight to defend democratic rights. On X/Twitter, she wrote: "Julian Assange is free from prison but the fight for his freedom (and ours!) continues. The actions against him do not just have a chilling effect—they have a freezing effect. We will continue to work to secure greater freedom for Julian and justice for the many abuses against him that chill others."