

# *Australian foreign minister says her government cannot save Julian Assange*

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**Penny Wong / Julian Assange**

Canberra, July 12 (RHC)-- Australian journalist and publisher Julian Assange turned 52 in London's Belmarsh prison last week. It was his fifth July 3rd birthday that the WikiLeaks founder has spent at the notorious maximum-security facility over having published classified US documents that had been leaked to him.

The ever-resilient Stella Assange confirmed, while speaking at the National Press Club in Canberra on June 1st, that her husband is indeed being held in prolonged solitary confinement, in isolation for "22 hours a day", and has been for years, which is considered torture under international standards.

Julian's case is testament to the stranglehold that governments, especially the US, are placing on the free press in a time of mass global communications: a case in which extralegal measures in plain sight of all, have been taken to set a precedent to what happens to those who expose certain truths.

There is one last glimmering light of hope left after a UK High Court Justice rejected his last appeal on 8 June, which is one final UK domestic plea to two new judges in a public hearing of that same court. Yet, Britain, one of our nation's closest allies, officially signed off on extraction in June last year.

And last week saw Australian foreign minister Penny Wong admit on-air that despite her government having attempted to use its official diplomatic channels to negotiate Assange's release, all that it could do, has been done, and, basically, it has no more power to achieve anything else.

Wong was speaking to Radio National's Patricia Karvelas on July 4th, when the host raised that the day prior had been Assange's fifth birthday spent in a UK gaol, and asked what the government was doing on the matter, since earlier this year, the minister had said the case had dragged on too long.

"Ultimately, this is a legal case in another jurisdiction involving another country. That is both the United Kingdom and the United States," Wong, who has given similar explanations in the past, told the ABC radio breakfast show host in response.

"So, there are limits to what Australia can do. And I know people believe that somehow, we can fix this," the foreign minister continued. "Actually, there are limits to what Australia can do."

The Labor senator added that all her government has the ability to do continues to be done, which is to tell the US and the UK governments, the two administrations this nation recently formed the AUKUS pact with, "that this has dragged on too long, and... that this be brought to a close".

Wong not only admits here that her government has reached the end of its ability to push the case for Assange being returned, as it's been raised on a number of occasions "at the most senior levels", but she also hints that the government's position wasn't necessarily that extradition be ruled out.

When Karvelas pushed Wong on when she had last consulted diplomatically on the matter, she received a taciturn, "I'm not going to go into that, but you and I both know I've engaged with the foreign secretary, and, obviously, we have engaged with the United States".

In the past, Wong has delivered more sombre messages about the chances of Australia having input into the outcome of matters related to Assange as he's drawn in the grips of our nation's two closest allies, than has her boss, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, whose always delivered a more hopeful message.

Admittedly, any acknowledgement of the Assange case by our government and there being a chance of it intervening has been better than what came from the previous Coalition cabinet, which saw then PM Scott Morrison stating Assange would receive "no special treatment" on arrest.

As opposition leader, Albanese said in early 2021 that "enough is enough" in response to Assange, whilst a fortnight after taking top office in May last year, he hinted that backdoor negotiations were taking place on the case, when he said, "not all foreign affairs is best done with the loud hailer".

Indeed, the "enough is enough" statement slowly took on the role of the de facto official policy of the Albanese government on the Assange case, and ever since making his first such suggestion, the PM has continued on with it to the point where these responses have lost their sheen.

While Wong asserted in February, perhaps more sincerely, that while her government had attempted to bring the matter to a close, as it had "dragged on too long", the "rule of law prevails" in the US and UK, which implies that it was a matter for the courts that couldn't be interfered with.

The UK is set to hold the one last appeal before two High Court judges, but after this, there may still be a chance to raise an appeal to the European Court of Human Rights, while Assange's family last week confirmed that his health continues to deteriorate after years of imprisonment inside.

But hope was further dashed last month, when it came to light, just days prior to the UK High Court denial of the last appeal, that the FBI had attempted to contact British novelist Andrew O'Hagan to speak with him about Assange.

The author considered this was because it is publicly known that his relationship with Julian had soured and the U.S. agency was fishing around for further evidence against the WikiLeaks publisher prior to getting him into a US court to prosecute on eighteen charges carrying up to 175 years inside.

While just last week, global editor of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism James Ball revealed in Rolling Stone that the U.S. Department of Justice and the FBI had been pressuring him and multiple other British journalists to cooperate them in building the prosecution's case against Assange.

This clearly means that the U.S. is expecting to have the Australian journalist in its custody in the not-too-distant future, and the latest UK court decision, coupled with the determination of the British government to greenlight extradition over 12 months ago now, would support this presumption.

And as Doctors for Assange, and Julian's friend, veteran Australian journalist John Pilger, have long been warning, it's likely if Assange is extradited and placed in the U.S. prison system, it will mark his end.

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