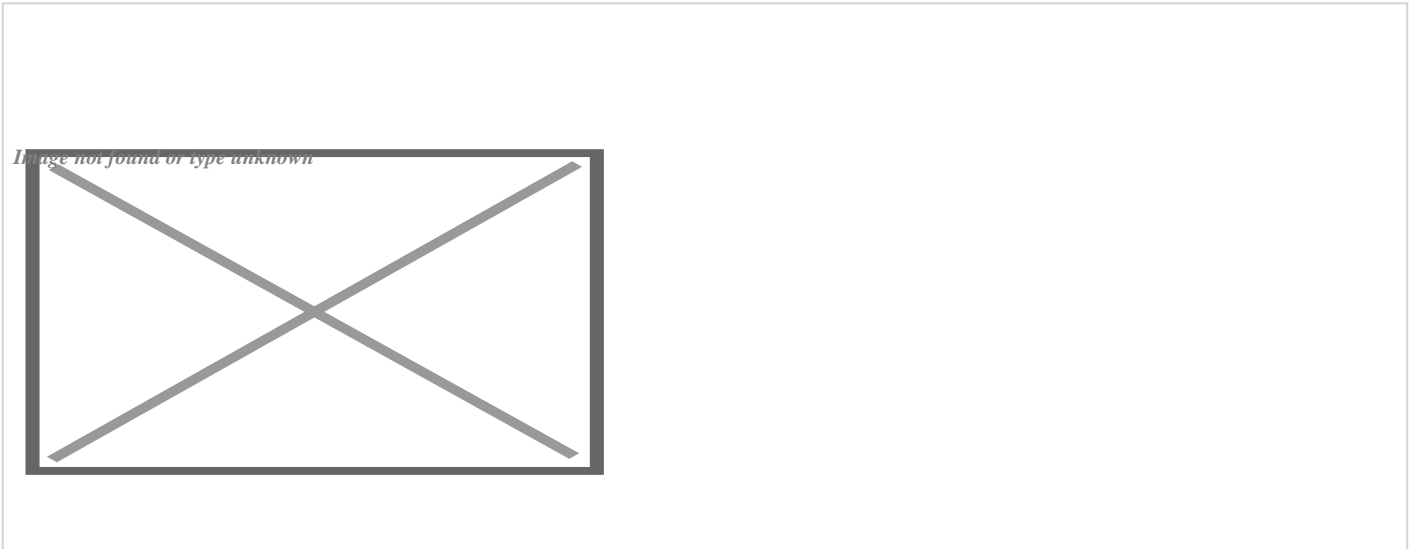


U.S. Ambassador to Australia and daughter of John F. Kennedy flags Julian Assange plea deal



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'There's a way to resolve it': Caroline Kennedy flags Assange plea deal

United States ambassador Caroline Kennedy has flagged a potential plea deal between Julian Assange and US authorities that could end America's pursuit of the WikiLeaks founder and allow him to return to Australia.

As hopes fade among Assange's supporters that the Biden administration will abandon its extradition request, a David Hicks-style plea bargain has emerged as the most likely way for Assange to avoid a drawn-out criminal trial on espionage charges and a possible lengthy jail term in a maximum security US prison.

Assange's legal options to avoid being extradited from the United Kingdom to the US could be exhausted within two months, coinciding with a visit by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese to Washington D.C. in late October.

Asked whether she believed it was possible for the US and Australia to reach a diplomatic outcome on the Assange matter, Kennedy said it was an "ongoing case" being handled by the Department of Justice.

"So it's not really a diplomatic issue, but I think that there absolutely could be a resolution," she said in an interview at her residence in Canberra.

Kennedy noted US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's recent comments that the charges against Assange were serious and that he had allegedly endangered US national security by publishing leaked classified information.

"But there is a way to resolve it," she emphasised, adding: "You can read the [newspapers] just like I can."

Pressed on whether US authorities could strike a deal with Assange to reduce the charges against him in exchange for a guilty plea she said: "That's up to the Justice Department."

Assange's brother Gabriel Shipton said: "Caroline Kennedy wouldn't be saying these things if they didn't want a way out.

Kennedy met with members of the Parliamentary Friends of Julian Assange Group in May, fuelling hopes of a breakthrough in his case.

The US is seeking to extradite Assange from London's Belmarsh prison to face 17 counts of breaching the US Espionage Act plus a separate hacking-related charge.

Australian National University international law expert Don Rothwell said Kennedy's comments reflected the fact the Biden administration was "very unlikely" to drop the charges against Assange outright.

Rothwell said the more realistic option was that US authorities could downgrade the charges against Assange in exchange for a guilty plea, taking into account the four years he has already spent in prison in the UK.

The remainder of any sentence could be served in Australia under a prisoner transfer agreement between the two countries, he said.

The complication was that Assange would be required to travel to the US and admit guilt, he said.

"Everything we know about Julian Assange suggests this would be a significant sticking point for him," Rothwell said.

He added: "It's not possible to strike a plea deal outside the relevant jurisdiction except in the most exceptional circumstances."

But Shipton said the idea of his brother travelling to the US to strike a deal was a "non-starter" because of the risk it could lead him to attempt suicide.

"Julian cannot go to the US under any circumstances," he said.

Albanese alluded to a plea deal earlier this year when he said that "a solution needs to be found that brings this matter to a conclusion", adding that "Mr Assange needs to be a part of that, of course".

Labor MP Julian Hill, a prominent Assange supporter, said: "I stand by my previous comments that no one should judge Mr Assange if he cuts a deal to get the hell out of there.

"In the meantime, I urge UK and US authorities to take concerns about Julian's health more seriously and to move him out of maximum security prison as a sign of good faith."

Assange lost his latest appeal against the US extradition order in June, and his supporters say he may have exhausted all appeal options by the time Albanese visits the US in late October.

Lawyer Greg Barns, an adviser to the Australian Assange campaign, said: "It is imperative that Anthony Albanese put Assange's case on the official agenda for his meeting with Biden and to make clear that this matter goes to the heart of the US-Australia alliance."

During a trip to Australia last month, Blinken pushed back on Australian calls for the charges against Assange to be dropped.

“Mr Assange was charged with very serious criminal conduct in the United States in connection with his alleged role in one of the largest compromises of classified information in the history of our country,” Blinken told reporters.

“The actions that he is alleged to have committed risked very serious harm to our national security, to the benefit of our adversaries, and put named human sources at grave risk of physical harm, grave risk of detention.”

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