

Former Australian Attorneys-General say Enough is Enough in relation to Julian Assange

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By Rob Hulls, Peter Duncan and Lara Giddens et al.

Nine former Attorneys-General, both State and Federal, have voiced their concern about the treatment of Australian citizen, journalist and publisher Julian Assange saying that enough is enough and his on-going detention must come to an end.

Former Victorian State Attorney-General Rob Hulls has joined with former Tasmanian Premier and Attorney-General Lara Giddings, another former Tasmanian Attorney-General Judy Jackson, former Queensland Attorney-General Rod Welford, former ACT Attorney General Bernard Collaery, former NSW Attorney General Bob Debus, former South Australian Attorneys-General Peter Duncan and Chris Sumner as well as former Federal Attorney-General Michael Duffy to call for an end to the inhumane, indefinite detention of an Australian citizen.

“Australian journalists have been rightly lauded in recent times for their work in exposing, in graphic detail, allegations of war crimes committed by Australian troops in Afghanistan,” Mr Hulls, who was Victorian AG from 1999 to 2010, said.

“By contrast, Julian Assange has been detained in London’s notorious Belmarsh prison for over four years because the U.S wants to extradite him to face charges which relate to the publication of details of US war crimes in both Afghanistan and Iraq,” he said.

Lara Giddings, who was Premier of Tasmania from January 2011 until March 2014 as well as being Attorney-General in that State from 2008 to 2011 also voiced her concerns about the treatment of Assange. “Regardless of what views people might have of Julian Assange, this man has had his freedom taken away from him for over eleven years. His on-going detention cannot be justified regardless of the rights or wrongs of his WikiLeaks exposé. He does not deserve to be left to the mercy of the United States legal system, where, if found guilty, he may well die in jail,” Ms Giddings said.

Tasmania’s first female Attorney-General Judy Jackson, who held the role from 2002 until 2006, also expressed disquiet about the plight of Assange.

“His treatment, as opposed to Australian journalists, is deeply troubling, given that in both cases the right of the public to know about war crimes, wherever and whenever they are committed, is crucial,” she said.

Former Queensland Attorney- General Rod Welford said that the indefinite jailing of Assange was unjust and had to be brought to an end.

“The on-going incarceration of Julian Assange is cruel and degrading in the extreme and amounts to the persecution of someone for exposing some inconvenient truths.” he said. Welford was Queensland AG and Minister for Justice from 2001 until 2005.

Former ACT Attorney-General Bernard Collaery, who was famously hounded for allegedly conspiring to communicate secret information about Australia’s involvement in the bugging of Timor-Leste’s Cabinet office, said that the pursuit of Assange has to stop. “The zealotry with which I was wrongfully pursued is being applied to Julian Assange. Powerful countries will do whatever they can to hide uncomfortable truths, and they don’t care about the collateral human damage,” he said. Collaery held the AG’s post in the ACT from 1989 until 1991.

Former South Australian Attorneys-General Peter Duncan and Chris Sumner believe that Julian Assange has become a political football to the detriment of justice and his health. “It is hard to fathom why this man has been in solitary confinement for so long while his fate seems to be part of a political game,” Mr Sumner, who was AG in South Australia in 1979 and from 1982 to 1993 and that States longest serving Attorney-General, said. “It is time to bring this saga to an end” said Peter Duncan, SA’s AG from 1975 to 1979.

Former NSW Attorney- General Bob Debus said that it was imperative that Australia upholds the human rights of Assange. “This Australian citizen is being detained in the harshest conditions and the toll on his mental and physical health must be enormous. We can’t stand by and do nothing,” he said. Mr Debus was NSW AG from 2000 to 2007 and was also Federal Home Affairs Minister from 2007 to 2009.

Former Federal Attorney-General in the Hawke and Keating Governments from 1990 to 1993 Michael Duffy, said the continuing detention of Julian Assange sets a dangerous precedent. "The United States is applying extra-territorial reach by seeking to charge a non-US citizen with crimes not committed in the US. This could potentially put at risk anyone in who publishes information that the US government deems to be classified for security reasons," he said.

The former Attorneys-General have written to the Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and the Federal Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus expressing their concerns and seeking a renewed focus on getting Julian Assange released from Belmarsh Prison and returned to Australia.

Here is the text of their letter:

Dear Prime Minister,

We write to you as former Attorneys-General and Ministers for Justice about the on-going plight of Australian citizen Julian Assange.

We believe that it is incumbent upon us, as former chief law officers and ministers with responsibility for the justice system within our various jurisdictions, to urge you and your Government to renew your endeavours to ensure our closest ally, the United States, ends its pursuit of Mr Assange so he can be released from Belmarsh prison and returned home to Australia. Whatever one's view of his actions, he has not been a free man for eleven years and has arguably more than served his time, if he ever even had a case to answer.

As you would be aware, Australian journalists in recent times have been rightly lauded for their work in exposing allegations of war crimes committed by Australian troops in Afghanistan. In stark contrast, Julian Assange has been detained for over four years in London's Belmarsh prison, on top of his effective imprisonment in the Embassy of Ecuador in London for seven years, because the US wants to extradite him to face charges which relate to the publication of details of US war crimes in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

We believe that the treatment of Julian Assange, as opposed to Australian journalists, is deeply troubling given that in both cases the right of the public to know about war crimes, whenever and wherever they are committed, is crucial.

In Australia we, quite rightly, condemn countries such as China, which seek to prosecute individuals who are not living in that country for exposing breaches of human rights or corruption. Despite this, the United States is applying extra-territorial reach by charging Assange, who is not a US citizen and did not commit alleged crimes in the US, under its Espionage Act. We believe that this sets a very dangerous precedent and has the potential to put at risk anyone, anywhere in the world, who publishes information that the US unilaterally deems to be classified for security reasons. This action should be of real concern to the Government because of its impact on journalists and whistle-blowers.

In relation to the on-going incarceration of Mr Assange, we say enough is enough and we look to you and your government to do all you can to satisfactorily resolve this matter quickly. As you have rightly said, both as Opposition leader and Prime minister, the Assange case must be brought to an end.

We have forwarded a copy of this correspondence to the Federal Attorney-General, the Honourable Mark Dreyfus KC.

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