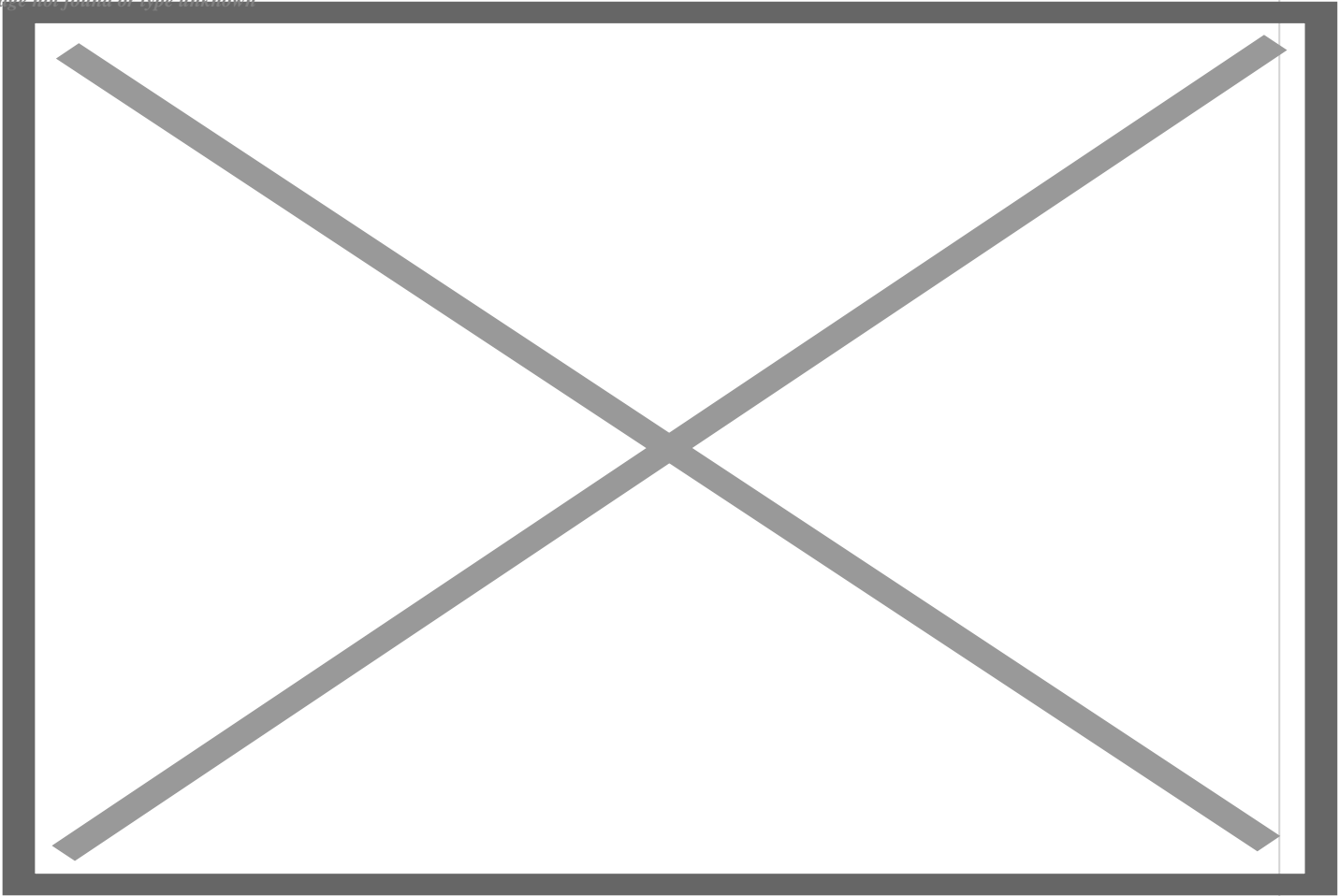


Australian prime minister talks with Biden about Julian Assange

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Gabriel Shipton (left) and supporters of Julian Assange standing at the corner of the road leading up to Blair House where Prime Minister Anthony Albanese stayed while visiting Washington DC this week. CREDIT:ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN

from The Sydney Morning Herald

By David Crowe *

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has raised the plight of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange in talks this week with United States President Joe Biden, stepping up efforts to find a way to release the Australian from jail.

Albanese discussed Assange in his private talks in Washington DC after making public calls in recent months for a resolution to the US charges against him for releasing state secrets.

The talks came as Assange's brother, Gabriel Shipton, told this masthead that he feared for his brother's life because of the impact of the detention on his mental health.

Shipton joined protestors outside the White House this week to raise awareness of the case at the same time Biden hosted Albanese at the residence.

Albanese confirmed to this masthead that he raised his concern about Assange in his discussions with the president during meetings that included an informal dinner, a discussion in the Oval Office at the White House and a formal meeting with Biden and his cabinet secretaries.

While he would not discuss his private talks with Biden or the president's view of the matter, he made it clear he believed the detention had gone on too long.

"I've made it clear that enough is enough — that it's time it was brought to a conclusion," he said.

Shipton said Assange should be released because his work at WikiLeaks had been in the public interest.

The Wikileaks disclosures included the "collateral murder" video that showed US forces killing civilians in Iraq and the release of a trove of US diplomatic cables.

Barnaby Joyce and Monique Ryan agree on two things: the weather and freeing Julian Assange. "We want the government to do more than just make representations to the Biden administration," Shipton said. "Ideally, we would like the government to act as it does for other Australians who are imprisoned overseas."

Assange, who is currently in London's Belmarsh prison, is facing a maximum jail sentence of 175 years after being charged with 17 counts of breaching the US Espionage Act plus a separate hacking-related charge.

Shipton, who saw Assange last week, said a visit to his brother was always "full of anxiety" about his brother's condition.

"He's still fighting, he's hanging in there despite what he's been through and despite the adversary he's taken on," he said. "He's not the same man he was a year ago or even before that — it's really taken its toll on him."

Shipton said it would be unacceptable for Assange to face trial in the US given the case is set down for a Virginia court where the community — and the jury pool — included defence and security workers.

"I don't believe that Julian would receive a fair trial in the United States," he said. "It's a bit of a fairytale, to be honest, this idea that Julian would receive a fair trial or a fair deal that wouldn't see him suffering more."

When Australian journalists asked US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby about the case this week, Kirby said it was an extradition matter for the Department of Justice.

Biden faces the risk of a domestic political blowback if he intervenes in the case to drop the extradition request, with conservatives such as former Donald Trump using it against the president at the next

presidential election.

Former president Barack Obama commuted the sentence of another person involved in the WikiLeaks disclosures, Chelsea Manning, after she had faced trial and gone to jail.

A cross-party delegation of MPs, including Nationals' former leader Barnaby Joyce and Kooyong independent Monique Ryan, travelled to Washington in September to plead for Assange's liberty.

Shipton said people cared about the issue because it was becoming a sign of the "inequality" in the relationship between Australia and the US.

"Julian is an Australian — he's an Australian father, he's an Australian son," he said. "He's an Australian citizen who's been unjustly imprisoned and it's up to the Australian government to defend their citizens overseas.

"People don't really understand what he even did wrong. He published truthful material," Shipton said in Washington. "So the other aspect to it is our right to know what governments do in our name, and that is important when we are in such a close relationship with the power that is imprisoning Julian for publishing national defence information about what they are doing behind closed doors."

*** David Crowe is chief political correspondent for The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age. Connect via Twitter or email.

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