

Delegation of Australian lawmakers will visit U.S. to push for Julian Assange's release

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Fox Nation host Piers Morgan talks to Julian Assange's brother and father about this role in leaking classified military documents.

By Landon Mion / Fox News *** Published September 9, 2023

A cross-party delegation of Australian lawmakers will travel to Washington, D.C., later this month to urge officials to drop the prosecution against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who is accused of publishing classified U.S. military documents leaked by a whistleblower.

The group will include former Deputy Prime Minister and National Party Leader Barnaby Joyce, Labor Party member of parliament Tony Zapia, Independent member of parliament Monique Ryan, Liberal Party member of parliament Alex Antic and Greens Party members of parliament Peter Whish-Wilson and David Shoebridge.

The Australian delegation will meet with House and Senate members, the State Department and the Justice Department to advocate against extraditing Assange to the U.S. to face charges for receiving, possessing and communicating classified information to the public under the Espionage Act. He also faces one charge alleging a conspiracy to commit computer intrusion.

Assange's brother, Gabriel Shipton, told Fox News Digital that the "All Party Australian delegation brings a powerful message from one of the U.S.'s closest allies, that the continued vengeful pursuit of Australian Publisher and Journalist Julian Assange is beginning to take its toll on the close friendship the two nations have enjoyed through history."

AUSTRALIAN PRIME MINISTER SAYS GOVERNMENT STANDS FIRM AGAINST US PROSECUTION OF JULIAN ASSANGE

Greg Barns, human rights lawyer and Assange campaign adviser, said in a news release announcing the delegation that polling shows nearly 90% of Australians believe the charges should be dropped. Shipton said in the release that even Australians who do not support Assange's actions believe he has suffered enough and should be released.

The prosecution against Assange is in connection with WikiLeaks' 2010 publication of cables detailing war crimes committed by the U.S. government in the Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, detention camp, Iraq and Afghanistan. The materials also expose instances of the CIA engaging in torture and rendition. WikiLeaks published hundreds of thousands of these classified U.S. military documents leaked by U.S. Army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning.

WikiLeaks also published its "Collateral Murder" video 13 years ago showing the U.S. military gunning down civilians in Iraq, including two Reuters journalists.

ASSANGE'S FATHER FEARS SON'S EXTRADITION TO U.S. AS WIKILEAKS LEADER'S HEALTH IMPROVES

"The most ceaseless hounding, the most unscrupulous lies and the most malicious persecution over 13 years reveal to us a malignant disregard of magnificent civic treasures of human accomplishment," Assange's father John Shipton told Fox News Digital. "Fighting for Julian's freedom embodies for all people iron hard determination to assert and continue asserting our indelible, inalienable rights."

The Australian journalist has been held at London's high-security Belmarsh Prison since he was removed from the Ecuadorian Embassy in London on April 11, 2019, for breaching bail conditions. He sought asylum at the embassy to avoid extradition to Sweden over allegations he raped two women after Sweden failed to ensure he would be protected from a U.S. extradition. The investigations into the sexual assault allegations were eventually dropped.

In addition to meeting with U.S. officials and lawmakers, the Australian delegation will also sit down this month with civil rights groups, including the American Civil Liberties Union, the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression and the Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters Without Borders.

AUSTRALIAN LAWMAKERS MEET WITH U.S. ENVOY TO PUSH FOR END TO JULIAN ASSANGE'S PROSECUTION

"We have grave concerns that if Assange is extradited and convicted for publishing truthful information, it will be a serious threat to investigative journalism in the United States and worldwide," Ben Wizner, director of the ACLU's Speech, Privacy, and Technology Project, told Fox News Digital.

The Obama administration decided not to indict Assange after WikiLeaks published the cables in 2010 because it also would have had to indict journalists from major news outlets who also published the materials. The DOJ under the Trump administration later indicted Assange under the Espionage Act and the Biden administration has continued to pursue his prosecution.

Former President Obama commuted Manning's 35-year sentence, for violations of the Espionage Act and other offenses, to seven years.

"The Justice Department and the State Department need to hear from allies that the continued efforts to imprison Assange are making things difficult and uncomfortable for friends and allies," Wizner said. "So I think [the delegation] is very important, and also I think that it points the way to what could be a reasonable solution here that should satisfy all sides."

The Justice Department and the State Department declined to comment on inquiries from Fox News Digital.

JULIAN ASSANGE SUPPORTERS DEMAND CHARGES BE DROPPED IN VIGIL OUTSIDE MERRICK GARLAND'S HOME

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has repeatedly said in recent months that the U.S. should end Assange's incarceration. "The Australian Government has made clear its view that Mr. Assange's case has dragged on for too long and that it should be brought to a close," a spokesperson for the Australian government told Fox News Digital. "The Prime Minister and Foreign Minister have expressed this view to the governments of the United Kingdom and United States, and we will continue to do so. The Australian Government cannot intervene in another country's legal or court processes just as they are unable to intervene in Australia's."

The spokesperson added: "We continue to convey our expectations that Mr. Assange is entitled to due process, humane and fair treatment, access to proper medical care, and access to his legal team."

Assange would face trial in Alexandria, Virginia, if he is extradited to the U.S., where he could be sentenced to as many as 175 years in an American maximum security prison.

"I think the structure of the Espionage Act means that there cannot be what I would consider to be a fair trial," Wizner said. "And I say that because the fact that the disclosures in 2010 informed the public, led to journalism awards, changed policy for the better. All of that would be irrelevant and inadmissible in a trial under the Espionage Act. The only thing the government needs to show under its theory is that WikiLeaks published the materials that the government insists are national defense information ... If this case is allowed to go forward, he'll really be arriving here not for trial, but for sentencing."

Some presidential candidates – Democrats Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Marianne Williamson, and Republican Vivek Ramaswamy – have expressed support for Assange, stating that they will drop the charges against him if elected to the White House in next year's presidential election.

"Mr. Kennedy has pledged to drop all charges against Julian Assange, and, if he has been convicted by the time Mr. Kennedy takes office, to pardon him," a spokesperson for Kennedy's campaign told Fox News Digital. "He believes it unlikely that Mr. Assange will receive a fair trial, given that the entire case

against him was a political vendetta from the outset. The prosecution of Mr. Assange is an assault on journalism as well as free speech."

Last year, editors and publishers of U.S. and European news outlets that worked with Assange to publish excerpts from the more than 250,000 documents he obtained in the Cablegate leak – The Guardian, The New York Times, Le Monde, Der Spiegel and El País – wrote an open letter calling for the U.S. to end its prosecution of Assange.

On Capitol Hill, Rep. Rashida Tlaib, D-Mich., led a letter to the DOJ earlier this year demanding that it drop the charges against Assange. Fox News Digital reached out to Tlaib's office for comment about the Australian delegation, but a spokesperson only pointed to a statement from April announcing the letter to the Justice Department.

Under the Trump administration, the CIA allegedly had plans to kill Assange over the publication of sensitive agency hacking tools known as "Vault 7," which the agency said represented "the largest data loss in CIA history," Yahoo reported in 2021. The CIA had discussions "at the highest levels" of the administration about plans to assassinate Assange in London and allegedly followed orders from then director Mike Pompeo to draw up kill "sketches" and "options," according to the report.

The agency also had advanced plans to kidnap and rendition Assange and had made a political decision to charge him, Yahoo reported.

WikiLeaks also published internal communications in 2016 between the Democratic National Committee and then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton's campaign that revealed the DNC's attempts to boost Clinton in that year's Democratic primary.

"The job of the media is to challenge the government's monopoly on secrets," Wizner said. "And if Assange is convicted, it will open the door to threatening news organizations and their reporters with imprisonment if they disregard the government's commands not to publish information even in the public interest ... You don't need to think that Julian Assange should win journalism awards to be very, very worried about the impact of this case on the freedom of the press."

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