

Australian lawmaker slams \$880,000 flight bill for Julian Assange

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Canberra, July 19 (RHC)-- A federal Liberal MP has taken a shot at the cost to get Julian Assange home to Australia despite commitments from a European foundation to cover the bulk of the costs before Assange left prison in London. Documents from Foreign Minister Penny Wong's office show it cost \$883,958 for Mr Assange to return to Australia accompanied by the UK and US ambassadors.

In June, Mr Assange agreed to plead guilty to one US Espionage Act charge of conspiring with a U.S. Army intelligence analyst to unlawfully obtain and disclose classified documents relating to the national defense. He had been in a maximum-security prison in London for five years and holed up at the

Ecuadorean embassy in London for seven years prior to that to evade the US espionage charges.

Liberal Party MP and government waste reduction spokesman James Stevens said in a statement “such exorbitant costs” brought Mr Assange “home in such lavish style.” “Being escorted by two of our most senior diplomats on chartered flights has cost nearly a million dollars – all to facilitate pleading guilty to spying against our closest ally,” he said.

“It’s a disgrace that much more important issues don’t command the same dedication of taxpayer resources that convicted criminal Julian Assange has.” However, taxpayers are not ultimately paying for most of the expense; a German foundation committed to covering it and has been billed 88 per cent of the costs.

German not-for-profit Wau Holland Foundation, which has connections to WikiLeaks, is expected to pay the bill by the end of August, Ms Wong’s letter says. The document was tabled in the Senate on Thursday, but the revelation the Australian government would not ultimately pay for Mr Assange’s flights was made as he travelled home last month.

“The Australian government facilitated all arrangements for the flight following an agreement for the costs to be reimbursed by the Wau Holland Foundation,” Ms Wong said. High commissioner to the UK Stephen Smith was ordered by the UK courts to accompany Mr Assange as a bail condition. Mr Smith’s airfares will cost the taxpayer \$17,807.39.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade costs tallied \$55,402.51.

U.S. ambassador Kevin Rudd was also on-board, having been closely involved with the diplomatic dealings to end Mr Assange’s imprisonment. Mr Rudd’s boarding passes cost \$29,267.73 that too fall on the public purse.

Both ambassadors had meetings in Australia about AUKUS, and Mr Rudd also had meetings with the Governor of the remote Pacific US territory where Mr Assange pleaded guilty. Speaking to NewsWire, Mr Stevens said no other Australian would get a chartered flight to bring them home from overseas and argued Mr Assange’s was “not an extraordinary case.”

“This guy is no angel, no saint,” Mr Stevens said

Questioned about an Australian ally, the US, pursuing Mr Assange until there were grave concerns the WikiLeaks founder would end his own life, Mr Stevens said the US was allowed to enforce its laws.

The MP cast no doubt the Wau Holland Foundation would “pony up” and pay but questioned the federal government underwriting the bill. Mr Stevens also felt the UK should not pay for our high commissioner’s travel despite it being a British court order because the UK had paid for Mr Assange’s incarceration and judicial proceedings.

At the time of his return home, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said: “Regardless of what you think of his activities, Mr Assange’s case had dragged on for too long. I have clearly and consistently – at every opportunity and at every level – advocated for Mr Assange’s case to be concluded.”

Mr Assange released classified material on WikiLeaks about the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, in some cases in raw or unredacted form.

The material included the infamous video from a U.S. military helicopter whose personnel on-board were shooting civilians in Baghdad.

WikiLeaks also published thousands of confidential documents suggesting that the US military had killed hundreds of civilians in unreported incidents during the war in Afghanistan.

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