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Australia welcomes Julian Assange home amid warnings about press freedom

There was broad bipartisan support at home for Assange's release, but some politicians also noted that the press freedom has worsened in recent years.

By Michael E. Miller

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A tourist walks past a mural of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange in Melbourne on Tuesday. (William West/AFP/Getty Images)

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CANBERRA, Australia — Australians waited for Julian Assange's chartered plane to arrive on home soil with a mixture of joy and relief on Wednesday afternoon as politicians across party lines welcomed what they said was his long-overdue release and Assange's ardent supporters celebrated his freedom.

A small crowd gathered outside the U.S. Consulate in Sydney, drinking champagne from plastic cups and holding signs featuring the WikiLeaks founder, who was a free man after pleading guilty to one charge of violating the Espionage Act and being sentenced to time served.

But none were happier than Assange's relatives, many of whom have not seen the WikiLeaks founder in almost 15 years. Assange's father, John Shipton, told local media he was "doing cartwheels" of joy, while his mother, Christine Assange, said the saga had "taken a toll on me as a mother."

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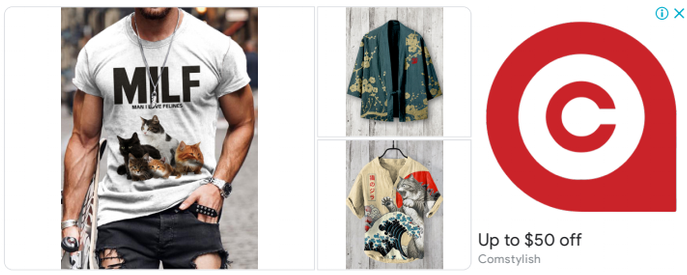

Assange's wife, Stella, and their two sons, aged 5 and 7, also traveled here from their home in London — the boys unaware that they are about to see their father outside a prison for the first time.

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange pleaded guilty June 26 to one count of violating the Espionage Act in a U.S. federal court in Saipan, Northern Mariana Islands. (Video: Julie Yoon/The Washington Post)

The deal was the result of two years of behind-the-scenes exhortations from Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, who had privately and publicly urged President Biden to allow Assange's release.

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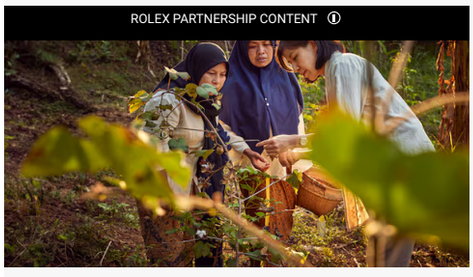
"This is not something that has happened in the last 24 hours, this is something that has been considered, patient, worked through in a calibrated way, which is how Australia conducts ourselves internationally," Albanese said on Wednesday. "I have been very clear as both the Labor leader and ... as prime minister that regardless of the views people have about Mr. Assange's activities, the case has dragged on for too long. There is nothing to be gained by his continued incarceration and we want him brought home to Australia."



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Even some of Assange's fiercest critics said it was a relief for the international saga to be over. "Assange is no hero, but it is a welcome thing that this has finally come to an end," opposition Sen. James Paterson told Sky News.

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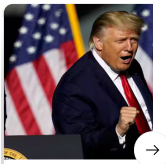

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Amid the emotions, however, were worries over what Assange's plea deal — entered during a brief morning pit stop in the Northern Mariana Islands, a U.S. territory — means for press freedom, around the world and in Australia, a nation where journalists and whistleblowers have endured setbacks recently.

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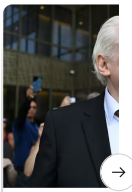

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Assange maintained in court Wednesday that he was a journalist and that he thought what he was doing, in publishing an avalanche of classified U.S. government information, was protected by the First Amendment, contending that the right to free speech contradicted the Espionage Act.

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Andrew Wilkie, an independent member of Parliament, warned it was "a really alarming precedent" for a journalist to be prosecuted in this way. "It's the sort of thing we'd expect in an authoritarian, totalitarian country," he said here. "It's not what we'd expect from the United States or a similar country like Australia. I think it sends a chill down the spine of journalists worldwide that this precedent has been set."

Barnaby Joyce, a conservative member of Parliament who campaigned for Assange's release, said he didn't like Assange but the issue was "extraterritoriality."

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“Imagine if someone from the United States who did something that wasn’t a crime in the United States happened to be in England and the next thing you know is being sent to Australia to serve 175 years in jail,” he said. “I imagine you’d see one of these U.S. nuclear [submarines] off our harbor, saying ‘Don’t do that.’”

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While Australians have long supported Assange, who grew up here before launching WikiLeaks in 2006 and becoming internationally famous in 2010 after publishing files about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States’ prosecution fed into fears some have in Australia over the deepening ties between the two nations.

Canberra and Washington have grown increasingly close in recent years, brought together by a concern at China’s growing aggression in the region, with Australia agreeing to host a rotating force of U.S. Marines in Darwin and more recently forming the “AUKUS” pact along with the United Kingdom. The United States has agreed to provide its ally with nuclear-powered submarines and increase military interoperability, sparking concerns here that Australia could be drawn into a future conflict.

That was affecting sentiment about Assange, said Antony Loewenstein, an Australian journalist who has known Assange since WikiLeaks was founded and has campaigned for his release.

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange leaves the United States Courthouse in Saipan, Northern Mariana Islands, on Wednesday after pleading guilty to an espionage charge. (Chung Sung-Jun/Getty Images)

“In Australia, it’s not just about whether he’s a journalist who’s been wrongfully imprisoned,” he said. “It’s also about this weird unresolved issue of this unhealthy relationship between Australia and the United States.”

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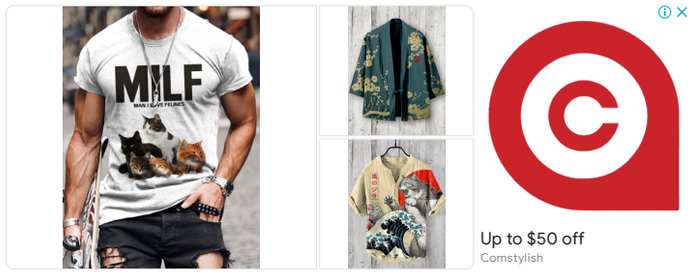
The longer Assange has languished in prison, the more his case has stirred those anxieties, he added.

For his many here in his home country, the question now is whether the 52-year-old will resume his role as the public face of WikiLeaks or whether the physical and mental toll of the last 14 years will dim his profile.

Outside the courthouse in Saipan, his attorneys suggested that Assange would return to the public fray. “Mr. Assange, I have no doubt, will be a continuing force for freedom of speech and transparency in government,” said Barry Pollack, his American lawyer. “He is a powerful voice and a voice that cannot and should not be silenced.”

In some ways, Australia could prove a challenging — or perhaps ripe — place for the transparency activist. It is arguably the most secretive liberal democracy in the world, said Johan Lidberg, head of journalism at Monash University in Melbourne, and Australia has been criticized recently for its treatment of both whistleblowers and journalists.



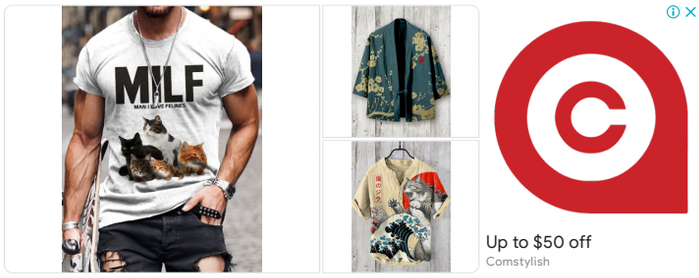
The country has fallen in press freedom rankings after a federal police raid on the public broadcaster in 2019 — under the previous conservative government — over an Afghan war crimes investigation and amid high-profile defamation suits against journalists. A war crimes whistleblower was recently sentenced to five years in prison, and another whistleblower will soon go on trial.

Albanese has promised to bolster whistleblower protection laws but so far his government has not delivered, said Monique Ryan, another independent member of Parliament who was part of a cross-party delegation to Washington last year to press for Assange’s release.

“It’s incredibly important that journalists in Australia and internationally are able to report on facts,” she said. “The feeling of most Australians is that is what [Assange] did: he brought to light some inconvenient truths that embarrassed world powers.”

People celebrate the release of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange at the British Consulate in Melbourne, Australia, on Tuesday. (Asanka Brendon Ratnayake/Reuters)

Polls have consistently shown public support for Assange in Australia, said Emma Shortis, an expert at the Australia Institute think tank who has written about the U.S.-Australia relationship. But that support has swelled in recent years as Australians across the political spectrum felt that Assange's treatment was unfair.



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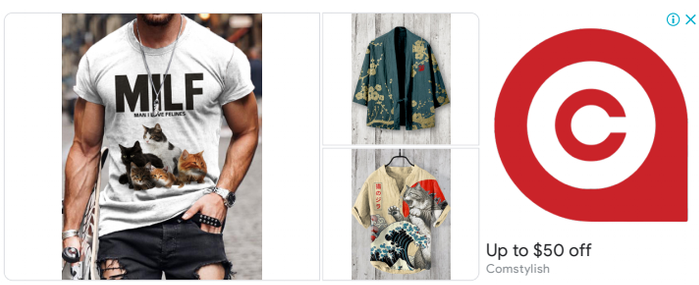
"When he was dragged out of the Ecuadorian embassy and put into Belmarsh prison in London, I think that's when support really increased," said Lidberg. "That's when it went from a journalism issue to a human rights issue."

Australia, which likes to think of itself as the land of the "fair go," was largely fed up with Assange's ongoing ordeal, he said.

Political support for his release has also grown. Albanese called for Assange's freedom before his election in 2022, and Assange's family lobbied members of both Australia's Parliament and the U.S. Congress. Albanese himself pressed President Biden on the issue multiple times, including during his White House visit in October. In April, Biden said he was "considering" the request.

Assange's release marks a diplomatic win for Albanese, Shortis said. Ryan and Wilkie agreed the prime minister deserved credit. Joyce concurred, but warned that the government risked showing too much support.



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"If it starts turning into a bachelor and spinster ball, that's no good," he said.

Despite the broad political backing for Assange's return, it's unlikely that he'll be the toast of Canberra, said Loewenstein. WikiLeaks' release of diplomatic cables in 2010 embarrassed politicians in the United States and Australia.

But Loewenstein, who covers Israel and the Palestinian territories, said he planned to quietly celebrate Assange's return to Australia.

"This is a very rare bright spot in many people's lives, including my own, at a time when there is so much crisis and trauma in the world," he said. "I might have a drink tonight, or two."

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