

Assange 'safe' – Australian won't approve his extradition to the USA

The Australian Government had sought – and received – assurances from the US Government on several occasions that Julian Assange would not be indicted to America, Foreign Minister Bob Carr told a gathering of civil liberties and human rights people in Canberra on 14 August.

If the US had wanted to extradite Assange, it was stated, they would have done so already, because extradition from UK is easier than from Sweden.

Australia would not agree to extradition of Assange to the USA, because that country retains the death penalty, delegates were told. But no mention was made of whether Australia would agree if the US Administration ruled out the death penalty as a potential sentence. Mr Carr reassured delegates that consular assistance to Assange has been ongoing.

The Assange exchange came as 90 representatives from a wide range of NGOs were addressed by the Foreign Minister and the Attorney General Nicola Roxon, who both fielded questions including about cluster bombs, the fate of Bahai in Iran, Tibet, capacity building in Laos and the situation in Sri Lanka.

As the group met in the Main Committee room of Parliament House, the other elephant in the room was the contentious issue of policy on asylum seeker, with debate of the legislation enabling off-shore processing under way in the House of Representatives. A number of delegates sought admission to listen to the debate, but were refused entry by high-handed Parliament House security staff. The UN High Commission for Refugees has since warned Australia risked breaching its international obligations over the "Pacific solution".

Of great interest to the meeting was the address by the new Australian Human Rights Commissioner, Prof Gillian Triggs, who stressed the need for practical initiatives and welcomed the formation of the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights, the PJCHR. The Commissioner stayed to take in the full two-day proceedings.

The chair of the PJCHR, former Speaker Harry Jenkins, explained the committee's role in evaluating legislation for compatibility with seven core UN treaties. He welcomed involvement of NGOs in the committee's operation. As to whether the committee would consider the Stronger Futures laws in relation to Indigenous people, and the asylum seekers legislation, he "took the suggestions on board".

Most of the conference time was taken by presentations by DFAT and AG officials on the current state of UN body committee proceedings and deliberations. Delegates expressed the feeling that much of this material

should have been distributed before the conference, to allow more time and opportunity for questions and answers on issues of particular interest.

The quality of questions from delegates was very high, demonstrating serious prior consideration by them of issues of concern. One sour note was the scornful reaction by DFAT staff to a valid question on why Australia is striving so hard to win a place of a non-permanent member on the UN Security Council. The point was made that, as Australia had refused to introduce a bill of rights, refused Indigenous constitutional rights and just legislated against asylum seekers, it was hardly in a high moral position to seek a UN seat. The cost of the bid is very conservatively estimated at \$25m, not counting the money spent over a number of years in processes associated with lobbying delegates around the world.

The conference was conducted under Chatham House rules, which seemed unnecessary as, overwhelmingly, the policy statements made are on the public record. A disadvantage of this restrictive practice is lack of transparency and thus accountability. CLA proposes the conference next year is held under CLA Rules:

CLA RULES:

Everything is open for full reporting unless DFAT or AGD declares in advance, and explains why, a particular segment is under Chatham House rules.

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