

Australian Labor government approves extradition of ex-US pilot to face trumped-up charges

Mike Head
23 December 2024

Australia's Albanese Labor government has again shown its readiness to trample over basic legal and democratic rights as part of its intensifying commitment to US war preparations against China, and US militarism more broadly.

Last Friday, without making any public announcement, let alone providing any explanation, Labor's Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus approved the American extradition request for former US Marine pilot Daniel Duggan, who has been an Australian citizen since 2012.

Duggan was arrested in Australia in October 2022, with the Albanese government's approval, at the request of US authorities, who accused him of providing military training to Chinese pilots in South Africa between 2009 and 2012.

Since then, the 56-year-old, who has consistently denied any wrongdoing, has spent more than two years in prison, including 19 months in maximum-security cells, in solitary confinement.

Despite none of the charges against him being tested in court, the father of six Australian children has been classified as a "high-risk inmate." If he were to be eventually convicted in a US court, he could be jailed for up to 65 years.

The timing of Dreyfus's decision is significant. It came less than a month before President-elect Donald Trump takes office in Washington, vowing to intensify the US economic and military confrontation with Beijing, along with any other country perceived as a threat to American global hegemony.

The decision also came, initially surreptitiously, on the eve of Christmas holidays, in a blatant attempt to suppress the considerable public opposition to the extradition. Dreyfus only acknowledged the move yesterday after Duggan's wife, Saffrine Duggan, alerted the media.

She told the Nine network newspapers: "I absolutely think this was premeditated timing ... two days before Christmas. It was organised, and that is what makes it even more shocking and deceitful. We're not being given a fair go."

Saffrine Duggan said Dreyfus had refused to meet her since the arrest two years ago. She vowed to continue her family's legal fight to halt the extradition.

There had been months of delay since May when a Sydney magistrate declared that Duggan was "eligible for surrender" to the United States, pending a final go ahead by Dreyfus, who initially approved the extradition proceedings in 2022 despite obvious defects in the case.

Duggan still has the option of appealing to the Federal Court against Dreyfus's decision to approve the extradition without providing any reasons. In August, Duggan's legal team sent an 89-page submission to Dreyfus outlining why the extradition should not go ahead, but Duggan's lawyer Bernard Collaery said he had received no response.

In a brief statement yesterday, Dreyfus belatedly verified Friday's decision, referring to the "public interest in the matter." He provided no explanation, except to claim: "Mr Duggan was given the opportunity to provide representations as to why he should not be surrendered to the United States. In arriving at my decision, I took into consideration all material in front of me."

Dreyfus simply stated: "I confirm that on 19 December 2024 I determined under section 22 of the Extradition Act 1988 (Cth) that Daniel Duggan should be extradited to the United States to face prosecution for the offences of which he is accused."

The attorney-general, a senior member of Labor's cabinet, refused to comment on supposed "operational" matters, including the timing of the decision, in order to

“ensure the safety of all persons involved and to uphold the integrity of the surrender process.”

Duggan’s family was told he would be extradited sometime after December 30 and before February 17, allowing little time for a legal challenge and public campaign.

The charges against Duggan, issued by the US government in 2017, accuse him of conspiring with seven others to teach Chinese military pilots to land on aircraft carriers. He is also charged with money laundering and violating a US embargo on American citizens exporting military services to China.

Both Duggan and the Test Flying Academy of South Africa, for whom he worked as a contractor from 2010 to 2012, deny the allegations. They point out that no aircraft carriers existed in South Africa and that pilots learned how to slow aircraft to almost stalling point as a necessary approach and landing technique.

Moreover, the charges date back to more than a decade ago, when working with Chinese-connected businesses was not prohibited by US law. That was before the Obama administration switched US policy on China, declaring a military and strategic “pivot” to the Asia-Pacific, setting in motion the US economic and military offensive against China.

In February last year, Saffrine Duggan lodged a human rights complaint with the United Nations, arguing her husband’s severe custodial conditions were causing him psychological distress. At the time, she said he was being held in a 2-metre x 4-metre cell at the maximum-security Metropolitan Remand and Reception Centre in Sydney’s western suburbs.

That inhuman treatment, and every other aspect of the extradition bid, has demonstrated that Duggan has become a test case, and a political victim, of plans by the US and its allies, including the Albanese government, for a potentially catastrophic war against China.

In June, for example, the US-led Five Eyes global surveillance and intelligence network—which involves Australia, the UK, Canada and New Zealand—issued a rare public bulletin. It explicitly cited Duggan’s case as part of a worldwide operation to counter alleged Chinese government attempts to recruit Western pilots.

That declaration damned the prospect of any fair trial in the US.

Australia’s political establishment has clearly aligned itself behind this operation. Under laws passed with bipartisan support in 2023—following Duggan’s arrest—former Australian defence personnel and public

servants face up to 20 years’ jail if they do unauthorised work for foreign governments, except for Five Eyes member states.

Duggan is also a victim of the fact that in 2012, the Greens-backed Gillard Labor government amended Australia’s extradition laws, removing several safeguards against extradition for political offences. Those alterations were directed, in the first instance, against the persecuted Australian citizen and WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange, to facilitate his removal to the US if he came back to Australia.

Duggan’s treatment further demonstrates the hypocrisy of Labor’s very limited role in securing a plea deal for Assange this year, after more than a decade of frame-up and incarceration for his crucial part in exposing war crimes and abuses by the US and its allies. The Albanese government’s only concern was to try to head off the massive global support for Assange.

The Labor government’s involvement in the pursuit of Duggan matches its prosecution and imprisonment of former military lawyer David McBride for helping to expose war crimes committed by Australian Special Forces in Afghanistan, during the Gillard government’s participation in the Obama administration’s stepped-up operations in the devastated country.

Labor’s role in the frame-up of Duggan is also in line with its complicity in the still-escalating genocidal atrocities, mass killings and war crimes being committed by the US-backed Israeli regime in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon and throughout Syria, and its support for the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

These developments underscore the necessity for a struggle by workers and youth, in Australia and globally, against the overturning of fundamental democratic rights, the US-led imperialist war drive with which this repression is inseparably connected, and the capitalist profit system itself, which is at the root of the plunge into another world war.



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