

# Australia's US Ambassador Kevin Rudd 'couldn't possibly comment' on whether he was 'linchpin' in Julian Assange plea deal

By political reporter [Evelyn Manfield](#)

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Kevin Rudd details diplomatic efforts to free Julian Assange

- **In short:** Australia's US Ambassador Kevin Rudd has avoided answering on whether he encouraged Julian Assange to accept a plea deal.
- Mr Rudd's diplomatic efforts in securing Assange's release from a UK prison have been lauded but he would not accept the title of "political linchpin" in the case.
- **What's next?** Assange's return to Australia is likely to continue dominating public discourse in coming weeks, but he is now a free man convicted of espionage.

Australia's Ambassador to the United States Kevin Rudd says he "couldn't possibly comment" on whether he encouraged Julian Assange to accept a plea deal with the US, as the former prime minister avoided answering if he was the "linchpin" in securing the end of the 14-year saga.

Mr Rudd flew to Canberra with Assange on Wednesday night [after the WikiLeaks founder pleaded guilty to a single espionage charge](#) in a US court on the island of Saipan.

Assange's guilty plea, and his five years already spent in a maximum-security London prison, resulted in his return to Australia as a free man – something the Australian government had long hoped for, after repeatedly saying the case had dragged on too long.

Mr Rudd said he travelled alongside Assange because he was the "principal point of contact" with both the US Department of Justice and Assange's lawyers, but would not claim the title of "linchpin" when asked in an ABC News interview with national political lead David Speers.



Kevin Rudd would not claim the title of "linchpin" when asked in an ABC News interview with national political lead David Speers. *(ABC News: Adam Kennedy)*

"That's your term, not mine," he said.

"The political linchpin to make this whole thing work was the prime minister who decided to actually make this a prominent issue with the United States."

Assange's lawyer, Jennifer Robinson, on Wednesday night praised both the efforts of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Mr Rudd as being responsible for "completely" changing the negotiations with the US, adding the ambassador had been "relentless" in Washington.

Mr Rudd would not comment on how difficult getting Assange's team to agree to a plea deal was, but said it required assessing the options in front of them.

He said the choices were limited to either a lengthy legal battle or "cut[ting] a deal through a plea bargain".

"Our view as a government ... was that this dragging on forever through this rolling set of appeals, and with Mr Assange frankly, looking at the prospect of being in incarceration for a very long period of time, and no resolution of the case whatsoever, the alternative was plainly the way to go," Mr Rudd said.

Asked if that meant he was encouraging Assange to take the deal, he responded: "You could say that, I couldn't possibly comment."

"The bottom line is this was a decision for the parties."

## **Desire to stop case from becoming a 'long-term irritant'**

Mr Rudd revealed little about his conversations with Assange on his long journey home, other than to say they "reflected on his time in prison".

"You can't ignore the elephant in the room," he said.

"On an aircraft such as that, you're not going to sit quietly in the corner and do the cryptic crossword – and besides, I've always hated cryptic crosswords because I can't get all the answers right."

Upon landing in the Australian capital, Mr Rudd said he was "relieved" to have the matter finally dealt with to stop it becoming a "long-term irritant" in the relationship between Australia and the US.



Julian Assange embraces his wife Stella after arriving in Canberra on Wednesday night. (Reuters: Edgar Su)

But he pointed out it was only human to also be "delighted" by a family reuniting, as he watched Assange and his wife Stella embrace on the tarmac.

## Rudd addresses Trump criticism

Mr Rudd's [relationship with Donald Trump has recently been in the spotlight](#) after the former president labelled him "not the brightest bulb" and suggested he might not have a long future in the role if he's re-elected to the White House.

But he brushed off the recent criticism: "A lot of people have had disparaging things to say about me over the years.

"That's just life in the fast lane."

He insisted he was "fully engaged with team Trump" on various issues and was constantly building relationships on both sides of politics so Australia would continue to have solid ties with the US no matter who was elected to office.

