

Journalist John Pilger speaks out on charges against Julian Assange

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Veteran journalist and documentary filmmaker John Pilger, a two-time recipient of Britain's Journalist of the Year award, is a well-known opponent of the US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the media apparatus that lies about them to the public.

In 2003, the Australian-born Pilger co-directed *Breaking the Silence: Truth and Lies in the War on Terror* (2003), which exposes US government claims about the "war on terror" and documents the manner in which American and British intelligence financed and supported Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan.

On December 7, Pilger was one of a number of prominent individuals, including filmmaker Ken Loach, who offered to stand bail in a British court for WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. Assange faces extradition to Sweden where he is the target of fabricated and politically motivated charges of sexual misconduct.

The offer was rejected by the London magistrate and Assange was remanded in custody. There are reports that the Swedish authorities are already in discussions with Washington over Assange's eventual extradition to the United States, where he would face trial on trumped-up charges of spying or facilitating terrorism.

Assange's imprisonment is a legal travesty. Its aim is to punish the WikiLeaks founder for publishing documents exposing the crimes and conspiracies carried out by US officials and others, and to intimidate anyone who dares to oppose the political machinations and warmongering of the major powers.

In addition to *Breaking the Silence*, Pilger has produced a number of other documentaries exposing imperialist war crimes. His latest effort, *The War You Don't See*, focuses on the media's role in war, and

more broadly, as the propaganda arm of governments in justifying military interventions.

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed Pilger regarding his stand in defence of Assange and the implications of the attack on the WikiLeaks founder.

WSWS: What were your impressions from the hearing that took place in London on December 7, and the denial of bail to Julian Assange?

John Pilger: The impression I got from the bail hearing was that the judge had made up his mind from the start. He had before him a person with no previous offences, who had not been charged with any crime in Sweden.

As Katrin Axelsson from Women Against Rape pointed out in a letter to the *Guardian*, it is routine in the UK for people charged with rape to be granted bail. And Julian Assange not only has never been formally charged, but the manner in which this case has been conducted in Sweden is a disgrace by any measure of criminal justice.

I pointed out in court that the senior prosecutor in Stockholm had thrown the case out as worthless and it was only the intervention of a prominent right-wing politician and lawyer that gave it new life.

WSWS: Why have you come forward to defend Assange? What are the issues that you believe are involved and why are they important for people across the world?

John Pilger: Julian Assange is an innocent man until proven otherwise. I don't believe he would receive a fair trial in Sweden, and there is the risk he would be "rendered" to the United States where the attorney-general is busy trying to invent a law with which to prosecute him for WikiLeaks' truth-telling.

Moreover, he has been effectively abandoned by the government of his own country [Australia] and, as a compatriot and one who believes in the free flow of information, I am giving him support and solidarity.

The importance of WikiLeaks cannot be overestimated. It represents a revolution. For the first time in my lifetime, we are learning day-by-day how power distorts and threatens our lives. In one sense, it's an exciting time and its founder should not be in a prison cell.

WSWS: What are the implications of the witch-hunt and crackdown on Assange and WikiLeaks, in your opinion, for freedom of the Internet and press freedom in general?

John Pilger: The implications are of course worrying. That said, watch how WikiLeaks outwits the hypocritical “freedom-lovers”, who are currently seeking to deny WikiLeaks both the legitimate means of gaining financial support and cyberspace itself. I like John Naughton's comment: “What we are hearing from the enraged officialdom of our democracies is mostly the petulant screaming of emperors whose clothes have been shredded by the net”.

WikiLeaks has taught many journalists a lesson they needed to learn, or re-learn: that they have no credibility while they are agents of power, not of people. Will that change journalistic practices? Yes, to some degree, because those journalists who care about the responsibilities of their craft will understand that WikiLeaks has shamed those in the media whom George Bush's press spokesman once called “complicit enablers”.

WSWS: What is your opinion of the state of the establishment press and media today, both as regards the response to Assange and WikiLeaks, and more broadly?

John Pilger: I have just completed a documentary film entitled *The War You Don't See*. It goes to air on ITV in Britain on December 14 and at the same time in cinemas across the country. I urge people to see it; it may answer these questions.

With honourable exceptions, the corporate media is a propaganda arm of government. But it has been that way for the last one hundred years, since the press barons ended the era of campaigning, people-based, often radical journalism and the notion of “objectivity” was appropriated by journalism schools in the United

States as part of the new “professionalism”—meaning journalism that takes its lead from above not from below.

What I find hopeful is that for the first time we are beginning to question the corporate rituals and mysticism, unwritten rules and uncharted boundaries, which pervade the media and too often ordain young journalists.

WSWS: Do you think there is an irony in the fact that those, like Assange and WikiLeaks, who exposed grave war crimes are hounded as criminals, and those responsible for such crimes are the ones doing the hounding?

John Pilger: Of course. That is the only response to those who claim that the WikiLeaks disclosures have put lives at risk. Even the Pentagon has let slip there is no evidence of that. There is, however, voluminous evidence that rampant power has destroyed countless lives.

WSWS: What do you say to those following this case and concerned about democratic rights and freedom of the press?

John Pilger: The United States was the first liberal democracy with universal rights. The First Amendment to its Constitution guarantees freedom of speech—or so we thought. Those attacking Julian Assange and WikiLeaks included prominent liberals.



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