

Julian Assange condemns Australian Labor government at public meeting

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WikiLeaks' founder and editor Julian Assange strongly condemned the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard in a pre-recorded address broadcast to a large public meeting convened in Melbourne last Friday.

The event took place with just four days notice, yet a capacity audience of more than 600 people attended, with hundreds more turned away to watch a live video feed of the event, broadcast on a large screen outside the city's Federation Square venue. The turnout demonstrated the enormous support for WikiLeaks among ordinary people in Australia, and their opposition to the persecution of Assange on bogus rape allegations by Swedish authorities.

Assange's address was a powerful and principled defence of himself and WikiLeaks. "We support a cause that is no more radical a proposition than that the citizenry has a right to scrutinise the state," he declared. "The state has asserted its authority by surveilling, monitoring and regimenting all of us, all the while hiding behind cloaks of security and opaqueness... We at WikiLeaks recognise the difference between secrecy and privacy. Individuals, not governments, have the right to privacy. Strong powers must be held to account while the weak must be protected." (Click here for Assange's speech on YouTube)

Assange rejected accusations that there was no "public interest" in publishing the leaked US diplomatic cables. "It is surely a matter of public interest that Australian politicians secretly brief foreign embassies, in effect providing them with political intelligence on the Australian government, while concealing these vital facts from those who actually elected them to office," he declared. "WikiLeaks has brought this important information to the public. It is surely a matter of public interest that the US secretary of state Hillary Clinton has been running a secret intelligence campaign directed at the leadership of the United Nations, demanding passwords, DNA, personal encryption keys, credit card numbers, email addresses and so on. That targeting is illegal under the 1946 UN Convention on Privileges and Immunities and illegal under the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. And it is surely a matter of public interest that the Labor government has been secretly working to shield from prosecution Indonesian military figures who killed an Australian journalist in East Timor. WikiLeaks brought this

information out to the public as well. It would appear the Labor government today is doing what the Labor government did in 1975 regarding East Timor—talking about human rights while trying to downplay attacks on journalists."

The WikiLeaks' editor also rejected charges that the cables' publication had endangered lives. "That which is asserted without evidence can be dismissed without argument," he told the audience. "And it is interesting how some politicians single out my staff and myself for attack, while saying nothing about the slaughter of thousands by the US military or other dictatorships, and saying nothing about other, much wealthier, powerful news organisations that publish material in partnership with us. It is cowardly to bully a small media organisation, but that is what is happening here."

He continued: "I want to assure you that we will not mimic the timidity and subservience to power that some other media organisations have. If that is what it takes to go 'mainstream' then we are happy where we are—at the frontline of the truth... We have been deeply moved by the concern Australians have shown us, but I ask that you turn your concern into action. Insist the attacks on my staff and organisation stop. Insist that I be allowed to return home. Insist that the Australian government come clean on all its interactions with foreign powers in relation to our organisation."

Assange's lawyer in Britain, Jennifer Robinson, who is also an Australian citizen, spoke to the meeting via a live video link-up. She began by referring to developments in Tunisia and Egypt, and Assange's work in preparing the publication of diplomatic cables demonstrating Washington's complicity with the Mubarak regime's crimes. "Julian and his team had been up all night redacting cables in order to send them into Egypt by whatever means they could," Robinson said. "At the time we joked, 'what kind of a world is this that we live in, where the vice president of the US, Joe Biden, is quick to accuse Julian Assange of being a high tech terrorist and yet is reluctant to call Mubarak a dictator?'"

She described her reaction to the Gillard government's support for the attack on Assange. "I myself was shocked when the Australian Attorney General [Robert] McClelland announced that Julian would be handed over to the US authorities swiftly and that he would not rule out revoking his passport. When Julian told me

this news I couldn't believe it and had to read it for myself. Would the Australian government be so quick to turn so unquestionably on its own citizen and leave him stranded in the world without consular assistance? Apparently so, as sufficient political power was brought to bear. We had serious conversations at that time about whether Julian would have to become the first ever political refugee seeking asylum from Australia in another state. Soon after, Prime Minister Gillard, in what I consider to be a breathtaking political and legal miscalculation, accused Julian of acting illegally."

Importantly, Robinson then directly rejected the rape allegations that have been used to pursue Assange. "The [London extradition] hearing on Monday and Tuesday is not a trial of facts, in which the court will determine Julian's innocence or guilt in relation to these allegations," she explained. "In many ways I wish it were a trial of facts, because I'm certain that an English court, or indeed an Australian court, would throw this case out. It is, after all, a case of consensual sex between adults, in which neither woman said no. In fact a reasonable prosecutor, both in the UK or Australia would have agreed with the chief prosecutor in Stockholm when she decided to throw the investigation out. As a woman and a feminist, I believe all allegations of sexual assault must be taken seriously, but we do not achieve justice for women by denying justice to men."

Assange's counsel condemned the role played by Swedish prosecutor Marianne Ny. She accused Ny of "acting in contravention of her obligations under the European Convention of Human Rights" and "abusing the European arrest warrant system".

The public meeting was sponsored by civil liberties organisation Liberty Victoria, GetUp, Trades Hall, and the journalists' union, Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA). Speaking from the platform after the video broadcasts from Assange and Robinson were Greens parliamentarian for Melbourne Adam Bandt, MEAA secretary Christopher Warren, Melbourne public interest solicitor Lizzie O'Shea, and Peter Gordon of legal firm Slater and Gordon.

The remarks of each of these figures stood in marked contrast to the important and forthright addresses of Assange and Robinson. They were characterised, above all, by evasions and double talk, aimed at covering up or playing down the Gillard government's role. Moreover, unlike Assange himself, none of the other speakers mentioned what the leaked diplomatic cables had revealed about the US government's active and extensive involvement in the Australian Labor Party and trade unions.

Peter Gordon, who employed Gillard in his law firm before she entered parliament, plaintively began his address by emphasising it "gives me no pleasure at all to stand up here tonight and make remarks which are critical of one of my former colleagues and partners in Julia Gillard, a woman in whom I have a great deal of admiration". He went on to describe Gillard and Robert McClelland as "decent people" and Barack Obama and Hillary

Clinton as "decent politicians".

Christopher Warren spoke at length, absurdly portraying the Australian press as a crusading fourth estate, with WikiLeaks typical of the media's role in holding to account those in power. This shameless distortion of the real situation—in which the corporate media functions as a loyal instrument of the official political establishment—was capped by his misrepresentation of the *New York Times*' Bill Keller as a supporter of Assange (see: "The *New York Times*' Bill Keller on Wikileaks: a collapse of democratic sensibility").

Adam Bandt declared that the "gut response of senior members of the political establishment to attack Assange spoke volumes"—an unwitting indictment of the Greens' own role. The "gut response" of the Greens to the eruption of legal threats against Assange and incitement to violence from people such as Sarah Palin was to say nothing for a week. Requests for a statement from the Greens by *World Socialist Web Site* reporters were ignored. Only when they had sniffed the political wind and established that there was widespread support for WikiLeaks among ordinary people—and serious concern about what was being done to Assange from within the media and legal fraternity—did Greens' leader Bob Brown say a word about what was happening.

Speaking after Jennifer Robinson had stridently denounced the Swedish allegations against Assange, Bandt attempted to lend a veneer of credibility to the sinister and transparent attempt, by both Swedish and US authorities, to frame the WikiLeaks' editor, declaring: "It is of course difficult at a distance to form a view about the case. And while some of the alleged activities may not amount to a crime under Australian law, I believe that the women in question have as much right to be heard as Julian Assange has to be presumed innocent." The Greens' MP then made a pathetic effort to cover his tracks and appear "even handed", continuing, "But I also wonder when every government will act with as much concern towards sexual assault allegations as the United Kingdom and Sweden is."

The Greens' parliamentarian concluded by issuing a polite request to Gillard to allow Assange to return home safely.



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