Australia: Thousands turn out in support of WikiLeaks, Assange and Manning

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18 March 2011

Close to 2,000 people attended a public meeting at the Sydney Town Hall on Wednesday in support of WikiLeaks' editor and Australian citizen Julian Assange and alleged American whistleblower, Private Bradley Manning. The meeting was sponsored by Amnesty International and other civil liberties organisations, with the assistance of the Sydney City Council. The large attendance demonstrated the outrage felt by a broad cross-section of the Australian population over the collaboration of the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard with the US-led persecution of Assange and WikiLeaks.

The meeting was proposed and addressed by well-known independent journalist John Pilger. He also invited independent federal MP Andrew Wilkie and civil liberties' lawyer Julian Burnside to speak.

Pilger has played an important role in Assange's defence. Last December, he was among a group of prominent figures offering their own resources to meet the onerous £240,000 bail demanded from Assange by a British judge in order to release him from prison. This was under conditions where a legal defence was being prepared against attempts to extradite Assange to Sweden on spurious sex crime charges.

Assange's defence counsel has argued that such an extradition would be an interim step to his extradition to the United States, where a secret grand jury has reportedly been empanelled to prosecute him on espionage charges.

Pilger began his remarks by citing leaked documents from the British Defence Ministry and the Pentagon, in which WikiLeaks was described as a threat due to its exposure of the secret dealings of government.

The Pentagon document, dated March 2008, called for a campaign to "destroy WikiLeaks' centre of gravity, its public trust" through "threats of exposure and criminal prosecution."

Pilger told the audience: "The real threat is not WikiLeaks or Julian Assange, but you. The real threat is you finding out the truth about those who pretend to be democratic, and to act in your interests, and to promote a peaceful world. The real threat is you being able to call your government to account."

Pilger proceeded to call for the broadest political action in defence of Assange and WikiLeaks. "Unless we make our voices heard now," he said, "Julian Assange is likely to end up in a Kafkaesque judicial system in the US, which is now so corrupted that not a single detainee since 9/11 has been accorded any redress in America's courts, including innocent people detained for years and tortured."

Pilger announced the presence in the front row of the audience of former Guantánamo Bay detainee David Hicks, provoking lengthy, thunderous applause.

David Hicks, who was seized in Afghanistan during the 2001 US invasion, was imprisoned as an "enemy combatant" for six years. He suffered severe abuse and torture, with the full support of the former Howard conservative government in Australia. He only secured his release by pleading guilty to the fabricated terrorism charges levelled against him by a US military court, in exchange for transfer to an Australian prison and a short sentence.

"Julian Assange and WikiLeaks have broken no law and are charged with no crime, and yet it's clear the Gillard government is trying to do to Assange what Howard did to David Hicks," Pilger stated. As WikiLeaks began publishing leaked US diplomatic cables, Gillard publicly denounced Assange's actions as "illegal", while Attorney-General Robert McClelland declared that the Labor government would cooperate with efforts to prosecute him in the US.

Pilger noted the recent revelations that the Gillard government had gone so far as to secretly investigate whether Assange could be charged with treason under Australian law.

On Monday night, Assange personally confronted Gillard over her support for the WikiLeaks' witch-hunt, during the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) weekly "Q and A" program. In a live-to-air question via video link, Assange informed Gillard he had evidence her government had supplied information to "foreign powers" about Australians working for or affiliated with WikiLeaks. He asked the prime minister when she "would come clean". If she did not, Assange asked, "should perhaps the Australian people considering charging you with treason?"

The public challenge to Gillard by Assange provoked a furious reaction from the Murdoch media, which has been at the forefront of attempts to demonise and discredit WikiLeaks in Australia, the US and globally. On Tuesday, *Australian* columnist Dennis Shanahan denounced Assange as someone "accused of crimes in Sweden and sought for political havoc in the US" and accused the ABC of

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"television terrorism".

Pilger informed the audience he had information that Attorney-General McClelland had been briefed that the Swedish charges "stink". A parliamentary briefing in Canberra was told last week that the behaviour of the leading Swedish figures involved was "highly improper and reprehensible" and "preclude[d] a fair trial". Pilger said: "The implications for Assange in Sweden are dire."

Concluding his remarks, Pilger highlighted the immense service that WikiLeaks and Assange had played in bringing to the light of day the secret diplomacy of the US and other governments around the world.

"We have a right to know about these machinations", he said. "We have a right to know these things, just as the people of Egypt and Tunisia had the right to know about the corruption of their regimes. They acted on that information. Certainly we can be inspired by what others have done fearlessly."

Following Pilger's speech, Andrew Wilkie addressed the meeting. In March 2003, on the eve of the Iraq war, Wilkie resigned his position as an Australian intelligence officer and publicly denounced as lies the claim that Iraq had "weapons of mass destruction". Last year, he was elected as an independent member of the federal parliament. Along with two other independents and a Greens member, he sided with Gillard, enabling Labor to form a minority government. He has nevertheless made occasional criticisms of government actions, including its prejudicial denunciations of Julian Assange.

Wilkie observed that he received support and encouragement from around the country when he denounced Gillard last December for "showing contempt for the rule of law, contempt for presumption of innocence and contempt for freedom of the press."

He told the audience that one of the factors behind the support for WikiLeaks was concern over censorship. "What we are seeing here with Julian Assange and WikiLeaks," he said, "is another attempt to censor the internet, which will be to deny it its great strength."

Wilkie also noted the popular anger over "the way a succession of Australian governments have been prepared to treat Australian citizens." He pointed out that the compensation recently granted to the other Australian Guantánamo Bay detainee, Mamdouh Habib, was "all the proof we need that that man was treated wrongly and that Australian governments were party to that mistreatment". David Hicks, Wilkie said, had been "fed into a grinder that has no similarity to any decent justice system."

Wilkie denounced the Labor government for having shown "no interest" since it won office from the Howard-led conservative parties in "conducting a full and proper inquiry, not into David Hicks, but into the system that treated him the way it did and into the government that allowed it to happen."

The final speaker, lawyer Julian Burnside, declared that Assange and WikiLeaks had "done nothing wrong" in publishing leaked documents. The Gillard government, he said, had "betrayed one of our own citizens."

Burnside dealt sharply with the political character of the sexual offences Assange is alleged to have committed in Sweden. The extradition efforts had been brought forward alongside agitation in the United States for action against WikiLeaks. "Anyone who thinks the extradition is actually about alleged sexual crimes," Burnside said, "has been living in sad isolation for too long."

The speakers were followed by a short question period before Pilger concluded the meeting with an appeal for a continuing campaign in support of Assange and WikiLeaks. His proposed campaign, however, consisted only of exhorting those present to pressure the thoroughly compliant and corporate-controlled media establishment to apply greater oversight and scrutiny of government. As they left Sydney Town Hall, audience members did so without being presented with any political perspective to conduct the type of struggle required to defend democratic rights. Such a struggle must be based on the political independence of the working class from all the parties and organisations of the political establishment, including Labor, the Greens and the trade unions, and grounded on a revolutionary socialist and international program.

One of those in attendance was Natalie, a student from the United States studying Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Sydney.

She told the WSWS that the WikiLeaks exposures had been "a validation of what a lot of people have suspected in the back of their minds, which is that our politicians tend to say one thing in public and in front of the press, and do quite a different thing behind closed doors, when they think no-one's looking or watching.

"What they're trying to protect are not the interests of the common people. No matter who is there we have to hold them to a certain level of scrutiny. When we blindly feel that if we just choose the other guy then he will do everything that he said, we see that it's not true. We elected Obama on 'hope' and 'change' and we can see right now with Guantánamo Bay and a lot of other issues that not much has changed. I think we are learning these hard lessons today."

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