

US whistleblower Chelsea Manning defies ban to speak in Australia

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Last Sunday, an audience of more than 1,500 gave courageous whistleblower Chelsea Manning a standing ovation at the conclusion of her hour-long appearance at Australia's Sydney Opera House, part of its three-day ANTIDOTE festival. The enthusiastic response revealed the yawning gulf between the new right-wing Morrison government's move to ban Manning from entering the country and the appreciation of ordinary people for her commitment to exposing the realities of war and the unending crimes and conspiracies of the US government.

Just days before her scheduled talks in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, followed by Auckland and Wellington in New Zealand, the Morrison government attacked Manning's right to speak in public about her experiences by issuing a "Notice of Intention to Consider Refusal" to deny her an entry visa. The ostensible grounds were that she failed Section 501 of the Migration Act's "character test" because of her "substantial criminal record."

This anti-democratic measure underscores the hostility of the Australian ruling establishment to the very concept of freedom of speech, with which Manning, above all, has become so powerfully connected. While unable to address the crowd in person, she appeared on a huge onstage screen, speaking via satellite from Los Angeles. Also on stage was Australian journalist and interviewer Peter Greste, who, as a reporter for *Al Jazeera* in Egypt, was jailed for a year in 2014.

Asked by Greste what had prompted her to leak 750,000 top security US military and diplomatic documents while on deployment in Iraq, Manning gave a sense of being engulfed in a deep personal and political crisis throughout 2008, including becoming homeless and living rough for around six months in California. She also recounted her shock, as an advocate for gender equality, at the outcome of the 2008 California vote on Proposition 8, which overturned the democratic right to same-sex marriage after that right had been voted into law only two years earlier. The outcome signalled that a small majority of the population wanted "to effectively divorce, at the time, 11,000 people."

"I had been living under the assumption [that] history is over, things are always going to get better," Manning continued. The Proposition 8 outcome "really shattered my understanding of

the world and of institutions being benevolent." This was compounded by systemic abuses of LGBT rights, for which, she said, "court processes were not enough to better."

Like millions of others in precarious circumstances, Manning signed up to the military. Speaking with blunt and disarming honesty, she reviewed her own political transformation after arriving in Iraq as an intelligence analyst with significant mathematical skills.

"By the time I arrived in Iraq in 2009, the war had been going on for so long that there were huge amounts of data for us to pour over and to run models on. And I focussed on that."

But, she observed, "Once you're immersed in a war zone, you realise that it isn't statistics anymore. These were human lives and flaws and all of the vulnerabilities that people have. And all of the hopes and dreams and the mistakes that are made. And life and death. And it just became so real and so raw—just being there—that I wanted to do something, and be a part of something. I thought I knew everything about this area, yet I didn't know anything at all."

Explaining why she decided to leak the "Collateral Murder" video of a US Apache helicopter training its weapons on 12 Iraqi civilians below, then gunning them down, along with two Reuters journalists, she said: "It wasn't just bad things. There was life—kids, soccer, people helping each other. But everything became deeper and more complicated. You see the worst of humanity and the best. And no one would have cared if the Reuters journalists weren't there. They were valued more than everyone else. That seemed self-evident to me."

"I was working 12 hours a day, without weekends. I realised that our models were only used if they fit in with what command wanted."

Manning's decision to become a whistleblower was a heroic and selfless act. It lifted the lid for the world's population on the atrocities of war and the lies, deceit, violence and inhumanity of governments that call themselves "democratic." She not only exposed military secrets, but also 250,000 diplomatic cables from US embassies, exposing US interference, including regime-change operations around the world.

One should also recall that the hundreds of thousands of documents exposed not only the brazen criminality of the US,

but of its alliance partners as well. These included every Australian government since the fraudulent “war on terror” began. Seventeen years later, no one has been held to account for these crimes or for the outrageous treatment inflicted on Chelsea Manning herself. Political establishments worldwide have made it their business to downplay, deny and censor any genuine understanding of the implications of the criminal wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

While she did not refer, in the course of the Opera House event, to her subsequent punishment, Manning suffered horrific consequences. She was arrested and charged by the US military, under the Obama administration, for leaking internal military documents to WikiLeaks, and sentenced to 35 years’ jail. She served seven, including one-and-a-half years in solitary confinement, before President Obama, in one of the final acts of his presidency, commuted her sentence. She was released in 2017. Obama nevertheless pointedly refused to remove her “criminal record” from the books.

It was this decision of Obama’s that enabled the Morrison government to issue its threat to bar Manning from entering Australia.

Asked by Greste, “What worries you? What about censorship?” she answered: “This is business as usual. Facebook and Twitter have collected huge amounts of information from people. Your information can then be sold and used. But there is a way of pushing back.”

She said that most people were aware of what was happening but that something had to be actually done about it.

“We have to do something in response. We are in a new era, even more disruptive than the printing press was. And it is only just trending to the surface. The tendency is towards more and more secrecy.”

The recent Cambridge Analytica scandal, she said, was just “business as usual. The scandal here, is that it wasn’t really scandalous.” Likewise, with Facebook’s data-sharing, where huge amounts of personal information were simply being passed on and even sold by Facebook and other social media.

Manning’s most penetrating observations related to the current situation inside the United States. Referring scathingly to the military-police-intelligence stranglehold over daily life, she declared: “We live in a domestic military occupation that is armed to the teeth... The mentality of the police is that we’re not policing, we’re patrolling. The police force is the military and the military is the police. The lines are being blurred.”

She attacked the \$700 billion and more being spent on the military each year and the immense profits being made by the weapons and materiel manufacturers.

In response, interviewer Greste immediately asked: “But shouldn’t they have this equipment? The war on terror is very serious!”

“No!” Manning stated. “You can’t trust governments to be benevolent. That’s just not the case; it’s not how systems like this work. We’re seeing more and more abuses with

authoritarianism. This is not hyperbole. There’s ethnic cleansing taking place in the US right now. They’re using similar techniques to dictatorships.

“We live in a police state, which is viewed through the lens of national security, under the intelligence-military apparatus. And they never ask for less. They always ask for more. More police, more military, more weapons, more prisons. It’s always more. We should strongly oppose that. We’re largely being terrorised by our own state.

“The war on terror is vastly disproportionate. It’s an excuse for bolstering an already exploding police and intelligence apparatus.”

Greste ended the interview with a question about Manning’s plans for the future after her unsuccessful bid for the US Senate in the Maryland Democratic primary this past June.

Her reply was forthright, but her political perspective unclear: “My political career is not over,” she said. “But I’m more of an activist. As we sat down to plan my campaign to be selected as a Senate candidate, we had to ask the question: Do we try to get elected and fit in with all their criteria, or do we stick to our principles?”

The clear, but unstated, assumption was that she had decided to go with the latter.

“There is no reform,” she continued, presumably referring to the pretences and lies advanced by both the Democratic and Republican parties during election campaigns, then added: “The time for reforms was 40 years ago. There are large numbers of people who have no say or power. We have to start doing things ourselves. Everything we do is a political decision. Not doing something is also a political decision. We have to become involved. Everyone has the ability to make a difference. They have to make the decision.”

At the event’s conclusion, a member of the audience asked Manning whether she would endorse Bernie Sanders in the 2020 presidential election. While she didn’t explicitly criticise him, her reply was non-committal, reserving her right to judge his policies once they were released. Earlier, she had commented that she thought the results of the forthcoming November mid-term elections would be very different to what the rest of the world was expecting.



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