

“Julian Assange is a significant international citizen who has made a stand for truth-telling”

Address by Emeritus Professor Stuart Rees to the Sydney Free Assange rally

Professor Stuart Rees
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Linda began her address by reminding us that Julian has been charged with no offence and has committed no offence. In a first rate series of articles in that significant journal *New Matilda*, Dr Lissa Johnson recently talked about the massive energy put by the world’s media into a smear campaign against Julian Assange.

For that reason, I want to address this issue about his freedom, not as a legal consideration, but rather as a cultural one. We begin the culture with Sweden’s legal game-playing, that eventually led to the acknowledgement that justice to Julian was denied. Those charges, which were never made, were paradoxically then dropped. So much for the Swedish culture.

But then we come to the British culture, that culture of arrogance that “we’ve always known;” that the British have always known what justice means; that British justice can’t be questioned. So no surprise that Philip Hammond, the foreign secretary, immediately dismissed that United Nations report on arbitrary detention.

The British system has done that for years. It’s culturally embedded that “they know best.” So they even spent a fortune, in a kind of sinister Gilbert and Sullivan light opera, surrounding the Ecuadorian Embassy with English bobbies for most of the past six years. If Gilbert and Sullivan, the musical satirists, had been alive, we would have had a sort of sinister light opera about it.

But then, in their desire to play second fiddle to the United States, that culture of arrogance goes on.

Australia used to call it the “mother country,” and there’s a bit of that still in the Canberra DNA, that still wants to be subservient to whatever wisdom comes out of Westminster

Then we come to the culture of revenge, a culture of preoccupation with cruelty and revenge, that comes from the United States. You may recall that when the controversy about Julian first started, a Republican senator from New York, King, said: “Why doesn’t somebody take a gun and shoot the son-of-a-bitch? I know it’s illegal, but it would be wonderful for American’s freedom if that happens.”

Somebody else said: “Why don’t we take a drone to him?” That was the Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton. Then there was an Evangelical—somehow, beware of the Evangelicals—contender for the White House, Mike Huckabee, father of the current press secretary, who said that the execution of Julian wouldn’t be good enough for him.

In response, as has been repeated by previous speakers, the Australian government said not a word in protest against that sort of barbarity that’s taken as political mainstream acceptability.

So then we come to the other culture, which, unfortunately, is our own, which is dominated by a preoccupation with cowardice: scared to question what goes on in the Pentagon, in the White House, or even in Westminster. When Julia Gillard said that Julian was a criminal, and she had to be told by the Australian Federal Police that he was not, nevertheless, the smear campaign against Julian is continued.

So we’re going to have to challenge those cultures, of

which we are a part. If we don't challenge them, we are somehow colluding.

Let me now express some gratitude, historically, for the contribution that Julian has made to our own sense of freedom and civility.

Back at the beginning of the 18th century, that wonderful satirist Daniel Defoe, who challenged the establishment of religious doctrine at that time, was sentenced to three weeks in the stocks, to be publicly humiliated. A bit later in that century, Tom Paine wrote the *Rights of Man* and was almost immediately charged with sedition by the British government. Hence there's a long history behind that culture of "we know best." Tom Paine had to escape so-called British justice to France.

Then we come to Daniel Ellsberg and his revelations about the conduct of the Vietnam War: that massive commitment of military brutality in which Australia colluded. This was followed by the whistleblowing of Chelsea Manning, who witnessed, as an intelligence officer, the barbarities that were going on as part of "Western civilisation," in particular in Iraq.

Then, completely offended by the surveillance society that is the United States of America—and we loved it as well, because if you look at the anti-terror laws here, you would think there was a camera outside every street—we come to Edward Snowden. What a contribution he's made, at least to the public awareness of the American people, if only they would wake up and listen.

Julian, of course, comes in that long tradition of whistleblowers and journalists.

It shouldn't take two German MPs to go to Britain and tell the British government, and by inference, the Australian government, that Julian Assange is a significant international citizen, who has made a stand for truth-telling. There's a sense in which the significant audience here represents, in your presence and your aspirations, what those two German members of parliament went to Britain to say.

A reference has been made to the sudden and accumulated effort that was made to free Hakeem Al-Araibi.

In a way, there's a great deal of common ground. Because Al-Araibi was likely to be sent back to a country whose civil rights record is non-existent. Bahrain is a vicious, vicious place. Julian faces being

taken back to another country which is preoccupied with imprisonment. The security-prison industry is just about the most successful in the revival of the American economy.

We need to mobilise in the same way that we did for Hakeem Al-Araibi.

Let me finish with reference to a poet, because I'm always lost without some reference to a poet.

Bertolt Brecht knew all about fascism. He knew all about totalitarianism. He also knew all about the constipation that passes for bureaucracy, where you can't penetrate to discover what's really going on in the minds of people in Canberra or elsewhere, as to why there's complete, continued compliance with Britain and with America.

"The bread of the people," is what Bertolt Brecht said. That's what he called his poem.

Justice is the bread of the people.

Just as daily bread is necessary, so is daily justice.

It is even necessary several times a day...

And that's the cue for us to continue to protest and to demand that Julian Assange be brought home.



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