

Free Assange NZ denounces hypocrisy at World Press Freedom Day event

Tom Peters
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On May 3, to mark World Press Freedom Day, the British High Commission in New Zealand co-hosted an event with the Canadian High Commission and the NZ Institute of International Affairs at the parliament in Wellington. UK High Commissioner Laura Clarke moderated a panel discussion involving Newshub reporter Tova O'Brien, Politik blogger Richard Harman and opposition National Party MP Nicola Young.

Like similar events in the US and Britain, the Wellington panel made a travesty of the ostensible topic of press freedom. This was starkly revealed towards the end.

Alex Hills, from the group Free Assange New Zealand, stood up to denounce the hypocrisy of the panel, which had not once mentioned the arrest and imprisonment of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange by British police—the most significant and brazen attack on journalism in recent history.

The award-winning journalist was confined for almost seven years in the Ecuadorian embassy before being arrested by British police on April 11, after the Ecuadorian illegally overturned his asylum. Assange is now threatened with extradition to the US for the “crime” of publishing leaked documents exposing US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Washington’s corrupt and thuggish diplomacy throughout the world.

Whistleblower Chelsea Manning, the source of the leaks, has also been imprisoned in the US for refusing to testify against WikiLeaks. She has just been released but faces a new court subpoena and further imprisonment.

Hills said: “We’ve focused on lies in social media but not those in [the mainstream media]. I want to point out the brazen hypocrisy of World Press Freedom Day being hosted by the UK government at this dark time.

Julian Assange is being persecuted by war criminals, and the corrupt that he exposed are still sitting in positions of power in the government on both sides of the aisle as well as within much of the media.

“Imagine the precedent Trump is setting, that any country could extradite any foreign journalist or publisher and make them subject to draconian laws, possibly the death penalty, just because they published truths about that government’s war crimes. Imagine if that state is Saudi Arabia.”

Hills called on “the world’s media to stand by their award-winning colleague and Nobel Peace Prize Nominee. End the smears and lies about an anti-war hero! You want to know how to get people trusting the media more? Tell the truth. Stop delivering a one-sided, government-sanctioned narrative. That is what is going on here.”

Hills’ indictment prompted an extremely hostile response from the panel. Clarke, speaking on behalf of the UK government, declared that Assange had to be “held to account and to justice and it’s not, I would say, a media freedom issue.”

According to this Orwellian interpretation of “media freedom,” journalists and publishers must be punished for reporting the truth about the crimes of governments.

Harman, a well-known political blogger in Wellington, gave a thoroughly disgraceful response to Hills, stating: “I think Luke Harding [of the UK *Guardian*] has done quite a lot on this question of whether [Assange] is a journalist or not, and has concluded that he is not.”

Harding has written scurrilous pieces against WikiLeaks and Assange. In an attempt to smear Assange as a supporter of US President Trump, Harding co-authored a report that Assange had met with Paul Manafort, Trump’s one-time campaign

manager. The article was quickly exposed as a pack of lies, but was not retracted by the *Guardian*.

The newspaper, along with the corporate media as a whole, viciously attacked WikiLeaks for publishing leaked emails showing that the Democratic National Committee sought to rig the 2016 Democratic presidential primaries in favour of Hillary Clinton. The leaks also revealed Clinton's close ties to Wall Street banks and her support for imperialist war.

Hills stated that Harding's "story on Manafort was a disgrace." At this point, Clarke intervened, saying: "I'm sorry, we're not going to have any more, quite frankly, that's fine." Hills protested, "What about free speech?" as Clarke moved to shut down the discussion. O'Brien and Young refused to comment on Assange's plight.

A video of Hills' speech has been widely shared and viewed thousands of times on Facebook and Twitter. It was retweeted by WikiLeaks editor Kristinn Hrafnsson with the comment: "Meanwhile in New Zealand. British High Commissioner says #Assange case is not about media freedom. Also former journalist cites Luke Harding as an authority that Julian is NOT a journalist. Surreal. Government panel defending attack on press freedom on #WorldPressFreedomDay"

The UK High Commission has not released its own footage from the event, despite initially promising to release a highlights video.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, Hills said the panel discussion had included hypocritical expressions of concern about the plight of journalists in Saudi Arabia and Myanmar. Much of the event, however, focused on how to suppress so-called "hate speech" and "extremism" on social media.

"Really it was a discussion about: 'How do we get people to trust mainstream media? We're having an awful lot of trouble because people don't trust media and there's so much lies in social media, how do we censor those lies?' It was crazy," Hills said.

There was no mention of how the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was based on lies about weapons of mass destruction peddled by the entire corporate media and the US and British political establishment.

The panelists echoed statements by the New Zealand and Australian governments, which seized on the March 15 Christchurch terrorist attacks as a pretext to demand greater censorship of discussion on the

Internet. Under a new law in Australia, social media executives can face prison sentences if they fail to remove any content deemed "abhorrent" and "violent" by the government. NZ Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern will discuss other possible measures at a meeting with French President Emanuel Macron on May 15.

Such laws will inevitably be used against socialist and progressive websites and bloggers and workers using social media to organise and share information, such as the "yellow vest" protesters in France and striking workers in New Zealand.

Ardern's Labour Party-led government, which includes the Green Party and NZ First, has refused to say anything in defence of Assange and Manning because they support the criminal actions of the UK and US governments. Labour has strengthened New Zealand's alliance with US imperialism. It has kept troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and is supporting the build-up to war against China and North Korea.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality is holding a meeting at Victoria University of Wellington on Wednesday, May 15 at 5:15 p.m., in Student Union Building room SU220 as part of the international campaign to free Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning. We urge students and workers to attend this vitally important meeting in defence of democratic rights and free speech.



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