Sydney Peace Prize recipients demand Australian government defend Assange

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Sydney Peace Prize laureates last week issued a statement condemning the US-led persecution of Julian Assange and demanding that the Australian government immediately fulfil its obligations to the WikiLeaks founder, as an Australian citizen and journalist, by coming to his defence.

The prize was initiated by the Sydney Peace Foundation, an institution linked to the University of Sydney, in 1998. In 2011, the foundation presented Assange with a Gold Medal "for exceptional courage and initiative in pursuit of human rights." He is one of just four recipients of the award.

Signatories to last week's statement supporting Assange included world-renowned defenders of civil liberties.

Among them were well-known Australian investigative journalist and filmmaker John Pilger, artist and anti-war activist George Gittoes, human rights lawyer Julian Burnside, Zimbabwean politician Senator Sekai Holland, Indian environmental advocate Dr. Vandana Shiva and US linguist and political commentator Noam Chomsky.

They joined prominent Australian journalist Mary Kostakidis and former chair of the Sydney Peace Foundation, Emeritus Professor Stuart Rees.

The statement was issued following the unveiling of 17 espionage charges against Assange for WikiLeaks' exposures of US war crimes and diplomatic conspiracies. The charges carry a maximum sentence of 170 years in prison.

"Julian's 'crime' is courageous, truthful journalism," the statement declared. "In response to WikiLeaks' revelations about murderous wars and US spying to promote the economic dominance of US companies, the Trump administration clearly seeks revenge."

The Peace Prize recipients warned that through its charges against Assange, the US government is seeking to "falsely claim a legal basis for their actions" which "reflect the naked political motives of a great power."

The statement outlined the significance of Assange and WikiLeaks' work, noting: "In common with other advocates of freedom of speech and of the press, Julian Assange has exposed power to sunlight, for all the world to see. By revealing truths about violence and deceit so central to US foreign policy, he has performed an historic public service."

It concluded: "Break the official Australian silence. Stop Julian Assange's extradition to almost certain long-term imprisonment. Secure his rightful freedom. The Australian Government must intervene now. We call on the civilised world to uphold the true values of peace with justice and to stand up for Julian Assange."

The document is an indictment of the Australian political and media establishment.

Successive governments, Labor and Liberal-National Coalition alike, have refused to defend Assange, and have instead joined the US-led vendetta against him.

They have rejected demands, including at Socialist Equality Party rallies addressed by Pilger, Rees and other defenders of democratic rights over the past 18 months, that they use their diplomatic powers and legal discretion to secure Assange's return to Australia with a guarantee against extradition to the US.

When Assange was expelled from the Ecuadorian embassy on April 11 and arrested by British police, Labor and Coalition leaders made mealy-mouthed statements that they would provide him with unspecified consular assistance, which committed them to absolutely nothing. Since then they have remained silent.

Not a single Labor, Coalition or Greens

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representative has condemned the unprecedented espionage charges against Assange or his brutal confinement inside Britain's notorious Belmarsh maximum security prison.

The Australian media has been similarly complicit. There has not been one editorial or prominent opinion piece in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Age*, the *Australian* or the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) demanding Assange's liberty or warning of the implications of his persecution for press freedom.

For years, the ABC and other media outlets have promoted the bogus Swedish sexual misconduct allegations against Assange. Since 2016, they have repeated the slanderous claims that Assange is a "Russian agent."

Significantly, in comments accompanying the statement, Rees reminded the "Australian, UK and Swedish authorities that the former Head of the Swedish Bar Association, Ms Anne Ramberg condemned the handling of the Assange case in Sweden and the UK as deplorable."

Assange has never been charged with a crime in Sweden. The reopening of a twice-abandoned "preliminary investigation" into the allegations this month is aimed at blackening his name and providing an alternative route for his extradition to the US.

The attitude of the official press was summed up in an opinion piece by the *Australian's* Paul Malley on Wednesday. He denounced WikiLeaks' supporters as "paranoiacs" and blithely declared that Assange would be "dealt with fairly" by the US authorities, who are seeking to imprison him for life.

Malley openly solidarised the *Australian* with the prosecution of a journalist for publishing classified information. He declared that WikiLeaks' publication of a massive tranche of US diplomatic cables in 2010 and 2011 had revealed "not that much."

In reality, the cables documented US-orchestrated coups, spying operations on foreign heads of state and ordinary people, and sordid intrigues in every corner of the globe. The publication of cables revealing the corruption of US allied governments in Tunisia and Egypt, and their collaboration with Washington in torture programs, contributed to revolutions in both countries.

Malley drew attention to statements by Pilger and Kostakidis, whom he described as "Assangists." Behind the venom, the article was an indication of the fear within the corporate and political establishment over widespread popular support for Assange, which found expression in last week's statement.

The awarding of the Gold Medal to Assange in 2011 occurred amid an unprecedented international operation, aimed at extraditing the WikiLeaks founder to the US, which compelled him to seek asylum in Ecuador's London embassy the following year. At a ceremony at London's Frontline Club, Kostakidis and Rees presented Assange with the medal.

Kostakidis described WikiLeaks as an "ingenious and heroic website that has shifted the power balance between citizen and the state by exposing what governments really get up to in our name." Rees said "'Assange's work is in the Tom Paine *Rights of Man* and Daniel Ellsberg *Pentagon Papers* tradition—challenging the old order of power in politics and in journalism."

In his acceptance speech, Assange commended the Sydney Peace Foundation for avoiding "the safe feel-good option of shunning controversy by uttering platitudes. Instead it goes into difficult terrain by identifying organisations and individuals who are directly engaged in struggles of one kind or another."

Assange concluded: "With WikiLeaks we are all engaged in a struggle, a generational struggle, for a proposition that citizens have a right and a duty to scrutinise the state."

The imprisonment of the WikiLeaks founder in Belmarsh Prison, the deterioration of his health and the prospect of his extradition to the US, all underscore the urgency of building a mass movement of workers, students and young people to secure his freedom and defend all democratic rights.

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