

Australian journalist calls on colleagues to defend Assange

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Andrew Fowler, a prominent Australian journalist, issued a strong appeal for his colleagues to defend WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange in an opinion piece published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* this morning.

Fowler is an award-winning investigative reporter who worked on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) television programs “Four Corners” and “Foreign Correspondent.” Fowler previously served as chief of staff at the *Australian* newspaper and head of the ABC’s investigative department. He is also the author of *The Most Dangerous Man in the World, the inside story of WikiLeaks* and *Shooting the Messenger: Criminalizing Journalism*.

In 2012, Fowler co-authored a “Four Corners” program, “Sex, Lies and Julian Assange,” exposing in detail the bogus character of the Swedish investigation into sexual misconduct allegations against the WikiLeaks founder.

Fowler drew a direct connection between the attempts by the Trump administration to prosecute Assange for his role in the exposure of US war crimes and diplomatic intrigues, and the Australian Federal Police (AFP) raids against a News Corp journalist and the ABC’s Sydney office last week.

The AFP raids were carried out in response to articles exposing preparations by the Australian government to expand surveillance of the population and the Australian army’s involvement in extrajudicial killings and other war crimes in Afghanistan.

In the article, titled “ABC raids a wake-up call to journalists who left Assange swinging,” Fowler wrote that the raids “produced an unexpected benefit. Journalists are being forced to decide: whose side are they on. And where do they stand on fundamental issues of disclosure and the public’s right to know?”

Fowler pointed to the shameful role of much of the Australian media in either maintaining a complicit silence on Assange’s persecution or actively supporting the

attacks against him.

The journalist noted that in 2017, Sally Neighbour, the executive producer of “Four Corners” had retweeted a post describing Assange as “Putin’s bitch.” This, Fowler noted, “said much about the state of journalism in Australia.”

Neighbour’s tweet, Fowler wrote, “followed a Four Corners interview with Hillary Clinton in which she was given full rein to attack Assange.”

Fowler explained that the unsubstantiated slanders of Assange as a Russian agent are based on WikiLeaks’ 2016 publication of Democratic National Committee emails demonstrating that the party had sought to rig its presidential primaries against Bernie Sanders and in favour of Clinton.

Fowler also condemned the attacks of journalist Peter Grete on Assange. Grete, who is well-known because he was imprisoned by the Egyptian military dictatorship in 2013, has repeatedly declared that the WikiLeaks founder is “not a journalist.”

Fowler rejected these baseless assertions, saying they aided the Trump administration’s attempts to criminalise journalism.

“Those who deny Assange’s journalism are denying him a major part of his defence,” he wrote. “By arguing that Assange is not a journalist... journalists are giving ammunition to the US administration to prosecute Assange for espionage, a crime which carries a possible life sentence.”

Fowler outlined some of the reasons why many journalists have joined the campaign against Assange. He perceptively wrote that “the old notion that journalists mainly represent ordinary people against the powerful is in many cases something of the past. Just as the political parties have shifted to the right, so too have many journalists.”

Fowler added: “What so enrages the journalists’ ‘club’

is the challenge from those who question their power, journalists like Julian Assange. His revelations threatened them.”

Commenting on the significance of WikiLeaks, Fowler said that it had “laid the path for the future of journalism, where journalists would be expected to produce primary source documents,” and “share them with the general public.”

Fowler warned: “Journalists should also understand that they could be next.” He noted that in a press conference last week, the AFP’s acting commissioner Neil Gaughan stated that it had carried out its raids to show the “international community” that Australia “takes the ‘leaking of sensitive information seriously’.”

“The ‘international community’ in this case means only one thing, the United States, Australia’s most significant intelligence sharing ally,” Fowler wrote.

He concluded: “If Assange is left to swing in the breeze, it will be an open invitation for any journalist, anywhere in the world, to be extradited to the US if the administration deems that they have published material which threatens US national security.”

Fowler’s article follows other signs of a breach in the official media’s complicit silence on the attacks against Assange.

In an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* last week, Waleed Aly pointed to the fact that the WikiLeaks founder was being pursued for carrying out actions that are “basic elements of so much investigative journalism.” Aly stated that the AFP raids took place in the context of a “cravenly bipartisan political scene” and “an absence of public debate of anything that can be vacuumed up under the heading of ‘national security’.”

On Sunday, the *Sydney Morning Herald’s* European correspondent published an article highlighting the warnings of CIA whistleblower John Kiriakou that Assange would not “stand a chance” of a fair trial if he were extradited to the US.

The sympathetic coverage of Assange’s plight indicates a growing recognition that the US attempts to prosecute the WikiLeaks founder have opened the floodgates for a broader assault on press freedom. This has been exemplified by the AFP raids and the moves by the French government to prosecute journalists for exposing its complicity in Saudi Arabia’s war against Yemen.

As WikiLeaks editor-in-chief Kristinn Hrafnsson told a London press briefing on Tuesday, the persecution of Assange “has a connection to other crackdowns we’ve seen in recent weeks,” including in Australia. “It’s part of

the same systemic attack on investigative journalism when it comes to reporting on national security issues,” he said. “It has a chilling effect, it’s sending a signal.”

Hrafnsson called upon journalists to come to Assange’s defence, declaring: “This is an attack on journalism, and it’s all interlinked. It’s a watershed moment for the preservation of journalism.” His comments were in the lead-up to a British hearing on the US extradition request this Friday.

John Shipton, Assange’s father, and Chinese artist Ai Weiwei visited Assange at Belmarsh Prison yesterday. Shipton reported that his son’s deteriorating health had “stabilised,” but that he had lost a substantial amount of weight during his two-month incarceration in the maximum security facility.

Shipton noted that the conditions of Assange’s imprisonment, including a severe restriction on visits and no access to a library, computer or documents, were obstructing his son’s preparations to defend himself against extradition.

Weiwei added that Assange was “very much like a person holding the last straw, worried about his life.” He added: “I’m very concerned about him, especially his psychological condition. The man has been under such pressure... I’m deeply worried.”

Weiwei said they had discussed “how fragile human rights are in the world today.”

Supporters of WikiLeaks and democratic rights are holding rallies around the world this week against the threat of US extradition and to demand Assange’s freedom. On Friday, there will be a demonstration in London outside Westminster Magistrates’ Court where Assange’s hearing is being held, starting at 9am.

In Australia, the Socialist Equality Party has announced protests later this month in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. The SEP demands that the Australian government fulfil its obligations to Assange as a citizen, by using its legal discretion and diplomatic powers to secure his immediate return to Australia, with a guarantee against extradition to the US.



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