

Australian filmmaker James Ricketson to speak at SEP rally in defence of Assange

26 June 2019

Australian documentary filmmaker James Ricketson will speak at the Socialist Equality Party rally in defence of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange this Saturday at Sydney's Martin Place Amphitheatre beginning at 12 p.m.

The Sydney protest will be followed by demonstrations in Melbourne and Brisbane, demanding that the Australian government act to prevent Assange's extradition to the US and secure his freedom.

In June 2017, Ricketson was arrested in Cambodia, where he was making a film about poverty-stricken families in Phnom Penh. He was falsely accused of spying for unspecified "foreign states." Ricketson was incarcerated in Cambodia's notorious Prey Sar prison for 15 months, found guilty after a three-week trial in August 2018, and sentenced to six years' jail.

Human Rights Watch Asia condemned the frame-up of Ricketson as a "politically manufactured farcical plot." Abandoned by the Australian government for months, he was eventually released and returned to Australia on September 21 after being pardoned by Cambodian authorities.

Ricketson submitted the following statement to the WSWS.

Does Julian Assange deserve to die in a US jail?

I was arrested in Cambodia in June 2017 and charged with espionage—the same charges that Julian Assange now faces in the US. There was no evidence at all that I was a spy, just as no evidence has been made public that Assange has committed any crime other than journalism. The fact that investigative journalism is rapidly being criminalised worldwide should be of concern to us all.

I spent more than a year in pre-trial detention in Cambodia, looking at the possibility of a 10-year jail sentence. For a 68-year-old, a decade in a crowded

third world prison may well have amounted to a death sentence. There can be no doubt that a 170-year jail sentence for Assange, if he is extradited, will result in his death.

The question that all of his fellow Australians must ask, including those who dislike or hate him, is: "Does Julian deserve to die in a US prison?" Silence on this question, sitting on the fence, is not an option. As Thomas Jefferson wrote, "All tyranny needs to gain a foothold is for people of good conscience to remain silent." There is much more at stake here than the fate of Julian.

We must all ask ourselves this question and speak out if our answer is: "No." We should also calmly, and with respect for opposing opinions, ask our friends and family this question. If the answer is, "Let him rot in hell," or some variation of this, you could ask, "Was this your response to James Ricketson's incarceration in Cambodia? That you did not care? That I could rot in hell?" Judging by the 110,000 who signed the change.org petition pressuring the Australian government to help me, the answer is almost certainly "no." Why?

The Australian government was very reluctant to speak out in defence of my legal and human rights during the first seven months of my incarceration, just as it has been very reluctant to assist Assange during the first seven years of his incarceration. In my case, public opinion, generated by petitions and extensive and positive media coverage, eventually left the Turnbull government with no choice, if it was to avoid a public relations disaster, but to do all it could, diplomatically, to help me.

A similar dynamic applied in the case of Peter Greste's incarceration in Egypt. The Morrison government and the Albanese Opposition must be made to realise that Julian's death in a US prison will be a

public relations disaster for ALL politicians who have, to date, remained silent about the human and legal rights abuses visited upon him.

Quite apart from the manifest legal unfairness experienced by Assange this past seven years in the Ecuadorian Embassy, and the very real possibility that he could die in a US prison, the Trump administration is sending a very strong message to all of us working in the Fourth Estate: “Expose the US as engaged in illegal and/or immoral acts through the publication of documents we deem to be secret and we may come after you, with all the legal powers we have at our disposal, and lock you away for the rest of your life.” Intimidation of the worst kind.

In the case of Australian investigative journalists and publishers of “secret” documents, if Assange is extradited, the Trump and future US administrations will be able to rest assured that the Australian government will utter not a peep of protest.

We in the media will almost certainly become more cautious in the kinds of stories we investigate (self-censorship), whilst publishers and broadcasters will think twice about revealing to the Australian public verifiable facts that the US does not want in the public domain. And, of course, as the recent raid on the ABC reveals, our own government is prepared to follow Donald Trump in declaring war on (“Enemies of the people”) journalists.

Unfortunately, politicians on both sides of the political fence have decided to remain silent about the multiple breaches of Assange’s human and legal rights this past seven years. And all the indications are that they will continue to remain silent for as long as they believe that the bulk of the Australian public does not care.

Why? One reason is that for the past seven years, a concerted effort has been made within the halls of power internationally to blacken Assange’s name—to present him in the media as an egocentric, narcissistic rapist who helped Donald Trump become President, who had bad body odour and who mistreats cats. This propaganda campaign to denigrate Assange has been very successful. I am sure that all who are reading this have friends and acquaintances who dislike, or in some cases, hate Assange.

Secondly, many in the mainstream media (too many), whilst they deplore the raids on the ABC and the home

of an Australian journalist, remain silent about Assange and seem to be unconcerned that the chances of him dying in a US jail are very high. For what crime? Investigative journalism and the publishing of “inconvenient facts” of the kind that all working in the Fourth Estate have a professional obligation to inform the public of in a healthy democracy.

We must do all in our power to prevent Assange’s extradition to the US. Signing petitions is not enough. We must make our presence felt in the streets at vigils and demonstrations. We must write to our local Members of Parliament asking them why they are remaining silent about the fate of Julian Assange. We must write to journalists who remain silent and ask them if they believe that Julian Assange has committed crimes that justify his death in a US prison.



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