

Australian filmmaker James Ricketson calls on journalist Peter Greste to defend Assange

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Documentary filmmaker James Ricketson has written an “Open Letter” to Peter Greste, an Australian journalist who was imprisoned in 2015 for 400 days by Egypt’s al-Sisi dictatorship on bogus spying charges while working for Al Jazeera. Greste was eventually released after mass protests demanded the Australian government intervene to secure his freedom.

To the disgust of those who helped win his release, Greste reacted to the April 11 arrest and imprisonment of Julian Assange by aligning himself with US-led persecution of the WikiLeaks founder. In a Sydney Morning Herald article, Greste declared that the Australian citizen “is not a journalist, and WikiLeaks is not a news organisation.”

Ricketson was arrested in Cambodia in June 2017 and falsely accused of spying for unspecified “foreign states.” Ricketson, who was making a film about poverty-stricken families in Phnom Penh, was incarcerated in Prey Sar prison for 15 months, found guilty after a three-week trial in August 2018, and sentenced to six years’ jail.

Ignored for months by the Australian government, the filmmaker was released when over 100,000 people signed a petition demanding Canberra intervene on his behalf. Greste was among the hundreds of journalists and others defending Ricketson and played a key role in the campaign.

Ricketson’s “Open Letter,” which is published below, is an exposure of Greste’s refusal to defend Assange, an appeal for him to change course, and a clear warning of the dangerous consequences for democratic rights if the Trump administration’s attempts to extradite Assange are not defeated.

An Open Letter to Peter Greste
Tuesday, July 2, 2019

Dear Peter,

Do you still stand by your assertion, made in a *Sydney Morning Herald* opinion piece last April, that Julian Assange “is not a journalist, and WikiLeaks is not a news

organisation”?

Assange has been a member of MEAA [Media Entertainment Arts Alliance] for the past 10 years, was awarded a Walkley for the ‘Most Outstanding Contribution to Journalism’ in 2011, amongst many other journalism awards. In November 2011 the UK High Court described Assange as “...a journalist, well known through his operation of WikiLeaks” and the US Army’s Counterintelligence Centre described WikiLeaks as a ‘news organisation’ and Assange as a ‘writer’ and ‘journalist.’

Even if it is still your contention that Assange is not a journalist, do you believe, on the basis of evidence available to you, that Assange, an Australian citizen, should be extradited to the United States to face espionage charges?

When I was imprisoned in Cambodia, also charged with espionage, you showed your compassion and used your influence as a journalist, who had likewise been charged with espionage and spent 400 days in an Egyptian prison, to alert the Australian public to my plight. You told [ABC Radio National journalist] Fran Kelly:

“You really can’t conceive of that length of time in prison until you actually have to confront it in all its stark reality... The Australian government insists that it’s a defender of the basic democratic principles in the region, including the rule of law, due process, basic human rights. And if it wants to be taken seriously and with respect then it needs to forcefully stand by those values in cases like James’. I think the government clearly needs to do more.”

You also said: “In Egypt’s case, Australia had very few levers that it could pull. It’s got far more levers...in Cambodia’s case—diplomatic levers, economic levers and so on.”

When I was found guilty of espionage you wrote on twitter: “Australian film-maker James Ricketson sentenced to six years jail in Cambodia. Outrageous affront to due process, freedom of the press and the rule

of law.”

Along with Phillip Adams, Elizabeth Farrelly, John Pilger, Piers Akerman and other journalists who wrote or broadcast in relation to my case, you played an important role in generating public support for me. This, in turn, placed pressure on the Australian government to use all the diplomatic tools available to it to extricate me from prison. The government did eventually step up to the plate and, behind the scenes, make significant diplomatic efforts to help me. Three weeks after I received a six-year jail sentence I was on a plane back to Australia.

Do you believe that Citizen Julian Assange is any less deserving of intervention on the part of the Morrison government than I was?

Do you believe that the Australian government is doing enough to protect Citizen Julian Assange’s basic human rights?

Do you believe that, as an Australian citizen, he is deserving of a 175-year jail sentence for doing nothing more, on the basis of the evidence available to us all in July 2019, than what a good investigative journalist/publisher does all the time?

Julian Assange turns 48 today. He has been locked up in an Embassy for seven years—five times longer than you were locked up in Egypt and I in Cambodia. We have both experienced what you refer to as the ‘stark reality’ of incarceration. I would not wish the experience on anyone, and particularly not on a fellow journalist.

Again, Peter, thank you for the journalistic help you provided me in my time of extreme need. Please do the same for Julian Assange—as both an Australian citizen **and** as a journalist. Please join with the growing number of journalists worldwide who fear the ramifications, if Assange is extradited, for freedom of speech, freedom of the press and the health of democracies such as Australia’s, at a time when President Donald Trump has declared we journalists to be enemies of the people.

Cheers,
James

After Ricketson’s letter was published, Clare Fletcher from the Walkley Board contacted the WSWS on July 11 pointing out that it was WikiLeaks not Assange that was given its award for “Outstanding Contribution to Journalism.” Fletcher requested a correction be published.

Presenting the award in late November 2011, the Walkley Board stated:

This year’s winner has shown a courageous and controversial commitment to the finest traditions of journalism: justice through transparency.

WikiLeaks applied new technology to penetrate the inner workings of government to reveal an avalanche of inconvenient truths in a global publishing coup.

Its revelations, from the way the war on terror was being waged, to diplomatic bastardry, high-level horse-trading and the interference in the domestic affairs of nations, have had an undeniable impact.

This innovation could just as easily have been developed and nurtured by any of the world’s major publishers—but it wasn’t.

Yet so many eagerly took advantage of the secret cables to create more scoops in a year than most journalists could imagine in a lifetime.

While not without flaws, the Walkley Trustees believe that by designing and constructing a means to encourage whistleblowers, WikiLeaks and its editor-in-chief Julian Assange took a brave, determined and independent stand for freedom of speech and transparency that has empowered people all over the world.

And in the process, they have triggered a robust debate inside and outside the media about official secrecy, the public’s right to know, and the future of journalism.



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