

Clinical psychologist Lissa Johnson: They are trying to break Assange “physically and psychologically”

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Australian clinical psychologist Lissa Johnson has been an outspoken defender of Julian Assange, writing extensively on the grave implications of his persecution for democratic rights and freedom of speech.

Johnson explained to the WSWS that she “writes about the psychology of politics and social issues.” She has a background in media studies and sociology, and a PhD in the psychology of manipulating reality-perception.

Earlier this year, Johnson wrote an extensive five-part investigative series titled “The Psychology of Getting Julian Assange,” published on the New Matilda website. Johnson provided the following responses to a series of questions from the World Socialist Web Site earlier this week.

WSWS: John Shipton and John Pilger have recently detailed the punitive conditions of Assange’s detention in Belmarsh Prison. Could you speak about the way in which his isolation, and the denial of his right to access computers/legal documents is aimed at stymieing his defence against the US extradition request and increasing the psychological pressures upon him?

Lissa Johnson: If anyone takes a moment to imagine what it must be like to face the prospect of 175 years in a US prison, having already been subjected to nearly a decade of arbitrary detention and judicial harassment, knowing that you have no chance of a fair trial in the US, having been smeared in the media and branded a “terrorist” and enemy of the state, then that gives you an inkling of what Julian Assange was dealing with even before being placed under lockdown in Belmarsh prison. If you add to that having read hundreds of documents from Guantanamo Bay and knowing, in intimate detail, what the United States does to those it brands terrorists and enemies of the state, then Julian Assange’s reality becomes even clearer.

Now, with the full force of the US national security state bearing down on him, Julian Assange has been stripped of his most basic abilities to protect himself. He is denied even the ability to view the documents in his case, in order to inspect and understand the evidence against him. He is denied regular contact with his lawyers, and access to a computer. In other words, he is forced, day and night, do nothing but wait, helplessly, for whatever wrath the US government intends to unleash upon him.

This is beyond barbarically psychologically cruel. Emotionally, it is akin to holding someone bound and gagged in the basement while their assailant stands outside sharpening their knives.

It is also a violation of Julian Assange’s human right to adequately prepare his defence.

As if all of this weren’t enough, Julian Assange is also being deprived of one of the most fundamental human psychological needs, which is human contact. Even without the threat of US extradition, the kind of isolation that Julian is suffering is deeply damaging to human beings. We are social animals and need social connection.

For that reason, prolonged solitary confinement of more than 15 days has been defined by the United Nations as torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment. Beyond 15 days, solitary confinement is considered “prolonged” because some of the adverse psychological effects can become permanent.

As well as causing a wide range of serious psychological disturbances and physical health problems, the reduced stimulation of solitary confinement can cause decreased brain activity, which may become irreversible after just seven days. Concentration and memory impairments can also occur, and can persist after solitary confinement ends.

The implication is that subjecting Julian Assange to social isolation is not only cruel and inhuman, it may well be damaging his cognitive capacity to engage in his own defence and fight his cause going forward.

Inflicting conditions with the potential to weaken and destroy one of the great minds of our time in this way, thereby turning him into an easy target, is reprehensible.

WSWS: As a clinical psychologist, can you comment on the treatment that Assange should be receiving?

LJ: Julian Assange is suffering because he is being abused. The intervention required to ameliorate his deterioration is to cease his abuse.

As Julian Assange is being abused on multiple levels, there are multiple layers of abuse that need to be addressed, and addressed urgently. Not only are his legal and human rights being abused, but his civil rights, his political rights and his democratic rights. All of these rights need to be restored, some of them immediately.

A simple and imperative starting point would be to grant him access to social contact, including regular visitors of his choosing, both personal and professional, including legal and health professionals and friends, family and colleagues. This would alleviate the isolation that will inevitably seriously adversely affect both his physical and mental health, now and into the future.

An equally simple and immediate intervention would be respecting his human right to prepare his defence. This would involve granting him access to lawyers, documents, the internet and a computer. That would at least reduce the sense of helplessness he must be experiencing, and restore some sense of efficacy, control and agency, which are psychologically essential factors in coping with threat and danger.

More broadly, it is appalling that Julian Assange is in a maximum security prison, stripped of his human and legal rights, on the transparently disingenuous pretext of a defunct bail infringement. It is the most minor matter at the best of times, and nonsensical in Julian’s case, as the relevant investigation was closed at the time of sentencing, and the associated arrest warrant has never even been re-issued. This concocted pretext for a maximum security lockdown is, in reality, serving as a vehicle by which to break Julian Assange, both psychologically and

physically.

Accordingly, the psychological treatment of choice would be to respect the edicts of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention and the UN Rapporteur on Torture, Nils Melzer, who have both instructed relevant authorities to grant Julian Assange his freedom, ensure his safety from US extradition, cease abusing, harassing, threatening and defaming him, and offer him compensation and redress.

WSWS: Could you speak about the significance of UN rapporteur Nils Melzer's finding in May that Assange has been the victim of "psychological torture"?

LJ: Nils Melzer's finding is of the utmost significance, as is the fact that the four states he named as perpetrators signalled their intention in June to ignore his reports, and continue torturing Julian Assange.

In his findings and public statements, Nils Melzer has joined the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention in alerting the world that Julian Assange is being detained not for any wrongdoing, but because the US is persecuting him for publishing.

Professor Melzer has further spelled out that in order to deliver Julian Assange into US hands, where Julian faces espionage charges for journalism, the governments, judiciaries and media of the US, UK, Sweden, and more recently Ecuador, have joined forces to mob, judicially harass, defame, humiliate, threaten and intimidate Julian Assange. This has been achieved by abusing due legal and democratic process, abrogating the rule of law and waging trial by media, for nearly a decade.

Nils Melzer's findings effectively put all of us on notice that Julian Assange is the victim of an unprecedented act of state-sanctioned collective violence. This reality is critically significant for citizens of all nations involved, because collective violence is a group activity.

Put briefly, collective violence only takes place if citizens are willing to obey the perpetrating authorities, and stand passively by while the abuse unfolds. Conversely, human rights can only be expected to be upheld when citizens demand it of their governments, particularly in the face of human rights abuse.

Given the four perpetrating states' non-response to Nils Melzer's findings, we all stand warned that Julian Assange's life, health and safety are in our hands. Julian Assange will only receive the freedom and respect for democratic and human rights that he deserves if we demand it of our governments.

Nils Melzer's reports are also significant in that he has articulated very clearly that, should we fail to stand up for Julian Assange, our own rights may well be next in line. Professor Melzer rightly warns that if we remain silent, we are in serious danger of ushering "unrestrained tyranny" in through the "back door of our own complacency."

WSWS: You have previously written about the way in which the persecution of Assange has drawn upon methods of psychological warfare employed by the intelligence agencies. Could you elaborate?

LJ: In counterintelligence, which has been deployed against WikiLeaks since 2008 according to leaked documents, a key tactic is to exploit adversary vulnerabilities. A maxim in psychological operations is also that an adversary is more hurt by desertion than by slaughter.

With this in mind, I wrote a series of articles about the ways in which the psychological vulnerabilities in the human reality-processing system have been exploited over many years in order to smear Julian Assange, and drive desertion from WikiLeaks. I placed this in the context of a 2008 Defence Department cyber-counterintelligence document that outlined a plan to destroy the "trust" at WikiLeaks' "centre of gravity."

Put briefly, the human reality-processing system is vulnerable to exploitation in that it is driven powerfully by emotion. Unless human beings are particularly motivated to be accurate, emotion tends to unconsciously direct our thinking much of the time, such that we accept versions of reality that "feel" true. So pervasive is this tendency that one scholar of cognition has described reason as a "gun for hire" in service of

emotion.

In the case of WikiLeaks and Julian Assange, this human vulnerability has been relentlessly exploited by pairing Julian Assange's name and face with negative associations and emotions, thereby pinning an emotional bullseye to his head, causing negative information to stick. Using such methods, including via Russiagate, every effort has been made to turn reality on its head such that peace is bad, war is good, truth is dangerous and censorship will set us free. The ultimate goal has been gaining public consent not only to persecute Julian Assange and "take down" WikiLeaks, but to treat public interest journalism as public enemy number one.

WSWS: What has been the role of the media in this campaign?

LJ: The establishment media has provided the vehicle by which this campaign has been waged. Outlets such as the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, cable news channels, the ABC and tabloid media, have faithfully paired Julian Assange's name and face with selected negative terms, concepts and emotions, over and over and over again, priming automatic unconscious negative emotional responses to Julian Assange.

This has served to foster emotional receptivity to demonising, misleading, counter-factual narratives on Julian Assange, along with narratives that rationalise and minimise his persecution, all of which have been woven from distortion, omission and outright fabrication. The scale of the censorship by omission, including media blackouts on critical pieces of information that undermine official narratives, has been staggering.

In the context of collective violence and atrocity, media that smear targets in this way function as instigators. Their role is to incite passive bystanders by creating what psychologists call an "atrocity generating situation." In atrocity-generating situations, brutality is normalised and victims are demonised, dehumanised and debased, causing the public to morally and emotionally disengage from their abuse.

In fact, Nils Melzer has named the media's recycling of distorted and fabricated narratives about Julian Assange as part of his psychological torture. In his final report, released on June 28, Professor Melzer urged all relevant authorities "to cease disseminating, without delay, any news or information which may be prejudicial to Mr. Assange's dignity and integrity, and to his rights to a fair and impartial proceeding in line with the highest standards of human rights law."

WSWS: What has been the role of the Australian government?

LJ: Nils Melzer has aptly described the Australian government as the "glaring absentee" in Julian Assange's persecution and torture. Of all the passive bystanders to Julian Assange's abuse, the Australian government is by far the most culpable and complicit.

Rather than exercise its diplomatic powers and authority under international law to protect the rights of its citizen, the Australian government has consistently offered feeble and factually inaccurate excuses for not intervening, opting instead to leave Julian Assange for dead.

WSWS: You have spoken before about the role of WikiLeaks in exposing the torture techniques employed in Guantanamo Bay, and how this was a significant contribution to our understanding of the misuse of psychological techniques. Could you explain?

LJ: WikiLeaks' Guantanamo Files contained not only several hundred classified reports, but also the full Standard Operating Procedures Manual for Guantanamo. Together, along with exposing torture and the detention of innocent men, these files revealed the involvement of Behavioural Science Consultation Teams, including psychologists, in designing the abusive tactics used at Guantanamo.

That evidence, as revealed by WikiLeaks, helped a group of psychologists in the United States known as Psychologists for Social Responsibility to hold the American Psychological Association accountable over its unethical collusion with the Department of Defence and the CIA, including psychologists' participation in horrors at

Guantanamo. For this reason, the psychology profession owes WikiLeaks and Julian Assange a great debt of gratitude. WikiLeaks and Julian Assange have helped us to defend the ethics and integrity of our profession.

I wish more psychologists understood this, and felt a sense of responsibility to do the ethical thing in return, by standing up for Julian Assange now that he is suffering the very same unethical psychological tactics that he helped to expose and combat.

WSWS: What do you think supporters of Assange and ordinary people should do to further the cause for his freedom?

LJ: The most important thing is not to be passive. Don't be silent. Don't leave it to others. Don't wait for authorities to put things right. They will not.

To further the cause of Julian Assange's freedom, do anything that is legal and within your power to do: attend rallies, write to your politicians, call your politicians, then call them and write to them again, sign petitions, be informed, share accurate information on social media, correct misinformation, talk to family and friends, find out what actions and initiatives already exist in your area and join them. Searching the #FreeAssange or #FreeAssangeRally hashtag on Twitter is one way to learn about events, which are rarely if ever reported in the establishment press.

In short, exercise to the fullest the democratic rights and freedoms that Julian Assange is fighting to defend, while you still can.

WSWS: The WSWS and our world party have called for the formation of a Global Defence Committee, to coordinate international actions aimed at securing Assange and Manning's liberty. What do you think of this proposal?

LJ: I think that it is a vital and imperative initiative. The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party are at the forefront in standing up against the torture and persecution of Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning, and breaking the cycle of collective violence. I commend the WSWS and its world party for taking the lead in this way, organising actions around the world, and providing essential information to correct the dangerous false narratives about Julian Assange and WikiLeaks.

As the WSWS and its readers know, the attacks on Julian Assange, WikiLeaks and Chelsea Manning are attacks at the heart of democracy and the heart of human welfare, because they are attacks on our right to know and to hold our governments accountable. Without those things, government abuses will escalate, and every cause of human significance, from war to climate emergency to social and economic equality and breakdown, will slip from our grasp. WikiLeaks Editor Kristinn Hrafnsson was right when he said, "A line has been drawn in the sand and either you are going to support Julian and fight this retribution and those indictments, or you basically step back and the lights will go out. That's how serious it is."



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