

Hundreds attend London meeting to demand freedom for Julian Assange

Our reporters

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Hundreds packed the St Pancras New Church in Euston Thursday night for a meeting demanding freedom for imprisoned WikiLeaks founder and journalist Julian Assange.

The largest meeting held in London to date reflects growing opposition to plans by the US government to extradite and imprison Assange for exposing war crimes, illegal mass surveillance and state corruption.

Headlined “Free the Truth,” speakers included UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer, former UK ambassador Craig Murray and veteran investigative journalist John Pilger.

An accompanying art exhibition featured paintings, drawings and sculpture, while the meeting opened with a piano recital of “And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda”—a favourite of Assange. The meeting was organised by academics Deepa Driver and Iain Munro, with the support of the Julian Assange Defence Committee.

Rap artist Lowkey began by quoting the words of jailed Chartist leader Ernest Jones: “Because I tried to extend your liberties, mine were curtailed. Because I tried to rear the temple of freedom for you all, I was thrown into the cell of a felon’s jail... Because I tried to give voice to truth, I was condemned to silence.” These words, Lowkey explained, were taken from an article by Karl Marx written in 1852 for the *New York Herald Tribune*. Marx was then a political refugee in London.

“Julian Assange is not being punished for anything he has done wrong. He is being punished for everything he has done right,” Lowkey said to applause. The brutal treatment of Assange was a “slow motion crucifixion... what they are trying to crucify is the truth.”

Condemning the mainstream media’s vilification of Assange, Lowkey said its journalists were just “stenographers.”

“Those who have joined in this demonization of Julian Assange are like turkeys voting for Christmas. How much profit did you generate off of Julian’s three million cables that WikiLeaks revealed?... Today Julian Assange, tomorrow you.”

Fidel Narvaez, former Ecuadorian counsel at the Ecuadorian Embassy, said that Assange was “along with Chelsea Manning, the most important political prisoner in the world today.”

The allegations against Assange in Sweden had never been credible and the investigation had been “opened and shut more times than a fridge door.” Assange was being “denied the chance to adequately prepare his defence against the fiercest persecution of a journalist so far this century, which is a powerful reason to demand due process for Julian Assange.”

Narvaez said, “Julian’s case is also a precedent for the institution of political asylum, because he, along with Edward Snowden, was the most important political asylee in the world.” His treatment was an

attack on a small country, Ecuador, by some of the most powerful nations in the world.

“Ecuador had every sovereign right to determine whether Julian Assange was being politically persecuted in 2012. In order to protect him from the odious persecution of a Grand Jury...that can open a secret investigation against you and indict you on secret charges that will only be revealed once you are arrested. That is what happened to Julian Assange this April.”

“This Grand Jury wants to sentence a journalist to 175 years in prison for publishing truthful information about war crimes,” he said. For years the world’s media had attacked the warnings made by Assange about the existence of a Grand Jury “as paranoia...an excuse to hide from Swedish justice.”

The United Nations had ruled that Assange was being subject to arbitrary detention and the UK should free him and provide compensation. Lenin Moreno’s government had “committed the crime of delivering a political refugee to those who persecuted him.” This had broken the “sacred principle of asylum.”

Lisa Longstaff from Women Against Rape addressed the meeting. “The pursuit of Julian Assange is not about rape. It’s the US government weaponising and distorting rape in order to punish him for the WikiLeaks exposés of war crimes, rape and torture.”

“In 2010 and 2012, we pointed to the unusual zeal with which Julian Assange was being pursued. It’s unlike any other rape investigation we’ve seen anywhere... In his case the judicial process was corrupted from the beginning.”

“Evidence emerged that the UK ordered Sweden not to drop the case sooner,” Longstaff explained, “so it’s clearly politically motivated.”

Longstaff said, “Rape and sexual allegations have been used to pursue a political agenda from the start, intent on actually hiding rape, hiding torture and hiding murder committed by the state. They are the rapists, they are the racists, they are the murderers.”

Professor Nils Melzer was given a prolonged standing ovation. He explained that his mandate as UN Special Rapporteur on Torture was to report to states when their actions contravened international law. He had assumed that signatories to international law would “act in good faith.”

“In my investigation I found that this isn’t about the law...because if it was about the law, then Julian Assange would not be sitting in extradition detention, accused of espionage for having exposed serious misconduct on the part of states, including war crimes.”

Assange, he explained, would not have been sentenced to 50 weeks in prison for a bail violation for seeking and receiving political asylum, or had his asylum terminated and his citizenship withdrawn

by Ecuador without explanation, or been portrayed as a suspected rapist by Sweden for more than nine years with no charges ever brought.

He would have been granted the right to prepare his defence and would not be detained in a high security prison, “under oppressive conditions of isolation and surveillance” and facing extradition for a political offence in contravention of UK law, “to a country where he will be exposed to a politicised trial, with secret evidence, behind closed doors, facing draconian punishments that is unlawful under US law and the First Amendment and sentencing to a supermax prison for the rest of his life.”

Assange’s persecution, he stressed, “is about setting an example, about scaring other journalists away, of instilling fear, preventing others from following the example of Julian Assange and of WikiLeaks, and to show to the world what happens when you expose the misconduct of the power of a state.”

During his May 9 visit with Assange at Belmarsh Prison, he had “found typical evidence of someone who has been exposed to a prolonged period of psychological torture,” Melzer explained. “Psychological torture is not ‘torture lite.’ Psychological torture aims to wreck and destroy the person’s personality and identity...to make them break.”

“We were able during our medical examination to confirm that this ill treatment had already had neurological consequences. If that is not stopped, it can end up having irreversible consequences on the cardiovascular system and the neurological system. This is extremely serious... Today I am extremely concerned for his life.”

Melzer had written to the UK, Sweden, the US and Ecuador to present his conclusions and ask them to take urgent measures to alleviate the pressure on Julian Assange and protect his human rights. All refused to do so: “If they no longer engage with the institutions that they have created to report their compliance with human rights, then I only see a very dark future for us and our human rights and for the rights of our children.”

Clinical psychologist Lissa Johnson spoke on behalf of more than 60 medical doctors who have issued an open letter calling for Assange’s urgent transfer from Belmarsh Prison to a tertiary care hospital: “If the UK government fails to heed their advice there will be very serious consequences, including that Julian Assange may die in prison.”

Johnson cited the findings of medical experts led by Nils Melzer who examined Assange inside Belmarsh on May 9: “Julian does show signs typical for someone exposed for a prolonged time to psychological torture... the doctors know that is very serious physically for Julian’s life and survival.”

Pointing to the public’s response to worldwide media coverage of the doctors’ open letter, she observed, “There’s a lot more public support for Julian than the media’s censorship and antagonism toward him suggests.”

“While institutions are failing us, while authorities are failing us, while the courts are failing us, here’s a group of people who took a matter of weeks to get this letter together. I think that’s where the pressure and the change is going to come.”

Former UK ambassador to Uzbekistan, Craig Murray, began his remarks by pointing to the meeting’s magnificent venue. At the rear of the church were monuments erected to honour those families—the Burnleys of Barbados, the Beale family of Canton, the Page family of Bombay—who gave funds to build the church and who were doubtless involved in the slavery and opium trade.

“This building is like the British Establishment itself—on the surface

it is beautiful, solid and harmonious, but inside it is rotten and corrupt to the core,” he said.

“We are seeing illegality in the treatment of Julian Assange. The abuses of process by the British justice system throughout the last decade have been absolutely astonishing,” Murray recounted. “There is no legality, there is no justice.”

“It is not only that he is the victim of torture. It’s not only that his life is at stake. It is not only that we need to save him from this dreadful injustice. We also want to save him because the world needs Julian Assange as a symbol of resistance!”

Historian, author and journalist Mark Curtis told the audience, “Julian has support all over the world.” He suggested actions that people could take to fight for Assange’s freedom, beginning with information available on the defend.wikileaks.org website. “Obviously there’s no point in relying on the establishment media, not unless you want to brainwash yourself.”

Curtis attacked the “propaganda tropes” employed by the media against Assange—that he is a “rapist,” a “Russian asset,” a “supporter of Trump”—singling out the *Guardian*’s November 2018 fabrication that Trump’s campaign manager Paul Manafort had met Assange at the Ecuadorian embassy.

He called for mass pressure on human rights organisations to actively defend Assange, pointing to Amnesty International’s refusal to designate Assange a “prisoner of conscience.” He called on MPs to follow the lead of former Labour MP Chris Williamson who has campaigned publicly in Assange’s defence.

The audience gave a loud ovation for the twice-suspended Labour MP, who was present, and who quit the party this month after it refused to endorse him as candidate for Derby North. Curtis explained that just four MPs had signed an early day motion moved by Williamson in defence of Assange. (Neither Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn nor Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott signed that motion).

“These are the people who are meant to represent us and hold the executive to account. I know I’m confusing the UK with a democracy... In our system, which we clearly see in this case, the law has been stitched-up, the media is a platform for the elite and the political class is an appendage of the executive. That’s why we, as ordinary people, need to take action on these issues.”

He urged the audience to become involved in grassroots organisations such as the Julian Assange Defence Committee and to take part in events being organised in the weeks ahead, “culminating in a global day of protest in February when the extradition hearing will be held.”

The final speaker, Australian journalist John Pilger, told the audience he had visited Assange in Belmarsh Prison earlier that day. He described his visit with Julian and the draconian security regime inside the prison for visitors and inmates. A transcript of Pilger’s report is posted separately.



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