Assange is facing a “new form of forced rendition”

WikiLeaks editor Kristinn Hrafnsson addresses the Australian press club

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In an address to the National Press Club in Canberra yesterday, WikiLeaks editor Kristinn Hrafnsson warned that the imprisonment and threatened US extradition of Julian Assange is an attack on press freedom that must be opposed by all journalists and defenders of democratic rights.

Hrafnsson branded the attempt to dispatch the WikiLeaks founder from Britain to the US, where he faces Espionage Act charges and life imprisonment, as a “new form of forced rendition.” He noted that this was taking place, not “with a sack over the head and an orange jumpsuit, but with the enabling of the UK legal system and with the apparent support of the Australian government.”

The WikiLeaks editor pointed to the “important international implications” of the Assange case. He stated: “Prolonging it creates an enabling environment for the deterioration of press freedom standards globally.”

Within Australia, the dangers of the “Assange precedent” had been revealed in federal police raids last June on the Sydney headquarters of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the home of Newscorp journalist Annika Smethurst. The police raids—and government threats to prosecute the targeted journalists—were over stories, based on leaks, that exposed Australian involvement in war crimes in Afghanistan and plans for expanded domestic surveillance.

Assange, Hrafnsson said, had “sacrificed everything so that whistleblowers can shine light on serious wrongdoing, so the public can understand truths about our world and for the principles of press freedom.”

The WikiLeaks editor characterised the maximum-security Belmarsh Prison where Assange is being held as a “brick and wire hell of sensory deprivation.”

Assange is being persecuted for his role as a publisher and journalist who exposed illegal wars and state intrigues. He “should not die for these principles,” Hrafnsson declared. “He should not be tortured, as the UN torture expert states is occurring.”

The Australian government has refused to defend Assange, who is an Australian citizen. Referring to Prime Minister Scott Morrison, Hrafnsson asked: “What has he done to get Julian home?”

The week before the WikiLeaks editor began his tour of Australia, Morrison contemptuously rebuffed an appeal from actress Pamela Anderson that his government intervene to block Assange’s extradition and secure his freedom. Morrison had lent credence to the judicial travesty being perpetrated against Assange in Britain and asserted that his government was powerless to do anything more than offer worthless and unspecified “consular assistance.”

Hrafnsson refuted these claims, listing a series of clear precedents for government action to free Assange. Declaring that it was time that Morrison “stood up for a fellow Australian citizen,” he stated: “Your government did take steps to secure the freedom of James Ricketson, also of Melinda Taylor, also of Peter Greste.”

There are clear parallels between the cases cited by Hrafnsson and the plight of Assange:

? Melinda Taylor, a lawyer who has previously represented Assange and WikiLeaks, was appointed by the International Criminal Court to advocate on behalf of Saif al-Islam Gaddafi in 2012, a year after his father’s government was overthrown by a NATO regime-change operation. In a flagrant violation of international law, the US-installed “rebel” government arrested Taylor and accused her of spying. The Australian Labor government intervened, with then Foreign Minister Bob Carr personally flying to Tripoli to secure Taylor’s release and her return to Australia.

? Ricketson, a documentary filmmaker, was convicted of bogus espionage charges in Cambodia. He was released last year after the Coalition government made “high-level” diplomatic representations on his behalf.

? Peter Greste, an Australian journalist working for *Al Jazeera*, was detained by the US-backed military dictatorship of Egypt and found guilty of fabricated “terrorism” offenses. He was freed after Australian government action in 2015.

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These cases demonstrate, as Hrafnsson explained, that the Australian government has a range of diplomatic and legal powers that could be employed in Assange's defence.

The fact that the current Coalition government, along with its Labor Party predecessor, has refused to fulfil its obligations to Assange since 2010 is inextricably tied to its support for the US alliance and its own turn towards authoritarian measures.

Hrafnnson thanked those Australian federal politicians who have formed a cross-parliamentary grouping to advocate for Assange. The co-chairs of the group, independent Andrew Wilkie and Nationals MP George Christensen, have announced that they will visit the WikiLeaks founder early next year. Their stand is the direct result of the international groundswell of support for Assange from political figures, independent journalists, artists, health professionals and, above all, working people.

The press conference itself exemplified the shameful alignment of much of the corporate media with the denial of Assange's legal and democratic rights. Only a handful of attendees at the event identified themselves as professional journalists and asked Hrafnsson a question. The conference was not broadcast live on ABC television, as many press club briefings are.

The media boycott was a political decision, undoubtedly made by press executives, editors and senior journalists. All of the corporate media, along with the ABC, have large bureaus in Canberra and regularly send substantial contingents to cover National Press Club events. The media blackout was aimed at preventing Hrafnsson's important comments from reaching a broader audience and, through censorship, attempting to stem the growing support for Assange.

One of the questions from a self-identified journalist in the audience was a hostile one suggesting that WikiLeaks had assisted the election of President Trump by publishing leaked emails from the Democratic National Committee (DNC) in 2016.

In a sharp reply, Hrafnnson insisted that WikiLeaks had merely upheld its duty to publish "true" and "newsworthy" leaked information that was in the public interest. Hrafnnson insisted such a stance was the professional duty of all journalists. He explained that WikiLeaks had not published material from the Trump campaign because it did not receive any.

Hrafnnson highlighted WikiLeaks' recent publication of damning exposures of the corruption of the Namibian government, in the lead up to the country's national election. He noted that the mainstream media has not condemned WikiLeaks for supposedly conducting "political interference" through these newsworthy exposures. Was it the case, he asked, that mainstream journalists were suggesting that one rule applied to the US, and another to other countries?

The hostile question dovetailed with a stepped-up attempt to revive the lying claims that Assange collaborated with Russia and Trump in 2016. This claim was always aimed at covering up the fact that material published by WikiLeaks revealed that the DNC was seeking to manipulate the Democratic Party primaries against Bernie Sanders and in favour of Hillary Clinton. The media has also sought to dampen down the explosive contents of Clinton's secret speeches to Wall Street banks, which WikiLeaks also published, in which she pledged to do the bidding of the financial elite.

The return of those who support the persecution of Assange to the "Russiagate" concoction follows the ignominious collapse last month of the slanderous nine-year Swedish investigation into false allegations of "sexual misconduct" against him.

WikiLeaks has warned that the "Russiagate" smears are being circulated by the very intelligence agencies that are seeking to destroy Assange for his exposures of their war crimes and mass spying, Tweeting yesterday, it stated: "We have learned that journalists are being fed misinformation by intelligence agencies. There is no 'WikiLeaks delegate' in Russia. The only persons authorised to speak for WikiLeaks, publicly or privately, are Kristinn Hrafnsson and Julian Assange."

In an indication of a polarisation within the media fraternity, Hrafnsson was invited to deliver a briefing to a group of around 100 ABC journalists and staff in Sydney on Monday. The overwhelming majority were reportedly sympathetic. Objective interviews with the WikiLeaks editor have also been conducted by some Nine Media and ABC reporters.

There is a growing recognition among principled journalists and media workers that enormous issues are at stake. As Hrafnsson told the WSWS on Monday: "The case of Julian Assange is, in all senses, the turning point. It is the biggest and the most serious attack on journalism and the free press in decades, if not 100 years. If this extradition goes ahead, journalists around the world will have lost so much that it will be very hard, if not impossible, to get back the rights that we had before."

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