

# Assange defence team: “The empire calls it espionage. We call it journalism”

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More than 100 journalists from 23 countries attended a press conference in London yesterday to discuss the US extradition hearing for Julian Assange that opens Monday. Organised by the Foreign Press Association, the conference was addressed by WikiLeaks Editor-in-Chief Kristinn Hrafnsson, lawyer Jennifer Robinson and Australian MPs Andrew Wilkie and George Christensen.

Ten years ago, Hrafnsson recalled, Assange was an internationally celebrated journalist. WikiLeaks had worked with a core group of journalists from all over the world to release the documents known as Cablegate. “Those core values are being challenged in a court next week in the Julian Assange case,” he said.

Describing as “absurd” the US State Department’s claims that Assange is not a journalist and WikiLeaks is not a media organisation, Hrafnsson said, “Last night some of us... were at the Frontline Club watching the award presentation that Julian Assange received in 2011, the Walkley award... the Pulitzer prize of Australia. He received that award for the releases in 2010 and 2011. The same releases that are now being described as espionage.

“The empire calls it espionage. We call it journalism.”

Hrafnsson tackled the frame-up US indictments against Assange. He told the journalists, “The lawyers acting on behalf of the United States will maintain that one of the indictments is about hacking. It is not. That label is propaganda... it has nothing to do with hacking. It is about lawful communication—communication between a source and a journalist.”

Rejecting the baseless allegations of “heartbroken generals from the Pentagon” that WikiLeaks’ exposures had “endangered lives,” Hrafnsson replied, “I thought that was ironic from the person who we [had] just exposed as having run death squads in Afghanistan.

“Now, ten years have lapsed and there has not been a single recorded incident of physical harm coming to any individual as a result of the leaks of 2010 and 2011,” he

noted.

Referring to the manufactured charges against Assange and the abuse of due process he has suffered over the past decade, Hrafnsson explained, “There is an overwhelming argument for dismissal.”

“This is a highly politicised case,” Hrafnsson continued. “I’ve said repeatedly, Julian Assange is a political prisoner... It was political in 2010, when high level officials in the US and commentators called for the ‘taking down’ of WikiLeaks.

“It was political when people were calling out for the assassination of Julian Assange, which in light of recent events in Iraq one should take seriously.

“It was political when Mike Pompeo, then CIA director in 2017, decided to depict WikiLeaks as a ‘non-state hostile intelligence service,’ something never heard before...”

Andrew Wilkie, an Australian independent MP and former lieutenant colonel in the Royal Australian Infantry Corps, reiterated that Assange had “publicised information in the public interest, including hard evidence of US war crimes.”

He was “very concerned at the behaviour of the British government, very concerned at the behaviour of the Australian government... And I criticise the Australian government for not speaking up in defence of an Australian citizen in strife abroad.”

Australian Liberal National MP George Christensen told the audience he was unusual among Assange’s defenders because he was “a big fan of Donald Trump and a big fan of BoJo [UK Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson].” He continued, “But I’m a bigger fan of free speech and a free press... and they are clearly under attack when it comes to the Julian Assange case.”

Explaining the purpose of his and Wilkie’s visit to London, Christensen said they wanted to “hear directly from Julian Assange what he wants to relay to the

Australian government and to the Australian people. And also, as a welfare check, because we're concerned about the constant reports we hear about his health situation, his mental state."

Christensen said he took confidence from Boris Johnson's recent statements in the House of Commons: "He said he believes that the US extradition treaty with the UK is somewhat imbalanced. He's also said that the UK protects journalists and whistle-blowers and I commend him for that. I hope that there's a change in direction."

Jennifer Robinson focussed on the significance of WikiLeaks' exposures for which Assange was being prosecuted, pointing to the criminalisation of national security journalism:

"We're talking about Collateral Murder, evidence of war crimes; we're talking about the Afghan and Iraq war logs, which showed the true costs of America's wars; human rights abuses; we're talking about Cablegate... Amnesty international said that it sparked the Arab Spring."

WikiLeaks documents had been cited in numerous human rights cases across the world, Robinson said. "They are a remarkable resource for those of us seeking to hold governments to account for abuses against their citizens and others. They are the publications for which Julian Assange now sits in a high security prison and faces 175 years in the US."

In the question-and-answer session, a journalist queried WikiLeaks' role in exposing the actions of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) during the 2016 US presidential elections in subverting Bernie Sanders' campaign in the Democratic primaries. Christensen observed, "because of that, some on the left have actually abandoned Julian Assange." In fact, the Democratic Party and its pseudo-left and liberal supporters internationally launched a reactionary campaign against WikiLeaks, claiming it was part of "Russian intervention" that put Donald Trump in the White House.

Hrafnsson explained that a court ruling last year had torn this lie to shreds. A New York judge had dismissed the DNC's case "with prejudice" in what he described as "the most underreported media story of year."

Christensen's absurd hope that Boris Johnson, a fellow right-wing politician, will intervene to save Assange is one that is also being openly promoted by Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn. After meeting with Wilkie on Monday, Corbyn told ABC News, "He [Johnson] accepted that it [the UK-US extradition treaty] is an

unbalanced treaty and it is not a fair one. Therefore I think that is a big change by the British government."

This is a deliberate distortion of what happened during Prime Minister's Questions last Wednesday, when Corbyn ended the session by first asking about Anne Sacoolas, the CIA operative who ran down and killed teenager Harry Dunn. Corbyn denounced "our country's one-sided extradition treaty with the USA," asking whether Johnson would commit to seeking a "balanced extradition relationship with the United States..."

Johnson, under immense pressure over revelations that his government allowed Sacoolas to leave the country knowing she was a CIA agent, squirmed while acknowledging Corbyn's characterisation of the extradition treaty as "unbalanced"—before insisting "that is totally different from the case of Harry Dunn and Anne Sacoolas."

When Corbyn followed up by asking whether Johnson felt Assange's "extradition should be opposed and the rights of journalists and whistle-blowers upheld for the good of all of us," Johnson replied that he would not comment on "any individual cases," before claiming that "the rights of journalists and whistle-blowers should be upheld and this government will continue to do that."

The only statement ever made by "BoJo" on Assange was on April 11, 2019, congratulating officials at the UK Foreign Office for brutally arresting and dragging him from the Ecuadorian embassy. He has no intention whatsoever of seeking the extradition of Sacoolas, let alone opposing the US demand for Assange to be extradited to the UK—and Corbyn and Christensen know this full well.

The relentless, decade-long persecution, threatened illegal rendition and torture of Julian Assange are the product of a lurch by all the imperialist powers toward war, authoritarianism and state repression in which the Johnson government is positioning itself as Trump's key military ally.

Assange will not be freed because of a supposed "change of heart" by Johnson, but through the building of an independent political movement of the working class against the Tory government that demands the release of the WikiLeaks publisher.



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