

Veteran “Four Corners” journalist Andrew Fowler denounces Australian government’s refusal to defend Assange

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Andrew Fowler, an award-winning investigative journalist and long-time defender of Julian Assange, recently spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the imprisonment and persecution of the WikiLeaks publisher and its implications for genuine investigative journalism, press freedom and basic democratic rights. The following is an edited version of the discussion.

Fowler, who began his journalistic career in the UK, was chief of staff and acting foreign editor for the *Australian* newspaper, and a senior reporter and investigative television journalist for the Special Broadcasting Services’ “Dateline” program and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Four Corners” and “Foreign Correspondent.”

He is also the author of *The Most Dangerous Man in the World: The inside story of WikiLeaks* (2011) and *Shooting the Messenger: Criminalising Journalism* (2018), which details how post-9/11 governments have used the “war on terrorism” to carry out a wide-ranging unprecedented assault on democratic rights.

Fowler interviewed Assange three times between 2010 and 2012 and reported *Sex, Lies and Julian Assange*, a detailed “Four Corners” exposé of the bogus sexual misconduct allegations in Sweden against the WikiLeaks founder. The 2012 documentary, which won the New York Festival Gold Medal, was one of the few honest reports about the false and politically-motivated character of the allegations made against Assange in Sweden and circulated by the corporate media and “liberal” and pseudo-left publications around the world.

Last June, after Australian Federal Police raids on the ABC, Fowler penned a powerful comment for the *Sydney Morning Herald* warning that the raids were “a wake-up call to journalists who left Assange swinging” and calling on them to speak out in defence of the WikiLeaks founder. Fowler also initiated an open letter from ABC Alumni—an organisation of former ABC staff—demanding that the Australian government oppose the US extradition of Assange and repatriate him to Australia.

We began our discussion by asking about the media silence over “Speak up for Assange,” a petition signed late last year by hundreds of journalists and asked him to comment.

Andrew Fowler: It’s curious why it didn’t received any coverage, especially given the fact that it was signed by [Kerry] O’Brien, [Daniel] Ellsberg and many other notable journalists.

My judgment of what is news these days is completely different from the people currently running the show. Most of the media has gone down the lightweight entertainment route—anything that’s deemed to be too disturbing to people tends to get pushed to one side. It’s the infotainment argument.

There’s a whole bunch of reasons why the media is silent on this, which I’ll be exploring in the update I’m currently writing to my previous

book *The Most Dangerous Man in the World*. The question that has to be answered is why is the Australian government silent on all of this? It’s an outrage.

WSWS: Your *Sex, Lies and Julian Assange* exposure of the so-called sexual assault allegations against Assange was also largely ignored at the time, and the media slander against Assange continued.

AF: Yes, that’s right. Getting that story up was difficult and we put a lot of work into it. If you watch it again though you’ll see that analytically and factually it’s extremely strong and stands the test of time. But it seems to have been buried and neither “Four Corners,” nor any other program went back to it and used the facts that we uncovered.

But then AFP raids on the ABC and Annika Smethurst happened which made it pretty clear demonstrating the warnings Assange had been making. Suddenly journalists were made aware of just how vulnerable they were to the changes going on in this country—the warnings Kerry O’Brien made in his Walkley Awards’ speech about Australia heading towards authoritarianism and even down the road, he suggested, towards fascism.

What intrigued me about the reaction to the AFP raids was the way the ABC, and other media, separated Assange from all this.

Long before the raids, Hillary Clinton had been allowed to appear on the network and openly accuse Assange of doing the bidding of Putin just because Assange dared to publish emails showing she was getting preferential treatment over Bernie Sanders. No ABC journalist challenged her over this.

How can anyone and journalists in particular separate out Assange, who revealed one of the great stories of our time about Hillary Clinton—that she was getting preferential treatment over Bernie Sanders—and yet abandon the person that published this? How do you square that circle? The answer is related to the bigger picture of how a lot of journalists now see their role in society.

Journalists should always stand apart from power and not be part of it—to stand against authority and authoritarianism and not just be public relations officers. Instead, what we’ve seen in the last 20 or 30 years is mainstream media journalists coming to see themselves as part of the powerful elite, and so they mix with the politicians and administrators, and have come to see their role as upholders of the status quo. Some become stenographers for whichever government is in power.

You’ve only got to listen to Michael Pezzullo, head of [Home Affairs minister] Peter Dutton’s department, to get some idea of this. Pezzullo talks about “trusted journalists.” Obviously journalists should be trusted by the public but to be considered a “trusted journalist” by politicians, that’s something else altogether. Pezzullo is not talking about real journalists but “trustees” which is an extremely unhealthy development; it’s the road towards authoritarianism.

WSWS: How would you assess the relationship between what WikiLeaks exposed in Australia—the US protected sources in the Labor Party and elsewhere—and Australia’s military alliance with the US?

AF: WikiLeaks revealed the truth about all the political parties in Australia and consequently, it was party politically friendless. I know from my own experience that none of the mainstream political parties will take up the cudgels for you if you’ve just revealed what they’re all doing behind the scenes.

Julian Assange is now in a prison for terrorists, in virtual solitary confinement and charged with espionage because he revealed evidence of war crimes committed by another country—things that serious and honest journalists are supposed to do.

And such is the relationship between the United States and Britain that its judicial system is going to allow him to be extradited to the very country that he has exposed committing these crimes.

For the British government, Assange has become a tradable commodity and something they can use to ensure its access to the American intelligence and information gathering systems.

WSWS: The same relationship with Australia?

AF: Absolutely. Australian governments are terrified of the United States in case they’re cut out of intelligence-sharing. That’s what Australian involvement in the Iraq War was about. If Assange was brought back to Australia from the UK there’d be a new US extradition attempt here.

WSWS: You saw firsthand, the impact of the sex allegations against Assange on his support base and how it was used.

AF: Yes, it produced a very dramatic shift politically speaking. The problem was that the allegations were very, very flimsy and could not be tested until he was charged but the Swedish didn’t charge him. The Swedish prosecutor could have easily gone to London and actually gone through the process but she didn’t.

The role of Sweden in that process is extremely murky but there’s a very interesting email uncovered by Stefania Maurizi, an Italian journalist, who has done a lot of work on this. The email was from the British Crown Prosecution Service to the Swedes urging them not to get cold feet and call off the investigation. The British were more concerned about Assange getting away than the Swedes were.

WSWS: Could you comment on Nils Melzer’s report into the treatment of Assange.

AF: It isn’t so much what I think of Melzer’s report but the response of the Australian media. It was a shocking indictment of the treatment and torture of an Australian citizen and was, as he said, the biggest gang up of so-called democratic countries against an individual he’d ever seen. It was sickening to read it but it was barely reported here. It should’ve have been on the front-page of every newspaper in Australia and lead radio and television stories.

There used to be healthy debates in news rooms about what should be lead stories and that sort of thing.

WSWS: From the outset the WSWS has stressed that the persecution of Assange is inseparable from Washington’s preparation for war.

AF: America is always preparing for war—in the Middle East, against China—all over the place. The persecution of Assange is an attack on anybody who speaks out against the power and authority of the United States. It’s a warning to every journalist: “Pull your head in. Shut up. Don’t question. Just report what we say.”

These sorts of threats, however, should be a motivating force to serious journalists to actually stand up and ask questions and challenge authority.

The defence of Assange and WikiLeaks is extremely relevant to preventing another war. If people can’t reveal the truth from inside intelligence organizations. If [former Office of National Assessments intelligence analyst] Andrew Wilkie did now what he did and said about the Iraq War in 2003 both he and [Australian journalist] Laurie Oakes

could have been charged.

WSWS: And subjected to secret trials.

AF: That’s right. We’re living through a very significant moment in history. The question is how to make people aware of just how much danger they face and why the defence of Assange is important.

The Australian public does not realise the full extent of anti-democratic laws that have been imposed in this country. As Daniel Ellsberg has explained, the more you expose what governments are really doing behind the scene, the tighter and more restrictive it’ll get. All sorts of draconian laws have been either imposed on us by being a member of the Five Eyes group but we have none of the protections of the First Amendment or European human rights laws.

WSWS: There’s tremendous popular support for Assange across Australia and internationally. The media silence on these issues highlight the vast gulf between the mainstream media and ordinary people. Millions of young people have no confidence in the established parliamentary parties—Labor or conservative.

AF: Yes, and that’s a very good point. There’s a shift underway. In December, in the midst of the bushfires and smoke engulfing the city we had a demonstration quickly called on climate change and 20,000 people turned up to protest in the centre of Sydney.

The other thing that’s quite interesting from my experience—I grew up during the Watergate period—is the kids today have no fear about socialism. They see no bogeyman in socialism, whereas for over 30 years, though, it was “Reds under the bed” and all the rest of that.

WSWS: How should the campaign to free Assange develop and what role should journalists play?

AF: The personality nonsense about Assange has to be taken out of it. The argument has to be about what has and will happen to journalism and the media. If you’re going to start looking at journalists and judging them according to how they live their lives well you’re not going to stand up for too many people. Assange has done what every journalist should do and told the truth about a powerful country, the most powerful country in the world, and the crimes that it has committed.

It should be incumbent on all journalists in this country to report on every single thing that happens to Julian Assange. Not as just Julian Assange, but as the editor-in-chief of WikiLeaks. These stories should be in news bulletins every night with live crosses from the courts.

This is a fundamental issue and if we don’t win this battle then it’s not over but it’s very nearly over. Journalists have to put these arguments clearly to the public and raise its awareness about what’s at stake.

Some journalists might argue that this is political. Well yes, of course it’s political—we don’t live in an apolitical world—and it’s a political battle that we have to win.



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