

Journalist Andrew Fowler: If Assange is extradited, the same can happen to any of us

Oscar Grenfell
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In an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site* earlier this week, veteran Australian investigative journalist Andrew Fowler warned that the attempt to extradite Julian Assange to the US and prosecute him for exposing American war crimes is establishing a precedent for the suppression of press freedom and broader opposition to authoritarianism.

The WSWS contacted Fowler after he published a strong opinion piece in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on September 7 condemning the resumed British court hearings for Assange's extradition and pointing to the issues of democratic principle at stake. The article was a rare breach in a wall of silence around the proceedings that has been enforced by the Australian political and media establishment.

Fowler is a long-standing opponent of the persecution of Assange, and an authority on the history of WikiLeaks as a result of his decade-long reportage on the organisation.

Between 2010 and 2012, he interviewed Assange three times. This contributed to a full-length biography of the WikiLeaks founder, as well as *Sex, Lies and Julian Assange*, a documentary aired on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's flagship "Four Corners" program, exposing the bogus sexual misconduct allegations levelled against Assange by the Swedish state. The film, which is available online, remains essential viewing for anyone seeking to oppose the lies and slanders promoted by intelligence agencies, the corporate media and innumerable middle-class cynics, to undermine public support for Assange.

Earlier this year Fowler brought out an updated edition of *The Most Dangerous Man in the World: Julian Assange and WikiLeaks' Fight for Freedom*. The new volume spans from Assange's childhood to the issuing of Espionage Act charges against him in 2019, and contains a wealth of material on the US-led vendetta against the WikiLeaks founder.

Fowler is also the author of *Shooting the Messenger: Criminalising Journalism*. In his lengthy career he has been 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, as well as the ABC's "Four Corners" and "Foreign Correspondent."

WSWS: You wrote an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) last week headlined "Assange makes his way to date with destiny he always predicted." Could you elaborate on this? What is the significance of Assange's warnings coming to pass for all of the slanders that have been used to undermine public support for him, such as the abandoned Swedish investigation and the claims that he somehow worked on behalf of Russia?

Andrew Fowler: Assange believed right from the first time he was accused of sex crimes by the Swedish prosecuting service that the attempts to extradite him to Sweden were part of a plan to take him to the US. Though it is often argued that it is just as easy to extradite from the UK to the US, there is evidence that Sweden is extremely compliant to illegal actions by the US on its soil.

For example, there is no publicly available evidence that the UK government allows the CIA to snatch people off the street in the UK. But

that's exactly what happened to two asylum seekers, who had been granted residency in Sweden. They were whisked off to Egypt and were tortured. After a UN investigation the Swedish government paid them compensation.

WSWS: As a journalist who has covered Assange for over a decade, could you comment on what you expected when this began in 2010, whether you thought it would end up like this, and what has surprised/shocked you over the past ten years?

AF: I always thought it would be tough going, even in the halcyon days when Assange was pointing to a new way for journalism to flourish in the then burgeoning internet age. WikiLeaks was a counterweight to the rising intrusiveness of the surveillance state. It would be expected that the US—the sole superpower—in particular would try to smear his name.

What at times was disheartening was to witness the relish with which journalists, who had previously greeted him as with open arms, turned on him. Many of these journalists saw themselves as part of the ruling elite, not representatives of the voiceless, the unrepresented in society.

WSWS: What were your impressions of the first week of hearings? They seemed to confirm the characterisation of the proceedings as a lawless show-trial.

AF: A lawless show-trial might be taking it a bit far, but there is a pattern forming. Assange is sitting in a glass cage between two burly guards. It is difficult for him to brief his lawyers. Applications for him to sit in the body of the court have been refused. When the US introduced superseding indictments which totally changed the flavour of the allegations against Assange, the judge could have refused to accept them. She didn't, even though they were late being filed.

The hearing is shambolic. Witnesses being interviewed online can't hear the lawyers who are questioning them and at times don't have the documents they are being questioned about. Then there's the question of access to what is a hearing of immense public interest and importance. Only journalists are given access to the online streaming of the hearing. Members of the public and human rights organisations are barred.

The attempt by the State to control information is at the heart of the charges against Assange. Its physical manifestation is there every day in the court.

WSWS: In the same SMH article, you reviewed the case of Duncan Campbell, and juxtaposed the attempts by the British state to prosecute him with the proceedings against Assange. Could you recall that case for our readers and comment on its significance vis-à-vis the Assange case?

AF: There are several parallels between Campbell and Assange. The UK Government had been gunning for Duncan Campbell, a physicist turned journalist, ever since he revealed the existence of the then top secret GCHQ [Government Communications Headquarters] spy station in the 1970s. Campbell argued that since those who were being spied on, mainly the Russian government, knew of its existence, so too should the citizens of the UK who were paying for it. Following Campbell's exposé, a former GCHQ officer made contact with Campbell, but the UK security

intelligence services got wind of the meeting and arrested them and another who was present.

The significance of the case against Campbell, who was working for *Time Out*, a relatively small circulation magazine in London, was that it appeared to have one major objective, to stop Duncan Campbell's journalism. As with Assange, Campbell was accused of providing information which might be directly useful to the enemy. The UK Government wanted Campbell put away "for a very long time," the Crown prosecutor candidly told the defence's Australian lawyer Geoffrey Robertson.

The case began to fall apart when the court clerk disclosed to Jeremy Hutchinson, the defence's senior counsel, that the prosecution had vetted the jury, several of whom worked for government departments and had signed the Official Secrets Act. One, a former SAS soldier, was almost certainly hostile to the activities of the defendants. All this might have remained secret but for a note being passed to the judge that some members of the jury were worried that by even listening to the evidence, they might be breaking the Official Secrets Act. When news inevitably leaked out publicly that the prosecution had vetted the jury, the judge abandoned the trial.

Campbell was subsequently convicted at a second trial, but given a non-custodial sentence, perhaps because the prosecution had been caught so red-handed. The less serious charge of "unauthorised receipt of classified information" remained, but the charge he published material "intended to be directly or indirectly useful" to the enemy was dropped.

In Assange's case, it's not the jury that's been stacked (there isn't one), but the judiciary has been revealed to have a gross conflict of interest. Lady Emma Arbuthnot heard the first case against Assange, and as the UK chief magistrate oversees the current extradition hearing. Her husband is a member of the House of Lords, an ex-Conservative Defence Minister and has been a paid consultant for a company partly owned by the former head of MI6.

WSWS: In the new edition of your biography of Assange, you detail various aspects of the more recent campaign against him. There is a significant amount of material on the alleged CIA spying on Assange while he was a political refugee in the Ecuadorian embassy. Could you speak on the implications of this for the attempt to extradite him, and also the material you cover which shows that senior levels of the US government were at least aware of the spying?

AF: The most telling aspect of the spying on Assange in the Ecuadorian Embassy is that it breaches lawyer-client protection laws. David Morales, the CEO of Spanish security company Undercover Global (UC Global), which carried out these activities, is currently on trial in Spain. Those who worked for Morales have stated that UC Global was working for "United States Intelligence" but what has been unclear, and remains so, is exactly who?

In my book *The Most Dangerous Man in the World: Julian Assange and WikiLeaks' Fight for Freedom*, I reveal how details of the conversations Assange had in the embassy ended up at the US State Department, headed by Mike Pompeo, who earlier as director of the CIA had described WikiLeaks as a "hostile intelligence service."

WSWS: Your book also outlines numbers of instances in which Australian governments and senior politicians, Labor and Liberal, demonstrated their hostility to Assange. Could you point to some of the more egregious examples?

AF: Back in 2010 the then Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard accused WikiLeaks of breaking the law with its public disclosures of evidence of US war crimes. She did not correct the fact that the organisation had broken no Australian law (as a subsequent Federal Police investigation found). The then Attorney-General Robert McClelland threatened to remove Assange's Australian passport, until Kevin Rudd, the foreign minister pointed out that was his area of interest and he would do nothing

of the sort.

Later, another Foreign Minister Bob Carr called Assange amoral, but subsequently admitted he had lied when he said that Assange was receiving more consular assistance than other Australians in trouble overseas. Carr has since joined the campaign against Assange's extradition. The current Prime Minister Scott Morrison, says Assange should 'face the music.' In other words, he will do nothing to prevent his extradition to the US.

WSWS: What do you think of the silence of Labor and the Coalition about the current hearings, and what lies behind the support for Assange's persecution by all governments since 2010?

AF: Without going into a long analysis of Australian governments and their relationships with the United States, in my opinion the reason no one speaks out against the US is because they fear that the intelligence sharing relationship will either be ended, or severely curtailed. Silence and compliance is the price Australia pays for access to information gathered by the Five-Eyes spying operation.

WSWS: The response from the mainstream media in this country continues to be muted. Why do you think that is? Why aren't more journalists rallying to Assange's defence?

AF: The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) has been very strong in its support of Assange, particularly now that the details of the extradition charges are known. Journalists in general haven't been so robust in their support for a number of reasons:

1. A successful psyops campaign by military-intelligence operatives to smear Assange.
2. The belief among some journalists that they are part of a ruling elite (and Assange was not).
3. Anger that Assange pointed out this was not the role of journalists.
4. Assange was a "newcomer" and would not play by the established rules.
5. WikiLeaks forced journalists to be more open and accountable.
6. Assange's "new journalism" greatly irritated the so-called traditionalists by repeatedly reinforcing the ancient journalistic shibboleth that the real role of journalists is to hold truth to power.

WSWS: Why is this case so crucial for journalists?

AF: If the extradition hearing determines that what Assange did was an extraditable offence, then no journalist, anywhere in the world, will be safe from extradition to the United States. What Assange is charged with doing is what every journalist should be doing every day, encouraging sources to leak, helping them protect themselves; exposing evidence of war crimes.

WSWS: In our coverage on the WSWS, we have stated that Assange's case cannot be understood outside of the context of escalating authoritarianism, war and social inequality. Defence witnesses last week particularly pointed to a broader "war on journalism." Could you comment on the relationship between this case and broader developments?

AF: If I can put it this way: Assange is being prosecuted, not for what he did, but what he stands for. And for what he stands against, the rise of authoritarianism.

The information WikiLeaks revealed might have been shocking, but it was hardly unexpected. This is not to diminish the extraordinary benefits that flowed to all of us from the truths that WikiLeaks revealed. Yet what WikiLeaks and Assange did, more than anything else, was to dare challenge authority, and particularly the authority of the world's then sole super power. In a world where countries are increasingly moving closer and closer to authoritarianism, those who stand against authority are to be crushed. There will be no dissent. It is why he is in the dock at the Old Bailey.

WSWS: Finally, could you please speak about the role of ordinary people in coming to Assange's defence?

AF: As a journalist I tend to avoid giving advice, but the best thing that members of the public can do is to speak out against any injustice. Petitions and phone/email calls to members of parliament may not sound dramatic, but they can be effective. Politicians take contact from members of the general public seriously.



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