

Australian academics attack Julian Assange on ABC program

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The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) released an hour-long podcast on June 23 in which several academics and media figures discussed the extradition proceedings of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

The program remains worthy of comment several weeks later. It is, after all, one of the very few occasions on which the publicly-funded broadcaster has seen fit to devote an entire show to Assange, despite the fact that he is Australia's most high-profile political prisoner, and a fellow journalist.

The ABC broke its general silence on Assange under conditions of an outpouring of support for the WikiLeaks founder, after British Home Secretary Priti Patel announced last month that she had approved his extradition to the US, where Assange faces 17 Espionage Act charges and 175 years imprisonment for exposing American war crimes.

Anyone hoping for a sympathetic accounting of Assange's persecution, or a statement of support for a journalist facing egregious persecution, was left disappointed.

The program was entitled: "Is Julian Assange entitled to a 'free speech' defence?" Every credible press freedom and human rights organisation has answered the question unequivocally in the affirmative. They have demanded that the US charges be dropped forthwith, because they constitute a frontal assault on the most basic democratic rights.

Not so the ABC and its esteemed guests. The radio presenters were Waleed Aly and Scott Stephens and the program was part of an ABC Radio National series "The Minefield."

Aly has previously made limited criticisms of the prosecution of Assange, though not recently. A politics lecturer at Monash University and ubiquitous media personality, his "liberal" credentials are primarily based on the promotion of multicultural identity politics, which are not even slightly left-wing or threatening to the powers that be.

Less frequently noted is that Aly works for Monash University's Global Terrorism Research Centre think tank, a

state-funded body which collaborates with policing agencies and is tasked with "fostering counter-terrorism practices."

Stephens is an ABC editor, and former theology and ethics lecturer and parish minister. He is considered an expert on the Slovenian academic Slavoj Žižek, an intellectual charlatan whose occasionally "left" rhetoric is marshalled in support of imperialist war and reaction.

Appearing as a guest on the Assange episode was Katharine Gelber—a University of Queensland Professor of Politics and Public Policy and head of that university's School of Political Science and International Studies.

Barely five minutes into the program, Stephens complained that "Assangists" are "so sensitive about Assange as a cause, and what Assange as a cause might then mean for the future of western democracy or the future of press freedom... that no admission that there really may have been things for which he has rightly been charged and for which he should be held accountable and for which he should be tried, can even be broached."

The only 'crime' for which Assange has been charged is publishing true information, in the public interest, which exposed illegal actions by the American government and its allies. If that is made illegal, so is any opposition to war and other government policies.

Stephens presented the kangaroo court process to which Assange has been subjected for over a decade as a *bona fide* legal case.

"Is the defence really worth the price of causing people to lose faith altogether in legal systems, in the internal accountability structures within journalism, of the ability of politicians and judges to behave and to act, and to legislate, in good faith?" Stephens continues.

Without evidence, he repeated the US Department of Justice's account of the charges against Assange: "Soliciting/conspiring with persons who had access to classified information to assist them in procuring that information—in other words 'hacking,'" and "the mass publication of documents that placed persons who were informants, especially in Afghanistan and Iraq, in immediate

threat of reprisal, of imprisonment, and of death.”

These claims are refuted by evidence that has been on the public record for years.

Testimony in court cases has proved that Assange did not hack into US computers.

Far from “willfully, heedlessly or recklessly” placing individuals at risk through WikiLeaks’ publications, both Mark Davis and *Der Spiegel* journalist John Goetz have revealed the extensive redaction of documents by Assange.

Yet, Stephens declared, “On both fronts, in my opinion, it is right for him to be extradited, it is right for him to be placed on trial.”

Stephens did not note that according to a *Yahoo! News* report last September, the Trump administration and the CIA had plotted to kidnap or assassinate Assange in 2017. Were these plans for state murder in London an expression of the “rule of law” and “democratic norms”? Stephens did not say and Aly did not bother to ask.

Gelber jumped in to proclaim that WikiLeaks is not a journalistic organisation, despite having received some of the highest honours in the field, including Australia’s Walkley Award for Most Outstanding Contribution to Journalism in 2011.

According to Gelber, “Assange is saying that ‘I can illegally obtain information, I can exercise no prudence or caution in what I choose to make public. I can put individuals at risk because I want to. I can ignore all of the principles of journalism.’ And then when they come after me, which I knew was going to happen, I’m going to say ‘How dare you come after me. I have free speech.’”

Stephens concurred with Gelber’s anti-democratic rant, adding, “The ‘free speech’ argument is not on the side of those who try to illegally obtain that information.”

The US has acknowledged it has no evidence that WikiLeaks’ publications resulted in any individual in the world coming to physical harm. The only damage done was to the bogus humanitarian and democratic pretensions of the warmongers in Washington.

If soliciting information is a crime, moreover, so is all genuine journalism. If journalists do not solicit information, they simply become a forwarding service for approved official information that is handed to them by government authorities. Such a conception of a “free press” would not be objected to by any number of dictators and autocrats.

Gelber expanded on this point: “We can’t allow that special protection [freedom of the press] to be extended to anybody with a keyboard no matter how they obtained the information, no matter what they want to release, and without exercising any editorial restraint, or prudence, or judgment.”

In other words, press freedom applies only to journalists

who work for multibillion dollar media conglomerates, and who are vetted by the intelligence agencies. This was certainly not the conception of the American revolutionaries, who inscribed free speech for all as the First Amendment of the American Constitution, but it would be heartily agreed to in the offices of the CIA and their Australian counterparts.

Aly, adopting the lame pose of pseudo-objectivity that is so favoured among careerist journalists and talking heads, distanced himself from those who would brand Assange as either a “villain” or “messiah.” He added: “I just feel like it would be a much better conversation if you were banned from mentioning the name Julian Assange.”

So would the CIA thugs who plotted to assassinate Assange, and all of the government leaders who have overseen his decade-long persecution.

Aly’s statement underscored the obliteration of any substantial distinction between upper-middle class liberal opinion, and the rantings of those who speak for the intelligence agencies and the state.

The program underscores several conclusions that must be drawn by those fighting for democratic rights and Assange’s freedom.

Chief among them is that there is no constituency for democratic rights within the political establishment, including the ABC, whatever its erstwhile liberal pretensions. To the extent that the assault on democratic rights is discussed in these circles, it is legitimised and promoted with slanders and outright lies. If a dictatorship were proclaimed, there would be a measured “conversation” on its pros and cons.

The official media, including the ABC, is completely integrated into the state and corporate apparatus. Its figureheads and self-styled experts are representatives of an affluent upper-middle class that has been irredeemably corrupted by its six-figure salaries, stock market holdings and property portfolios.

The real basis for Assange’s freedom is the emerging movement of the working class, including in the US, Britain and Australia. It is there that a genuine commitment to democratic rights, free speech and an opposition to imperialist war is to be found.



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