

Australian journalist Andrew Fowler says the persecution of Assange is a “symptom of a declining empire”

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14 July 2022

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed well-known Australian journalist Andrew Fowler this week on the continuing persecution of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange, who faces extradition to the US and life imprisonment there for exposing American war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Fowler is one of the few prominent media figures who has consistently voiced support for Assange, throughout the decade of his pursuit by US and allied governments. Fowler’s strong statements are given greater weight by his own substantial record as an investigative journalist.

He has been chief of staff and acting foreign editor for the *Australian* newspaper, the national flagship of Rupert Murdoch’s Australian operations. Fowler was also a senior reporter and investigative television journalist for the Special Broadcasting Service’s “Dateline” program, as well as the state-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Four Corners” and “Foreign Correspondent.”

He has produced important works on Assange, including a thorough investigative documentary that aired in 2012 and a book account of Assange’s journalistic work and the evolution of WikiLeaks, which has been published in two editions.

The WWSW asked Fowler to comment on the implications of last month’s decision by British Home Secretary Priti Patel to approve Assange’s extradition from London, where he is incarcerated in the maximum-security Belmarsh Prison, to the United States.

Fowler explained that “There is certainly an urgency for Assange. Patel’s decision to go ahead with the extradition means that the avenues for Assange to avoid extradition are closing fast.”

Assange had applied to appeal the ruling, in his last possible appeal within the British legal system. The British judiciary is still to announce whether it will hear the case, something that is far from guaranteed.

The continuing pseudo-legal extradition process is proceeding at full-steam, despite the fact that the US campaign against Assange has been exposed as a dirty-tricks operation. Fowler is an authority on some of the more egregious aspects of the assault on Assange’s rights, having dwelt at length on them in

the second edition of his book, *The Most Dangerous Man In The World: Julian Assange and WikiLeaks’ Fight for Freedom*.

Asked to enumerate some of those abuses, Fowler replied: “There is now overwhelming evidence that the United States government has acted unlawfully in the pursuit of Assange.

“Evidence that the CIA was involved in and directed spying on Assange and his legal representatives while he was inside the Ecuador Embassy is now being prosecuted through the Spanish courts. Information gathered during this spying operation was relayed directly to the US administration, including to a close confidant of the then president Donald Trump.

“As important, Yahoo’s investigation, all but confirmed by former CIA director Mike Pompeo, that the CIA planned to kidnap and even kill Assange in London, adds weight to the very strong argument that Assange cannot get a fair hearing in the US (a country whose war crimes he exposed) and the case should be dropped.”

That *Yahoo! News* story, published last September, was based on the statements of 30 anonymous former US officials. It confirmed that the filing of an indictment against Assange, and the ensuing extradition request, were secondary prongs in the US offensive against WikiLeaks, the first weapons of choice being illegal surveillance and plans for Assange’s rendition or murder.

The extraordinary measures against Assange did not begin in 2017, when the assassination plot was discussed.

In 2012, Fowler’s “Sex, Lies and Julian Assange” documentary was aired on the ABC’s prestigious “Four Corners” program. It was a meticulous dissection of the Swedish sexual misconduct allegations of 2010, which had been used to blacken Assange’s name and justify the effective deprivation of his liberty in Sweden.

Fowler’s piece pointed to the many contradictions in the Swedish investigation, as well as the involvement of the US and other powers, inexplicable except from the standpoint of the targeting of Assange for his journalistic work.

Now, even more is known about the case, branding it irrefutably as a frame-up. In the course of nine years, the

Swedish investigation never passed the “preliminary” phase and Assange was not charged with a single offense. In the light of subsequent developments, the WSWS asked Fowler to give his thoughts on the Swedish affair now.

He answered: “While US intelligence may not have been directly involved at the start of the investigation into the Swedish allegations against Assange, there is ample evidence that later, they, and their British subordinates, began actively working to get Assange onto US soil. By December 2010, the US Justice Department had empanelled a Grand Jury to examine ‘evidence’ against Assange.

“An email trail revealed by Italian journalist Stefania Maurizia revealed that the Swedish investigators of Assange were being urged on by the UK’s Crown Prosecution Service not to let the case drop. The email from the CPS warned the Swedish prosecutors not to get ‘cold feet’ as they considered ending the investigation. With the US Vice President at the time, Joe Biden calling Assange a ‘high-tech terrorist,’ it is reasonable to suspect that the British were acting on behalf of the US to continue the case.”

Fowler commented on the relentless demonisation of Assange, including by sections of the press, stating: “It is important to remember that in 2010 when WikiLeaks first revealed evidence of US war crimes in Iraq, Assange was lauded as a journalistic hero and showered with awards. But repeated lies and falsehoods about Assange, often repeated by mainstream media journalists, undermined his position, both in the journalistic world and among the public at large.

“These attacks on Assange and WikiLeaks should not have come as a surprise to any reasonable journalist, since the plan of attack was clearly outlined in a secret document drawn up by the US military and released by WikiLeaks. Only recently has the pendulum swung back towards understanding how important Assange’s case is for all journalists. If the judicial reach of the US in the Assange case is successful, no journalist who publishes or broadcasts information that the US deems to be against its national security interest will be safe.”

Was this bound up with a broader assault on democratic rights? Fowler answered in part: “Since the attack on the Twin Towers, at the urging of the US, the other members of the Five-Eyes military and intelligence sharing group have mirrored the US crackdown on open and democratic discussion.

“The media is partly responsible for the emergence of this authoritarianism. It became too close to executive power, particularly during the Bush and Obama administrations and, compromised by this relationship, became unable to do its job properly of holding power to account.”

And what of the relationship between escalating war and this turn to authoritarianism? Fowler commented: “Russia and China are clearly a threat to the interests of the West, as is the West a threat to the interests of Russia and China. What is important to remember is that these are not the high moral questions in which the threat of war is usually wrapped, but a

strategic realignment in the world.

“How the declining power of the US in relation to China is handled, both by the US and its Western allies, will determine our future. I am afraid that the signs are not good that mistakes of the past which led to two world wars won’t be repeated. The bullying legal overreach of Assange by the US is a symptom not of strength, but the weakness of a declining empire, given to hubris and monumental errors of judgment.”

As the WSWS has previously analysed, the US is an imperialist power, while Russia and China are not. The threat of war arises out of the breakdown of the capitalist system, and the drive of all the imperialist powers, led by the US, to offset their own crisis at the expense of their rivals.

The US has stoked conflicts, including the war in Ukraine, as part of an overarching plan to confront Russia and China, aimed at reducing them to a semi-colonial status, securing their substantial natural resources and dominating the geo-strategically decisive Eurasian landmass.

Fowler’s point, that these “are not the high moral questions in which the threat of war is usually wrapped,” is well made. As it claims to be fighting for democracy in Ukraine, Russia, China, etc. the Biden administration is trying to convict Assange of charges that would be a death blow to press freedom.

Finally, the WSWS asked why workers and young people should concern themselves with Assange’s plight and take up the fight for his freedom.

Fowler said: “The plight of Assange should concern people of all ages, but perhaps the young have most to lose as executive government seeks to crush dissenting voices. If Assange is extradited to the US the future will be bleak indeed for anyone who wants to stand up against the military and industrial interests that have led us to climate catastrophe and, once again, talk of war.”



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