Lawyer Jennifer Robinson gives powerful defence of Assange at Australia's National Press Club

Oscar Grenfell
19 October 2022

In an address to Australia's National Press Club in Canberra yesterday, Jennifer Robinson, one of Julian Assange's lawyers, provided a powerful and unanswerable indictment of the protracted political persecution of her client.

Robinson's speech, which was broadcast live on the state-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation, contained a sharp warning on Assange's plight and the implications of the US attempt to prosecute him.

Assange, she said, would not survive years' more incarceration and "persecution by process." And if he were extradited from Britain to the US and hauled before a kangaroo court for publishing true information, it would be a dagger blow to freedom of the press and democratic rights.

The address was a rare breach in a wall of silence on the Assange case in Australia. His various court dates have been given cursory coverage, but there has scarcely been any television programming or substantive reporting on the persecution of an Australian citizen and journalist.

Robinson noted that many were shocked at Assange's appearance when he was dragged from Ecuador's London embassy by the British police in 2019. She said that she was not, because "for seven years I had seen his health decline."

Similarly, some were surprised when the US unveiled an indictment of Assange, and an extradition request, as soon as he was arrested. Robinson noted, however, that this was what Assange, WikiLeaks and its defenders, including herself, had been warning of for years.

"For the past three and a half years Assange has been in a maximum security prison" dubbed "Britain's Guantanamo Bay," Robinson noted, where his health had further declined. At a court hearing last October, she recalled that while prosecutors for the US extradition were deriding medical evidence of Assange's deteriorating condition, viewers of the proceeding watched him slump with his head in his hands. It was later confirmed that Assange was, at that moment or just before, suffering a minor stroke, which is often a prelude to a major stroke.

"Julian's wife Stella anxiously waits for the phone call she dreads," Robinson said. "He is suffering profoundly in prison and she does not know if he will survive it."

Robinson provided a brief précis of where Assange's extradition case is up to. She explained that he had won in the first British hearings, with a District Court ruling early last year that extradition would be "oppressive" because of the conditions in which Assange would be held in the US prison system. He would be placed under "Special Administrative Measures (SAMs)," a draconian regime of complete isolation described by rights' groups as the "darkest corner" of US penitentiaries.

The Trump administration, Robinson went on, had "sought to shift the goalposts." It had given "assurances" that Assange would not be placed under SAMs. Robinson cited Amnesty International, who described such assurances as being "not worth the paper they are written on."

In Assange's case, it was even worse, given the assurances contained clauses allowing him to be placed under SAMs at any point, once in the US. It would be the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) that would determine whether he would be subjected to the restrictions.

Robinson reviewed the revelations in a *Yahoo News!* investigative report last September that the CIA had, in 2017, plotted to kidnap or assassinate Assange while he was a political refugee in London. She repeated the point several times, emphasising the extraordinary and unprecedented character of the plot.

Despite this, however, the High Court had accepted the American "assurances."

The CIA revelations were part of a litany of abuses, Robinson said, in a case where there had been "very little of due process or the rule of law."

This was "the first time in US legal history that a journalist faces prosecution under the Espionage Act for committing acts of journalism. The US will argue that Assange, as an

© World Socialist Web Site

Australian citizen, is not entitled to any Constitutional protections."

The US-UK Treaty, under which Assange's extradition was being sought, explicitly banned extradition for political offences. But the proceedings were continuing, despite the obvious political character of the case. A key witness of the US indictment, Icelandic conman Sigurdur Thordarson, had admitted last year that his testimony consisted of lies. The US had "deliberately misrepresented the facts of the case." It had, moreover, through the activities of the CIA, spied on Assange's privileged communications with lawyers and seized legal documents relating to the extradition case.

Robinson cited Daniel Ellsberg, the famous leaker of the Pentagon Papers, exposing the criminality of the US war in Vietnam. Ellsberg's prosecution under the Espionage Act, brought by the Nixon administration, was thrown out of court with prejudice. Ellsberg has stated that the abuses in Assange's prosecution are far greater than in his own.

Assange's lawyers had filed an appeal against the High Court ruling approving extradition. The court has not yet indicated whether the appeal will be heard. If it is, Robinson noted that Assange would face more years of legal proceedings, before any prospect of his freedom. "He simply will not survive that long," she warned.

This meant that the case "requires an urgent political solution."

Robinson recalled what Assange is being prosecuted for. Referring to the acclaimed "Collateral Murder" video, showing a US military helicopter gunning down civilians and Reuters journalists in Baghdad, Iraq, she addressed the journalists in the room directly: "Julian is being prosecuted for exposing the murder of your journalist colleagues in Iraq."

WikiLeaks publications had exposed thousands of civilian murders, covered up by the US, and war crimes. "Journalism like this is about subjecting the powerful to scrutiny and the powerful didn't like it," she said. WikiLeaks had shone a light on the power structures in Washington, London and Canberra, and what their actions "meant in the streets and in the homes of people in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan."

Robinson noted that for over a decade, Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National, had rejected appeals from Assange's lawyers that they intervene to secure his freedom as an Australian citizen and journalist. Current Prime Minister Anthony Albanese had said that "enough is enough" and he "could not see what is served" by the continuing attempt to prosecute Assange. But those words, Robinson said, have to be backed up by actions.

In fact, there is not the slightest indication that the Albanese government has made any demands on the US in relation to Assange. Albanese has instead deepened Australia's alignment with the US military confrontations against Russia and China.

During her address, Robinson had noted that Assange's prosecution would establish a precedent, where "any journalist or editor anywhere in the world who published truthful information regarding the US could be extradited" and face imprisonment in America.

The warning was made to a room in which there was hardly a representative of the official media. David Crowe, of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, was the only mainstream journalist to attend the Press Club event and pose a question to Robinson.

Robinson is a well-known and highly-regarded figure. She is one of Australia's most successful human rights lawyers.

The boycott by the press corps, including almost all of the country's prominent journalists, was a shameful display of the state-aligned and corrupted character of the media.

When the Chinese ambassador to Australia spoke at the very same Press Club last August, one journalist after another stood up to angrily ask him about purported attacks on democratic rights in China.

The official Australian media claims to be intensely concerned about democratic rights in Taiwan, Ukraine and other focal points of western imperialist foreign policy. But it is indifferent to a major and unprecedented attack on press freedom with vast implications for genuine journalists, and working people, in the US, Britain, Australia and around the world.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site