

Three months since arrest of WikiLeaks publisher

UK government holds “media freedom” conference while imprisoning Assange

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Thursday marked three months since WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange was dragged out of the Ecuadorian embassy and into London’s Belmarsh Prison, where he is being held pending extradition to the United States and a drumhead trial on Espionage Act charges that carry a prison sentence of 175 years.

Assange’s only “crime” is exposing war crimes, subversion and corruption by the US and British governments. Chelsea Manning, the courageous whistleblower who leaked the information to WikiLeaks, has been sent back to jail for refusing to give false testimony against Assange before a US grand jury.

Assange’s jailing by the government of Prime Minister Theresa May at the behest of the United States has been followed by a near-total media blackout, including the burying of a United Nations statement calling his treatment a form of torture.

It was against the backdrop of this grim milestone that the British government convened a two-day “Global Conference for Media Freedom” in London this week. The 1,000 carefully vetted attendees, including political dignitaries, representatives of the corporate press and professional “civil liberties” activists, gathered to proclaim their commitment to unfettered freedom of the press and their unyielding defence of persecuted journalists.

The conference will be remembered only as a grotesque example of the boundless cynicism of the British ruling elite. It was held some seven miles from Belmarsh Prison, where the world’s most famous persecuted journalist is being held in a maximum-security facility designed for murderers and terrorists.

WikiLeaks supporters noted that Assange might have been able to smell the stench of hypocrisy from the conference in his prison cell.

Since Assange’s brutal arrest by the British police on April 11, he has been imprisoned on bogus bail-skipping charges while the British government works for his extradition to the United States, where he is to be destroyed for publishing documents that exposed mass surveillance, war crimes and global diplomatic conspiracies.

The arrest was presided over by British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt. In April, the self-styled champion of press freedom congratulated the corrupt Ecuadorian government for illegally terminating Assange’s political asylum. He declared that the WikiLeaks founder was “no hero” and stated he would be willing to send Assange to the US, where the courageous journalist could face the death penalty for his lawful publishing activities.

Over the past three months, Hunt has combined these venomous attacks against Assange with a campaign supposedly aimed at defending press freedom. In June, he was the featured speaker at official “World Press Freedom” events, just days after United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer found that his government was a party to “psychological torture” of Assange, along with the denial of his fundamental legal rights.

This double-dealing was again on display in the foreign minister’s keynote address on Wednesday. Predictably, he did not mention the WikiLeaks founder. Hunt’s remarks, however, stood as a damning indictment of his own government’s actions.

He declared: “The strongest safeguard against the dark side of power is accountability and scrutiny—and few institutions fulfill that role more effectively than a free media.” He went on to say that “Real accountability comes from the risk of exposure by a media that cannot be controlled or suborned.” He hailed “the sunlight of transparency” as “the greatest deterrent to wrongdoing.”

Hunt should have added that such exposures are permissible only if they do not threaten the imperialist interests of Britain and its allies.

The foreign minister’s hypocrisy was outdone only by his “special envoy on media freedom,” Amal Clooney. The lawyer was on Assange’s legal defence team in 2012 as he battled attempts to extradite him to Sweden on concocted sexual assault allegations aimed at creating an alternate route for his rendition to the US.

Clooney has long since abandoned the WikiLeaks founder. In the interim, she has married actor George Clooney and become a celebrated member of the political and legal establishment.

During the 2016 US presidential election, the Clooneys held \$176,000 per head fundraisers for Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton, who has played a central role in the persecution of Assange.

Amal Clooney was appointed Hunt's "special envoy" less than a week before British police snatched Assange from London's Ecuadorian embassy. As Clooney was doubtless aware, the timing could hardly have been coincidental. The British government hired Assange's former lawyer as its mouthpiece on "press freedom" as part of its effort to legitimise its attack on the WikiLeaks founder's legal rights.

Clooney made the only reference to Assange at the conference, stating that the Trump administration's "indictment against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has alarmed journalists at newspapers around the world... because, as the editor of the *Washington Post* has put it, it... 'criminalises common practices in journalism that have long served the public interest.'"

The lawyer, however, said nothing about the role of the British government, whose foreign secretary was sitting just metres away from her. Even this mealy-mouthed reference to Assange was more than the corporate journalists could handle. Most of the reporters present simply suppressed Clooney's mention of Assange in their articles on the conference, proving the hypocritical character of their own proclamations about "media freedom."

The journalists in attendance had already been carefully scrutinised by the British government and adjudged to be faithful servants of the status quo. Those who were not were simply banned.

Reporters from the Russian-owned RT, Ruptly and *Sputnik News* outlets were denied entrance. The British Foreign Office declared that they were excluded "because of their active role in spreading disinformation," i.e., because they have featured reportage critical of US and British-led wars and the persecution of Assange.

The real character of the conference was captured in footage of Hunt, surrounded by a phalanx of security personnel and minders, entering the conference and refusing to answer questions from Ruptly journalists about why they had been banned and what he thought of Assange.

It was also summed up by Hunt's statement to a journalist that Saudi Arabia had already "paid the price" for its brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi, because it had suffered "reputational damage." In other words, allies and purchasers of British arms are permitted to chop up dissident journalists with bone saws, provided they are willing to bear the "price" of mealy-mouthed denunciations and a bit of bad press.

Hunt's bogus media freedom campaign serves to create a "human rights" pretext for military intrigues against Russia, China and other countries in the crosshairs of British imperialism, while covering up the anti-democratic actions of the British ruling elite and its allies.

At the same time, it is aimed at intensifying the censorship of the internet on the Orwellian grounds of combating "fake news" and "disinformation." This is of a piece with measures imposed by Google and Facebook over the past two years aimed at reducing traffic to progressive, socialist and anti-war websites including the *World Socialist Web Site* and WikiLeaks.

The "media freedom" conference again demonstrated that there will be no defence of Assange from any faction of the political or media establishment.

As the WSWS and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) have insisted, what is required is the development of a mass movement of the international working class, to defeat the international political conspiracy against Assange, secure his freedom and defend all democratic rights.

Last month, the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Parties affiliated with the ICFI published a call for the formation of a Global Defense Committee to stop Assange's extradition to the US and secure both his and Chelsea Manning's freedom.

"The aim of this campaign," the statement said, "must be to politically arouse and mobilize the international working class—the overwhelming majority of the population and the most powerful social force on the planet—in defense of Julian Assange and, in fact, the democratic and social rights of all workers."

The WSWS urges all those who are seriously committed to the defense of democratic rights to sign up now and join the fight to defend Julian Assange.

Oscar Grenfell

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