

Jennifer Robinson, a leading member of Assange's legal team, speaks with the WSWS

By our reporters
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Barrister Jennifer Robinson, a longtime member of Julian Assange's legal team, is currently visiting Australia and spoke this week with World Socialist Web Site reporters in Melbourne. The interview followed her legal briefing to a meeting organised by Melbourne WikiLeaks supporters at the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance office.

In late July, Robinson gave a lecture on human rights law at the University of Sydney's law school, where she is an adjunct professor. The following week, she held a briefing with about 30 MPs and their staff at the federal parliament.

World Socialist Web Site: Could you comment on the recent US court ruling dismissing the Democratic National Committee [DNC] allegations that WikiLeaks conspired with the Russian government to steal DNC emails and leak them to public?

Jennifer Robinson: The decision in the DNC suit on our "motion to dismiss," which was successful, is incredibly important as a principled free speech position but also for WikiLeaks.

It confirmed longstanding principles that journalists can receive information that has been released in breach of the media law, or has been stolen, and publish that information. This principle is protected under the [US Constitution's] First Amendment for all journalists and for all media organisations.

It is also incredibly important that the judge found that WikiLeaks benefits from the First Amendment equally, just like any other media organisation. He also raised concern that if the DNC's suit were successful against WikiLeaks, it could be used against all other media organisations and journalists.

The recognition that we can be protected by the First Amendment is critical, particularly in the context of the statement made by Mike Pompeo—now US secretary of

state—when he was CIA director, that WikiLeaks is a "hostile non-state intelligence agency" and Julian Assange does not benefit from the First Amendment. We now know Assange absolutely does benefit from the First Amendment and this will be important ongoing for WikiLeaks.

WSWS: You have previously said that if the media had spoken out when the Obama administration was developing its case against Assange and WikiLeaks then the current situation may not have happened. Could you speak about this?

JR: It's disappointing that there was not a stronger pushback on Obama's decision to open a grand jury and continue it in relationship to WikiLeaks for so long. It is only now, in the hands of the Trump Administration, that many people understand just how dangerous that is.

The UN Rapporteur on Torture [Nils Melzer] said in his report on Julian Assange that not only has he been vilified by states but the media's participation in his vilification has significantly undermined Assange's position, and he [Melzer] is right. I wonder if there had been more support from the media, and human rights groups had pushed back harder, whether this indictment would have been politically feasible.

WSWS: The WSWS has called for establishment of a Global Defence Committee to free Assange and Chelsea Manning and we have been organising rallies, protests, meetings internationally on university campuses and workplaces. Can you comment on this, and is Julian aware of the growing support for his freedom internationally?

JR: He obviously has no access to the internet and he can't see what is happening, and has very little access to the media, but yes, I and others always show him pictures of what is happening around the world and the

support. It really does make a difference—Julian is heartened by it. The solidarity campaign is not just important in buoying his spirits inside prison but critical in ensuring that he is protected in the long-term for WikiLeaks's work.

Even though WikiLeaks is protected by the First Amendment, it will take a very long time to return to the United States for that legal argument to be ever made. So the solidarity campaign is important in relationship to whatever happens to him in the meantime. It is crucial that there is a social movement, here in this country and around the world, to call the powers to account on what this indictment means, not just for him but for all the media.

Earlier, in late July, during a question and answer session after her lecture at the University of Sydney, Robinson spoke about the refusal of Australian governments to defend Assange and his state of health.

WSWS: Could you comment on the almost decade-long refusal of Australian governments, Liberal and Labor alike, to defend Julian? Canberra claims it is offering consular assistance but what does this consist of? To what degree is Julian, now that he is in Belmarsh Prison, aware of the massive international support for him?

JR: The inaction of Australian governments with respect to Julian Assange is incredibly disappointing, and some would say an outrage.

The Australian government has threatened to cancel his passport, Julia Gillard accused him of illegal conduct when there was no such illegal conduct, and successive governments have refused to seek assurances, prior to him going inside the Ecuadorian Embassy, to protect him from US extradition. They've refused to take any action at the political level to protect him from the very outcome that he's now facing.

The Australian government always had the ability, as we've pointed out to them on numerous occasions, to exercise diplomatic protection over Julian as an Australian citizen. It speaks volumes about Australia's position in the world that it's not willing to take a stand against the United States and protect an Australian citizen. This should be cause for concern for all of us.

The Australian government is offering consular assistance but consular assistance seems to mean very different things in very different circumstances. If

you're Peter Grete in a prison in Egypt, then it means a lot. If you're Julian Assange in London, facing prosecution by the US, it doesn't mean much, and I think that ought to be raised with the Australian government. Certainly, we have raised it on numerous occasions.

The Australian government can and should be taking a more proactive role in speaking out against his treatment, and what's been happening to him, and certainly about what will happen to him if and when extradition is ordered.

I was with Julian in prison last week. He is very isolated. When he was first arrested it took us four days to get our first video conference with him, and it was remarkable to see somebody who's so tapped into the world, and understands what's going on all over the place, to be cut off from the internet. He hadn't seen the reactions to his arrest and he didn't know that Ola Bini, his friend and colleague, had been arrested in Ecuador.

Julian is really cut off from information but he does know about the support around the world. When I went in to see him, I took him pictures of protests from around the world so that he could see them for himself. There's a prisoner email service, and friends and colleagues, some of whom are in this room, are doing their best to send information to him.

He's in a very difficult situation and has been in the health care ward since being put in Belmarsh. He's suffering from the long-term impacts of isolation inside the embassy, without access to health care and outside exercise, and he's facing the prospect of years litigating to protect himself from extradition to the United States.

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