

Fashion designer Vivienne Westwood visits Assange: “He’s a freedom fighter!”

By Oscar Grenfell
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World famous fashion designer Dame Vivienne Westwood visited Julian Assange in Britain’s Belmarsh Prison yesterday. She gave impassioned comments afterwards condemning the persecution of the WikiLeaks founder and calling for his freedom.

Westwood’s visit coincided, almost exactly, with the five-month anniversary of Assange’s expulsion from Ecuador’s London embassy on April 11 and his brutal arrest by the British police. The anniversary, along with Westwood’s visit to Belmarsh, has been subjected to a total blackout by the corporate press in Britain, the US, Australia and internationally.

This is despite the fact that the fashion designer is a renowned figure in her field. Westwood is widely credited with bringing the new wave and punk fashion trends into the mainstream of the industry. She has won a host of awards, and has spoken out on social issues including environmental destruction and inequality, for many years.

Westwood’s professional activities and political views are prominently covered by the major news outlets. The BBC, for instance, has published two stories about her in the past month, the *Independent* featured her comments on climate change in August, and the *Guardian* has referenced her at least six times this year.

A “call to press” by WikiLeaks, however, stating that Westwood would be visiting Assange and making comments to the media, was ignored by these outlets and the entire British press. The Russian-owned RT and Ruptly networks are to date the only publications that have reported on the event.

The media silence is a conscious act of censorship, aimed at preventing the public from hearing the warnings of a prominent cultural figure about Assange’s declining health and the issues of principle

at stake in his persecution.

When she emerged from the maximum-security prison, Westwood told RT and a group of WikiLeaks supporters that she was “thrilled to bits” to see Assange.

Westwood reported that Assange had “lost weight” since she saw him last and that he was being held in conditions of virtual solitary confinement. “The state he’s in, it’s a wonder,” she said, adding: “I don’t know how I would cope.”

Other recent visitors to Assange, including investigative journalist John Pilger, and the WikiLeaks founder’s brother Gabriel Shipton-Barber, have warned that his health has deteriorated significantly over the course of his five-month incarceration.

The fashion designer stated that Assange is “an innocent man” who has been “persecuted for nine years for telling the truth.”

Westwood noted the unprecedented character of Assange’s incarceration. He has been jailed in a maximum-security prison that holds convicted murderers and terrorists, despite the fact that he has only been found guilty of a minor bail infringement, that stemmed from his successful application for political asylum in 2012.

Westwood declared: “He must not be extradited.” She warned that if dispatched to the US, “this man faces 175 years in jail, believe it or not. That’s totally out of proportion. It’s the kind of thing that a nation that has gone crazy would charge somebody with, for telling the truth.”

The fashion designer hailed Assange as a “freedom fighter,” adding: “The reason he’s such an innocent and good man is because he’s a freedom fighter. Why do you think people like that speak up for the truth? Because they care about people, that’s why.”

Westwood referenced the Collateral Murder video, released by WikiLeaks in 2010, which showed US troops in an Apache helicopter gunning-down unarmed civilians, including two Reuters journalists in Iraq. She said that figures such as Assange “care about the fact that people can try to get away with shooting innocent people.”

Westwood’s comments follow powerful interventions by other principled artists and intellectuals in defence of Assange.

On September 2, Roger Waters, the famous musician who cofounded Pink Floyd, performed a moving rendition of the song “Wish you were here,” dedicated to Assange.

Waters was joined by John Pilger, who told the crowd of around 1,000 workers, students and youth: “By defending Julian Assange, we defend our most sacred rights. Speak up now or wake up one morning to the silence of a new kind of tyranny. The choice is ours.”

The event, which was the largest in support of Assange in a number of years, was met with silence by virtually every corporate publication in Britain, the US and Australia.

Last Friday, model and actress Pamela Anderson mounted a powerful defence of Assange on the US talk show program “The View.” She debunked the smears that Assange and WikiLeaks had threatened “US national security” and insisted that he was being persecuted for exposing US war crimes.

Anderson’s refutations of the hysterical denunciations of Assange by Meghan McCain, a regular panelist and the daughter of late Senator John McCain, won support from the studio audience and were widely shared on social media.

The defence of Assange by Westwood, Pilger, Waters, Anderson and other prominent figures, reflects the widespread support for the WikiLeaks founder among millions of workers, students and young people.

The refusal of the corporate outlets to cover Assange’s plight, or to even mention events held in his defence, underscores the intense fear of the political and media establishment in every country that these sentiments will coalesce into a political movement actively fighting for his freedom.

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