

Assange's lawyer Jennifer Robinson addresses public meetings in Australia

By Patrick O'Connor
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Jennifer Robinson, a London-based barrister and leading member of Julian Assange's legal team since 2010, addressed public meetings in Sydney and Melbourne this month on the fight to secure the freedom of the WikiLeaks publisher and journalist.

The sold-out events were organised by the local affiliates of PEN International, an organisation of writers that supports freedom of expression and defends persecuted writers and journalists.

In her speech, Robinson detailed the extraordinary, politically motivated vendetta being waged by the US state against Assange. She then addressed questions issued by the events' chairs, former Australian Broadcasting Corporation journalists Quentin Dempster in Sydney and Barry Cassidy in Melbourne.

Dempster and Cassidy's decision to chair the events and associate themselves with the campaign to free Assange reflected the shift within journalist and intellectual circles that has taken place since the US issued its formal extradition request, based on Espionage Act charges.

Cassidy, who is well-known as the former host of the ABC's "Insiders" politics program, was visibly shocked when speaking about the extraterritorial nature of the American legal vendetta against the WikiLeaks publisher.

He rightly noted that recent Australian Federal Police raids on the ABC office in Sydney, after publication of leaked details of war crimes in Afghanistan, could have been followed by US extradition requests for multiple Australian journalists, in the event that any of their sources were alleged to be American citizens.

Robinson began her address by explaining that she had last met with Assange on November 12, before flying to Sydney. The barrister detailed the punitive and degrading treatment she is forced to endure in

order to have a discussion with her imprisoned client.

"I have to go into a room [at London's Belmarsh prison], lock away my things, put away my phone and my laptop," Robinson told the Melbourne meeting on October 19.

"I'm only allowed to take in papers. I go into a holding area where we have to take our fingerprints. They take our keys. We then go in, walk across a courtyard into the entrance way of the prison, more finger prints, body scanning, going through doors where you have to wait for the beep to go. You walk in, you go into a sealed area before you can enter the prison. Once I'm inside I have to go through a complete body scan. Prison guards rifle through my papers to make sure there's no contraband.

"I then have to go through another gateway, I cross another cold courtyard on the inside of the prison gates, where they take my fingerprints again. Then I actually get to an area where there's a cafe, and of course because of austerity measures it's manned by volunteers who work for Good Samaritans, volunteering their time to serve us things from the cafe, where I might get him [Assange] a cup of coffee and a Kit-Kat. It takes me 45 minutes from the entrance of the prison to another security desk, where I have to allow the prison guards to search my papers again. I pass people accused of violent crimes, some of them terrorism, many of them standing up against the glass, watching me as I walk past, and I come into a consultation room, and there sits Julian Assange."

Robinson added: "Having worked on this case since 2010 I have been constantly resisting the normalisation of his treatment."

She described how Assange was currently being detained in solitary isolation—itsself a form of torture—for 20-21 hours a day, adding that she did not

expect the extradition legal fight to be resolved within the next 2-3 years, and that she feared for his health and wellbeing.

The barrister described Assange's arrest by British police earlier this year—after the Ecuadorian government capitulated to US imperialist pressure and revoked his asylum—as “the worst ‘I told you so’ for the media.”

Robinson detailed the nature of the charges that are the basis of the Trump administration's request to the British for Assange's extradition.

She explained that the espionage-based indictment reflected “what journalists do,” receiving and publishing important information and assisting whistleblowers in evading persecution. After outlining the significance of WikiLeaks' revelations—including the “Collateral Murder” video of US war crimes in Iraq, the war logs from Iraq and Afghanistan, and the release of American diplomatic cables sent from across the world—she described the case against Assange as a “terrifying precedent” for open journalism.

Robinson condemned the Australian government and the media. “I wonder what would have happened,” she said, “if the media had have stood with the WikiLeaks founder, and the Australian government [had] raised its concern about an Australian citizen being treated in this way, whether it would have been feasible to do what the Trump administration has now done.”

The barrister explained that “each and every one of us can do something to help him [Assange] ... you can, as an individual, support the local WikiLeaks campaigns. I know there are grassroots campaigns here in Melbourne. I would say that it does make a difference, not just to raise awareness in getting it to the media and to remind people what's happened to Julian, but [...] I try to take him pictures of protests, show him what's happening around the world, and the news does get back to him and it does make a big difference to his day-to-day, which is pretty abhorrent, in a lot of senses.”

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with people before the Melbourne event.

Catherine, a retired English teacher from the western Victorian regional town of Derrinallum, said: “The UNHCR and the UN Convention on Torture have certain criteria that are not being met as far as Assange's medical and psychological health are

concerned. I saw the same thing happening to asylum-seekers on Manus Island [in Papua New Guinea], where governments ignore these UN conventions which they are signatories to. They are ignoring natural rights.”

Catherine explained how she had previously campaigned for refugee rights. “Torture is exactly what I saw at Baxter refugee detention centre,” she said, “anything from catatonic to acute depression, suicidal behaviour, and mental confusion. It is everything Julian Assange seemed to be displaying in court.”

Robert, who is retired, stated: “Julian's drawn attention to what the US government is up to. He is dangerous to them and he's hard to silence. The governments know they are guilty—they have done something wrong. Governments can't do what they're doing without secrecy. Assange is like a beacon for all of us, we need whistleblowers for democracy.”

Lee is a technical consultant. “I've always had an interest in US policy, it's exceptionalism.” he said. “The US is a superpower that abuses its power. Britain is under the influence of the US, it is part of the Five-Eyes intelligence agreement.

“The events in Assange's last court hearing on October 21 were being overtly controlled by the CIA, the prosecution was getting its instructions. Then there was the move to locate the full extradition hearing next February in an annex of Belmarsh prison where there are only a few seats. This is to shut out the public from what is going on. It's an appalling attack on democracy.”

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