

WikiLeaks editor Kristinn Hrafnsson: “If Julian is taken to that Devil’s Island across the Atlantic, his life is lost”

By Oscar Grenfell and Richard Phillips
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WikiLeaks editor Kristinn Hrafnsson spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters in Sydney yesterday, after delivering an address to a group of Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) journalists and staff.

Hrafnsson is touring Australia as part of the international campaign by WikiLeaks against the jailing of its founder and publisher Julian Assange in Britain, and the prospect of his extradition to the US, where he faces espionage charges and life imprisonment for exposing war crimes.

Hrafnsson has been a leading journalist in the Icelandic and global media industry for several decades. Iceland’s National Union of Journalists named him the country’s journalist of the year in 2004, 2007 and 2010.

In 2009, he played a major role in exposing the financial misconduct that occurred in the lead-up to the collapse of Iceland’s banking sector.

In 2010, Hrafnsson worked with WikiLeaks in the production of “Collateral Murder,” a video showing a 2007 US Apache helicopter attack on a group of civilians and two journalists in Iraq. He travelled to Iraq to locate relatives of those who had been killed. As Assange’s father John Shipton recently noted, in doing so he risked his life “to give names to the dead.”

Hrafnsson was WikiLeaks’ spokesman from 2010 to 2017. In September 2018, Assange appointed the Icelandic journalist as WikiLeaks’ editor, as the intensifying persecution he was facing prevented him from carrying out the role.

The WSWs began by asking Hrafnsson about the aim of his tour of Australia.

Kristinn Hrafnsson: It’s very important to come here at this particular time, because there is a sense that the tide is turning. We are getting more and more support, and we need it desperately. We need support from the general public, media organisations, fellow journalists and, of course, from the political elite here. This is the purpose of my trip, to try to develop that.

There has been excellent work done by supporters of Assange on this side, where we can sense there is slowly and gradually a change happening. That is heartening, but time is also very short. The extradition hearing is on February 25.

WSWS: Could you comment on the role of the Australian government in relation to Assange, who is an Australian citizen?

KH: The Australian government could do a lot more to assist. They could pick up the phone, they could talk to their allies on an equal political level and demand some change there. Anything would help. The situation that Julian is enduring at the moment is absolutely unacceptable for someone who is on remand.

He’s no longer serving that ridiculously long sentence [for a bogus British bail offence], but he is a remand prisoner. It is completely unnecessary to have him in this horrible hellhole called Belmarsh Prison.

It’s not a place where a man like Julian, a journalist and a publisher, should be held. Especially a man who needs some space to prepare for the most important case of his life. The case that will define life and death for him.

WSWS: Prime Minister Scott Morrison last week rejected calls from actress Pamela Anderson for his government to intervene in Assange’s defence as an Australian citizen and journalist. What is your response to that and why do you think it is that his government is not taking any action?

KH: I can only speculate when it comes to the intrigues of politics here, but we all know that there is pressure from the US. We see the great pressure that is placed on the UK government to play the role of the lapdog of the US empire. I can imagine that similar things apply on this end.

But this is totally unacceptable and the general public here must demand that it end, not just on the obvious humanitarian basis, but also because of the principles that are at stake here, which are gradually being recognised.

People are seeing that this is not just an attack on the person of Julian Assange. It is an attack on journalism and the foundation of our democracies. There has to be a push on the government here to take action and do everything in its power to stop this nonsense.

WSWS: You have spoken about the shift that has occurred, with growing support for Assange, and the recognition of the broader implications of his persecution. Do you think there are other factors involved, including the collapse of the bogus Swedish investigation into sexual misconduct last month and the warnings about Assange’s dire health condition?

KH: It was good to get that [the Swedish investigation] out of the picture. Of course, it was always a nonsense case. They would always talk about charges, but he was never charged. It is the closing down, for the third time, of a “preliminary investigation” that ended with a rather lame excuse from the Swedish prosecutor.

Possibly it was deemed no longer necessary to proceed with it. I don’t want to go into conspiracies about how that came about, but the political aspect of the case was always obvious. Everybody who scratched the surface of the investigation could see that.

There has of course been a report about Assange’s condition by Nils Melzer, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture. There was the recent letter by a group of doctors, some of whom are in this country, raising concerns about the conditions of Assange’s detention and his health.

But there are other factors that have come into play over the last several months. Here in Australia, there were police raids in June on the ABC and a Murdoch journalist, which of course has great implications.

It’s all in the same context. We have been warning of this and talking

about the “Assange precedent.” This is not just in the literal sense that if Assange’s extradition to the US happens—where Julian will die in a supermax prison—any journalist can be subject to a US extradition, so the total overreach is scary. But the precedent is wider. It sets an example where governments who dislike the truth, who dislike exposure and are advocating for greater secrecy are taking the opportunity to crack down on journalism.

We have reached a very pivotal point. The case of Julian Assange is, in all senses, the turning point. It is the biggest and the most serious attack on journalism and the free press in decades, if not 100 years. If this extradition goes ahead, journalists around the world will have lost so much that it will be very hard, if not impossible, to get back the rights that we had before.

This is the end of a long road, and we have seen it slowly coming. Maybe it is not obvious because it has been an incremental process of eating away at the foundation of our society and our free press. In this country there have been more than 70 legislative changes since 9/11 which are an attack on civil society, on freedom of speech and on journalism. There is this scary erosion of the foundation of our civil contract and democracy.

People can no longer debate about minor issues in this bigger context, whether it is a difference of opinion, of methods, whether WikiLeaks is within the framework of journalism, or slightly on the edge of that framework. Those are not the issues. The issue is that we have reached a point where all journalists, their security and their ability to work is at stake.

This is the big picture that we are dealing with, and I sense that there is some trend in the direction of people acknowledging that. I sense it here in my short stay and in the literature I have been reading—that there is a growing recognition of the great importance of this case, and of the need for people to join across the media establishment and set aside political differences, because this case concerns the very foundation.

People are starting to see that, slowly and gradually. And it’s about time! We have been warning about this moment coming for a long time. None of us working in these circles enjoys saying “I told you so,” because these are such serious issues that we are dealing with.

WSWS: Could you speak about the role of the establishment press in demonising Assange?

KH: They are absolutely complicit in the character assassination, which Melzer accurately described as a “public mobbing” of Julian that has been taking place on all platforms.

Journalists have been complicit to different degrees. Some have been totally indifferent, others have echoed all sorts of slander without criticism or even investigation.

I watched a program on the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] that featured an interview with Ecuadorian President Lenin Moreno, the despicable coward who turned on Julian and sold him into the hands of the US.

There was even a report in the *New York Times* at the end of last year which stated that according to their sources, the Moreno government had received an offer from an emissary of Donald Trump that it would receive debt relief and assistance from financial institutions if it handed over Julian. And, lo and behold, a couple of weeks before Julian’s arrest, Ecuador received a multi-billion dollar loan from the International Monetary Fund, with further assistance from the World Bank in the pipeline. That is the world we are dealing with.

But when Moreno was on the BBC, it was an absurd, uninterrupted 50-minute interview where he slandered Julian, he talked about him smearing faeces on the embassy walls and what have you. It is totally disgusting. There has to be some serious reflection on the part of mainstream journalists about the role that they have played.

Sometimes I think back about the Dreyfus case, which was confined to

just one country a hundred years ago. It is a case that everyone in France is educated about, because they don’t want to miss the lessons of what was a travesty of justice.

I was reading about the case recently, and I was astonished by the similarities. There were secret trials, there was planted evidence, smearing in the media, corruption on all levels and, initially, nobody was supporting Dreyfus. In the end, he was sent to Devil’s Island.

But it took a small group, basically his brother and a handful of intellectuals, to start supporting him, fighting and campaigning, and even sacrificing quite a lot. Emile Zola, when he wrote “J’accuse,” was taken to court, lost a defamation case and had to flee to London. But things changed rapidly. Within little more than a decade, everything against Dreyfus was lifted. He was exonerated, allowed back in the military and even promoted.

So even though we are seeing dark times, there are signs that we can actually win, and we will win this one way or another. I hope that it does not take a long time, because Julian cannot endure for a long time in this situation.

The fact of the matter is that if he is thrown in a plane and taken to that Devil’s Island across the Atlantic, his life is lost.

WSWS: Can you speak about the causes of the assault on press freedom. You referenced before the role of the military, and there has been a dramatic escalation of war over the past period, and also unprecedented social inequality. Do you see these as factors in the current crackdown?

KH: It all comes together in the big picture. As the economist Thomas Piketty has shown, there is growing social inequality.

There is also a growing discrepancy in privacy and information. All of our information is being collected and sold by private companies. It is being stored and abused by the National Security Agency and intelligence organisations. At the same time, we are being denied, more and more, access to information and official secrecy is escalating year by year—and has been since 9/11.

And the wars have been continuing. Obama escalated the war in Afghanistan and started his dirty drone wars against seven countries. That Nobel Peace Prize winner had lists in front of him in the White House every Tuesday, where he decided who was going to die. He even sent drones to kill American citizens. And of course, the disgusting people who were working with him jokingly called it “terror Tuesday,” when Obama handed out death sentences to people in far-away countries.

It’s not without merit to the facts that Noam Chomsky says the most dangerous country in the world today is the United States. If you look at polls internationally, asking “Which country do you fear the most?” outside the small circle of Western Europe and the alliance states, most countries are dead scared of the US. It is viewed in people’s minds across the world as being an evil empire, because it brings death and destruction.

It’s not anti-American to bring that to light, because it is factually based. I used to spend time in the US as a correspondent in the 1990s. They gave rise to the most brilliant political thinkers and documents outlining great things. The US Bill of Rights is probably the only document of that nature in the world where you have “the pursuit of happiness” defined as a political right.

But that is no longer reflected in the actual world. Neither is the First Amendment, which has been emulated around the world and has been a symbol of press freedom for so many people. Now it is not a shield anymore. It does not apply in a secret court in Virginia where you have an Espionage Case against Julian Assange.

WSWS: Could you comment on the role of alternative media, including WikiLeaks?

KH: It has been one of the most pleasurable aspects of my work with WikiLeaks, to work with small independent media, rather than with large media organisations, which are corporations. I’ve met so many great

people who are running small editorial offices with a few individuals, who are basically moving mountains in difficult places, in Brazil, in Mexico and elsewhere.

I really admire that. It is where I feel that the sense of journalism is still alive today. It seems to have faded out in the big media companies, where journalists are constantly under attack budget wise and under political pressure. The core principles of the role of journalism, which is rather a sacred duty in a democratic society, seems to have been lost.

In some respects, it is human. It's understandable that people are afraid of losing their job, of being thrown out if they don't toe the company line, but I would hope we could see in general more bravery. The smaller organisations, and the more independent they are, that is where you see true bravery and journalism.

WSWS: Could you speak about WikiLeaks' latest publication, which casts doubt on the official story of a Syrian government chemical weapons attack in the city of Douma in 2018?

KH: The Syria document is not about the truth of what happened in Douma. It is about the truth of what is happening in the OPCW [Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons]—a body that has such an important role to play but that seems to have been thrown on the wrong track.

We may never know the truth about what happened in Douma in April last year, but we absolutely need to know the truth about what is going on in the OPCW. The leak we had from there raises serious concerns. It has been brushed aside by most media organisations because it bears rather uncomfortable truths. The fact that this might in some way benefit the position of some powers that are perceived as enemies doesn't have anything to do with it. It is about the integrity of the organisation and how it can play a role in the future.

We see, on many levels, the erosion of the credibility of international organisations. International laws are being pushed aside and there is a breakdown of the weak norms that have governed the international community.

We see that in the Assange case. You have nations, like Britain and Sweden—which claim to have a remarkable human rights record—ignoring a ruling by the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. Nobody wants to talk about the fact that by dismissing the Working Group's ruling on Assange, they have destroyed this terribly important human rights mechanism, which has been used on many occasions on behalf of dissidents who are rotting away in jails in faraway places, away from the comforts of Europe.

Who is going to listen to a ruling from that important tribunal? Tyrants will say: "Why should I abide by this when Sweden and the United Kingdom do not?"

So it is a rather bleak picture. But I try to stay optimistic. There is a need to turn it around and there is a growing feeling—it's almost in the air—of the need to do something and that is important because now is the time to resist.

I now see people very concerned about the environment, for example, which is understandable. But I always tell environmentalists that if you are concerned about the environment, pay attention to the importance of defending our remaining freedom of speech. Because if that goes away, you are not going to be campaigning for the environment. They have already, in some places, equated activists in that field as a terror threat.

If you want to advocate for the environment and save the planet from global warning, you need to fight for the freedom of the press, fight for Julian and stop his extradition. This is the foundation. It is what everything is about. We cannot look away. We have to take it on. It is everybody's duty to take a stand, because this is the line. It is either, or. Doing nothing is not an option.

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