

WikiLeaks editor Kristinn Hrafnsson speaks at Melbourne forum in defence of Assange

By Eric Ludlow
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More than one hundred people attended a panel discussion in defence of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange at the Victorian State Library in Melbourne on Wednesday night.

The meeting was part of an Australian tour by WikiLeaks editor Kristinn Hrafnsson to build support for Assange and demand that the Australian government intervene to secure his freedom. Over the past days, Hrafnsson has spoken to a group of Australian Broadcasting Journalists, delivered an address at the National Press Club, and given a number of interviews, including to the WSWS.

In a sign of the growing support for Assange, he was joined on the panel by lawyer and Greens member Julian Burnside QC, and cybersecurity technology specialist and academic Dr Suellette Dreyfus, who co-authored a book with the WikiLeaks founder.

Chairing the meeting, author and lawyer Lizzie O'Shea began by recounting the "recent raids on broadcasters and journalists in Australia as well as the criminalisation of whistle-blowing for precisely the kind of journalism that has cost Julian Assange a decade of his life." She warned of "Australia's slide toward authoritarianism."

Kristinn Hrafnsson then spoke, noting that Melbourne was the "birthplace of WikiLeaks."

Hrafnsson told the meeting that Assange "is the first journalist who is being indicted on the basis of a 101-year-old Espionage Act—a relic from the First World War... It lay dormant for decades until the Obama administration found it in a drawer and started using it to persecute whistle-blowers.

"We said at the time: 'This is only the beginning, whistle-blowers first. Then they will come after journalists.' Now they have crossed that line as well, and Julian Assange is the first. Unless we take action

and say enough is enough, he will not be the last."

The WikiLeaks editor noted that he has "sensed that there is growing support for Assange" among the "general public" and "journalists."

Hrafnsson reviewed the similarities between Assange's plight and the case of Alfred Dreyfus at the turn of the last century. He noted that the fight to free the persecuted French army officer began with small numbers but grew into a mass movement. Hrafnsson said: "A crowd of one man in the street holding a sign, a group of individuals fighting—it's not the numbers, it's the principle. And I sense, the numbers are growing."

During the panel discussion, Dreyfus reviewed some of Julian Assange's achievements, including co-running Australia's first free public access internet site and an open source software for "deniable cryptography."

Dreyfus spoke of how Assange and WikiLeaks "transformed how we receive news and information." Examples included the anonymous digital dropbox, largely a WikiLeaks invention, which is now used by some of the largest media organisations around the world, and the popularisation of "data set" journalism.

Lizzie O'Shea asked the panellists about the raids on journalists and attacks on whistleblowers in Australia.

Julian Burnside said the raids were a sign that "journalism is in real trouble in this country. In fact, all of us are in real trouble." He raised the unprecedented secret trials held in Canberra, stating, "open justice is a profoundly important element of any democratic society."

Hrafnsson stressed that "press freedom is under attack all over the world." He said that "there is a link between" Assange's arrest and the attacks on journalists in Australia, Brazil, the US and Europe.

“This is a universal thing,” he said, and “when one government takes steps like here in Australia, it sends a signal that it’s okay. So, like a virus, it will spread. So, we have to fight back now, before everything is lost.”

Hrafnsson noted a conversation he had recently had with Daniel Ellsberg, the whistleblower who leaked the Pentagon Papers exposing the criminality of the Vietnam War in the 1970s. The US administration of President Richard Nixon unsuccessfully sought to prosecute Ellsberg under the Espionage Act.

Hrafnsson, relayed that Ellsberg told him: “If I were in my battle today, I would never see daylight again.” The WikiLeaks editor commented: “When we reflect on the past, we usually think that we have progressed. But, actually, we are worse off now than at the height of the Nixon era.”

O’Shea asked Hrafnsson about the timeframe for Assange’s case. Hrafnsson said “we could be looking at a fight of two to three years.” He said he has full confidence in Assange’s legal team, but stressed that Assange will not get a fair trial in British courts: “I’ve been in the courtroom. I’ve seen how the smearing of his name has seeped into the minds of the judges. It’s not going to be a case that will be won on the merit of the law because the law is on the side of Julian Assange. It is a political case. He is a political prisoner.”

The discussion was then opened to questions from the audience.

Questions ranged from Assange’s case, to the fate of press freedom around the world, to WikiLeaks’s recent releases.

An audience member read out a section of the open letter, now signed by over 90 doctors, in defence of Julian Assange. Following this, a *World Socialist Web Site* reporter asked Hrafnsson to comment on the significance of this powerful initiative undertaken by the medical professionals.

Hrafnsson said the letter had a “tremendous impact” in helping people around the world “understand the gravity of the situation” facing Assange. He added that “journalists have a tendency to obfuscate” the facts surrounding Assange. Hrafnsson recounted his meetings with journalists in Australia, in which he told them: “You have a duty to report the facts. You have a duty to unwind the situation and get it right, because you are complicit in getting it wrong.”

Dreyfus said that she was “very disappointed” that Peter Greste, an Australian journalist imprisoned in Egypt from 2013 to 2015, wrote that Assange is not a journalist because WikiLeaks does not edit documents before releasing them. She said that Greste “got his facts wrong” and should have “corrected it.”

WSWS reporters spoke with a number of attendees.

Rosie, a student at RMIT university, has been following Assange since 2010 when she snuck out of home as a 12-year-old to attend a pro-Assange rally.

She denounced the “slanders” that have been published to smear Assange’s name and said that the “United States saw him as a threat because of the information he could access and all that WikiLeaks could access and publish.”

Phoebe, who is working while on a gap year, said: “I think it is important that everyone is conscious of what is actually going on and understands the importance of having a publisher such as WikiLeaks that publishes the truth and isn’t biased in any way. It’s important that people understand what’s happening between the US and China and any ulterior motives they may have.”

David Bradbury, a well-known documentary filmmaker, said: “I’ve covered war zones in Nicaragua, the Middle East. I’ve been to East Timor and seen what the CIA and the Americans do there.” He noted the “physical and mental” torture of Assange, but was optimistic about “going to this meeting knowing that other people care and are kicking up a stink about it.”

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