

How Canada's corporate media smeared WikiLeaks publisher and journalist Julian Assange

By Roger Jordan
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Since WikiLeaks began a decade ago to publish secret US cables exposing many of the war crimes and imperialist intrigues perpetrated by Washington and its allies around the world, Canada's corporate-controlled media outlets have made the whistleblowing website and its founder, Julian Assange, the target of a smear campaign.

Newspapers—ranging from the “liberal” *Toronto Star* and the *Globe and Mail*, the Canadian elite's supposed “newspaper of record,” to the neoconservative *National Post*—have vilified Assange as a manipulative, self-obsessed monster who supports dictators, while bemoaning the adverse impact of WikiLeaks' exposures on the global interests of American and Canadian imperialism.

The Canadian media's witch-hunting of Assange reached a high point last April following his illegal arrest in the Ecuadorian embassy in London. In a video comment, *National Post* “star” columnist Christie Blatchford declared, “Assange is no journalist.” She sought to justify her view by citing Assange's alleged responsibility for endangering the lives of Afghans and Iraqis who had cooperated with the US military in its neocolonial occupations of those countries.

This charge was repeated verbatim by Terry Glavin in a long, tendentious piece published in *Macleans*' magazine around the same time. A virulent right-winger and anti-Russia and anti-China war-hawk who argued that Canada should have officially joined Washington in its illegal 2003 invasion of Iraq, Glavin took Assange to task for disregarding “the innocent victims of his vanity.”

The cynicism of such criticisms is hard to overstate. Journalists who have spent large parts of their careers propagandizing for Canadian imperialist participation in the US-led wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, which collectively have led to the deaths of millions, and Canada's involvement in NATO's military encirclement of Russia, which has increased the likelihood of a catastrophic conflict fought with nuclear weapons, assert the right to pass moral judgment on Assange and WikiLeaks.

In his *Macleans*' piece Glavin also trotted out the Democratic Party's self-serving anti-Russia narrative to account for Hillary Clinton's defeat at the hands of Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election. Principal responsibility for Clinton's electoral debacle, Glavin ranted, lay with Assange and WikiLeaks,

who published a “steady, debilitating drip of the Clinton campaign's emails, now conclusively shown to have been hacked by the Russians.”

Leaving aside the fact that no such thing has been proven, “conclusively” or otherwise, but only ever asserted by the US intelligence agencies and their Democratic Party mouthpieces, Glavin neglected to inform his readers why the WikiLeaks releases in 2016 had had significant impact. The leaked emails uncovered the newsworthy story, which any genuine journalist would have been obligated to report, that the Democratic Party National Committee effectively rigged the Democratic nomination process to ensure Hillary Clinton's victory over “democratic socialist” Bernie Sanders. Further leaks revealed how Clinton was in the pocket of Wall Street and the corporate elite. This included her infamous remark to a wealthy audience dismissing millions of working-class Americans as a “basket of deplorables.”

But that is not all. Glavin and his fellow right-wing commentators sought to discredit Assange's personal character, culminating in the repulsive spectacle of their gloating over his illegal seizure. Assange had simply “worn out his welcome” at the Ecuadorian embassy, proclaimed Glavin, who reveled in the pictures showing how “the bedraggled 47-year-old WikiLeaks headman” was “dragged... kicking and shouting from the Ecuadorian embassy.” Tabatha Southey, a longstanding *Globe and Mail* columnist who now writes for *Macleans*, authored a scurrilous piece entitled “How to be a better house guest than Julian Assange.” The article contained cynical statements such as, “Generally keep your visit to three nights. Seven years is right out,” and, “help out, especially in the kitchen and not in the internal affairs of the most powerful nation on earth.”

These statements testify to the indifference, indeed hostility, to democratic rights in the editorial offices of the country's leading corporate media outlets. Far from being a “guest,” Assange resided in the Ecuadorian embassy after being granted political asylum—a status that is supposed to be protected by international law—so as to shield him from the combined efforts of the US, British, Australian and Swedish governments to persecute him for having exposed imperialist crimes.

Due to US and British pressure, Assange was subjected to ever more onerous restrictions in the tiny embassy premises, especially after 2016. He was denied access to the internet and prevented

from meeting supporters, and the CIA spied on his interactions with those he did meet, including, in a further travesty, his lawyers.

The determination on the part of Canada's media to denigrate and smear Assange reflects their unflinching support for the powers-that-be and visceral hatred of what he represents. The very idea that the population has a right to know about the criminal conspiracies and activities of the world's governments is anathema to these scribblers, who make a profession out of filtering official propaganda to justify the pro-corporate, pro-imperialist policies of Canada's ruling elite and its state. They viewed with horror how WikiLeaks disclosures about the corrupt practices of former Tunisian dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali helped fuel the popular revolutionary movement that toppled his pro-Western regime in early 2011.

The fear and outrage this privileged layer feels at the damage WikiLeaks has caused to imperialist interests was summed up in a 2010 *Globe* column authored by Scott Gilmore, a journalist and former diplomat who, not incidentally, is the husband of Catherine McKenna, the Minister of Infrastructure and Communities in the Liberal government of Justin Trudeau. Under the headline "WikiLeaks just made the world more oppressive," Gilmore raged against the publication of further secret US diplomatic cables, then, referencing his own time working for the Canadian government in Jakarta, declared, "American diplomats [were] doing the same thing we were trying to do in Indonesia: Make the world a little better."

Gilmore's arrogance and mendacity is hard to stomach. After all, it was in Indonesia that the US, with Canada's support, backstopped the bloody Suharto dictatorship for three decades from 1965 to 1998—a regime that came to power following a CIA-abetted massacre of over 1 million workers and Communist Party members.

The contempt for Assange and WikiLeaks extends to the nominally liberal *Star*, which published an attack on his publishing activities in 2011 under the headline, "WikiLeaks, Canadian media and democracy: Media with a face." The piece denounced Assange's insistence on anonymity for WikiLeaks' sources as "antithetical to journalism," and proceeded to describe the whistleblowing platform, which by that time had already won a series of international awards for its journalistic activities, as "an odd blend of information leaker, newsmaker, editorializer, self-styled journalist, and unclassified news media."

Underscoring where its true loyalties lie, the *Star* proceeded to declare its support for "responsible journalism" and argued that "freedom of speech does not mean that all expression is accepted in a democratic society." In other words, points of view deemed intolerable to, or inconsistent with, the interests of the political and corporate elite can simply be dismissed as the products of anonymous cranks who operate unethically and have no democratic rights. Or, to put it another way, the main threat to democracy currently is not the global criminal operations of US imperialism and its allies, but...WikiLeaks and Julian Assange!

Predictably enough, the would-be crusaders for "democracy" at the *Star* and Canada's other major media outlets have published next to nothing about Assange and the legal vendetta being

mounted against him since his illegal seizure by British police last April, let alone sought to alert the public to the critical democratic issues—including freedom of the press, free speech, and the right to due process—at issue in his prosecution and persecution.

The Australian citizen is being held in the maximum security Belmarsh Prison alongside convicted murderers and terrorists, and denied regular access to his lawyers or to the documents he needs to review to prepare his legal defence. UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer has stated that Assange shows symptoms of prolonged exposure to psychological torture, and dozens of doctors from around the world have warned that if he continues to be denied proper medical care he could die in prison.

But the Canadian media excises, or to be more precise, self-censors all this from "the News."

This silence is all the more damning given that Assange is being prosecuted under the US Espionage Act—although he is neither a US citizen nor a US resident—for publishing leaked documents, an activity constitutionally protected under US law. His conviction would open the door for other critical journalists whether working in Canada or any other part of the world to be swept up in the dragnet of US imperialist "justice."

With Assange facing an extradition hearing next month and the threat of being transferred to the US to face bogus charges and a possible 175-year prison sentence, it is high time for workers and young people across Canada to break through the media's silence and mobilize to defend Assange and democratic rights. As a first step in this process, the Socialist Equality Party is organizing a public meeting in Montreal this Sunday, February 2. We encourage all our readers to make plans to attend. For details see below:

No to war and the assault on democratic rights: Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning must be defended!

Montreal

Sunday, February 2, at 1:30 PM

Centre St-Pierre, Room 201

1212 Rue Panet (near the Beaudry Métro station, on the Green Line)

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>