Assange defence team: “The empire calls it espionage. We call it journalism”

By Thomas Scripps
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More than 100 journalists from 23 countries attended a press conference in London yesterday to discuss the US extradition hearing for Julian Assange that opens Monday. Organised by the Foreign Press Association, the conference was addressed by WikiLeaks Editor-in-Chief Kristinn Hrafnsson, lawyer Jennifer Robinson and Australian MPs Andrew Wilkie and George Christensen.

Ten years ago, Hrafnsson recalled, Assange was an internationally celebrated journalist. WikiLeaks had worked with a core group of journalists from all over the world to release the documents known as Cablegate. “Those core values are being challenged in a court next week in the Julian Assange case.”

Describing as “absurd” the US State Department’s claims that Assange is not a journalist, and WikiLeaks not a media organisation, Hrafnsson said, “Last night some of us…were at the Frontline Club watching the award presentation that Julian Assange received in 2011, the Walkley award…the Pulitzer prize of Australia. He received that award for the releases in 2010 and 2011. The same releases that are now being described as espionage.

“The empire calls it espionage. We call it journalism.”

Hrafnsson tackled the frame-up US indictments against Assange. He told journalists, “The lawyers acting on behalf of the United States will maintain that one of the indictments is about hacking. It is not. That label is propaganda…it has nothing to do with hacking. It is about lawful communication—communication between a source and a journalist.”

Rejecting the baseless allegations of “heartbroken generals from the Pentagon” that WikiLeaks’ exposures had “endangered lives,” Hrafnsson replied, “I thought that was ironic from the person who we [had] just exposed as having run death squads in Afghanistan.”

“Now ten years have lapsed and there has not been a single recorded incident of physical harm coming to any individual as a result of the leaks of 2010 and 2011.”

Referring to the manufactured charges against Assange and the abuse of due process he has suffered over the past decade, Hrafnsson explained, “There is an overwhelming argument for dismissal.”

“This is a highly politicised case,” Hrafnsson continued. “I’ve said repeatedly, Julian Assange is a political prisoner…It was political in 2010, when high level officials in the US and commentators called for the ‘taking down’ of WikiLeaks.

“It was political when people were calling out for the assassination of Julian Assange, which in light of recent events in Iraq one should take seriously.

“It was political when Mike Pompeo, then CIA director in 2017, decided to depict WikiLeaks as a ‘non-state hostile intelligence service’, something never heard before…”

Andrew Wilkie, an Australian independent MP and former Lieutenant Colonel in the Royal Australian Infantry Corps reiterated that Assange had “publicised information in the public interest, including hard evidence of US war crimes.”

He was “very concerned at the behaviour of the British government, very concerned at the behaviour of the Australian government…And I criticise the Australian government for not speaking up in defence of an Australian citizen in strife abroad.”

Australian Liberal National MP George Christensen told the audience he was unusual among Assange’s defenders because he was “a big fan of Donald Trump and a big fan of BoJo [UK Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson].” He continued, “But I’m a bigger fan of free speech and a free press…and they are clearly under attack when it comes to the Julian Assange case.”

Explaining the purpose of his and Wilkie’s visit to London, Christensen said they wanted to “hear directly from Julian Assange what he wants to relay to the Australian government and to the Australian people. And also, as a welfare check, because we’re concerned about the constant reports we hear about his health situation, his mental state.”

Christensen said he took confidence from Boris Johnson’s recent statements in the House of Commons: “He said he believes that the US extradition treaty with the UK is somewhat imbalanced. He’s also said that the UK protects
journalists and whistle-blowers and I commend him for that.
I hope that there’s a change in direction.”

Jennifer Robinson focussed on the significance of
WikiLeaks’ exposures for which Assange was being
prosecuted, pointing to the criminalisation of national
security journalism:

“We’re talking about Collateral Murder, evidence of war
cries; we’re talking about the Afghan and Iraq war logs,
which showed the true costs of America’s wars; human
rights abuses; we’re talking about Cablegate… Amnesty
international said that it sparked the Arab Spring.”

WikiLeaks documents had been cited in numerous human
rights cases across the world, Robinson said. “They are a
remarkable resource for those of us seeking to hold
governments to account for abuses against their citizens and
other. They are the publications for which Julian Assange
now sits in a high security prison and faces 175 years in the
US.”

In the question and answer session, a journalist queried
WikiLeaks’ role in exposing the actions of the Democratic
Party National Committee during the 2016 US presidential
elections in subverting Bernie Sanders campaign in the
Democratic primaries. Christensen observed, “because of
that, some on the left have actually abandoned Julian
Assange.” In fact, the Democratic Party and its pseudo-left
and liberal supporters internationally launched a reactionary
campaign against WikiLeaks, claiming it was part of
“Russian intervention” that put Donald Trump in the White
House.

Hrafnsson explained that a court ruling last year had torn
this lie to shreds. A New York judge had dismissed the
DNC’s case “with prejudice”, in what he described as “the
most underreported media story of year.”

Christensen’s absurd hope that Boris Johnson, a fellow
right-wing politician, will intervene to save Assange is one
also being openly promoted by Labour Party leader Jeremy
Corbyn. After meeting with Wilkie on Monday, Corbyn told
ABC News, “He [Johnson] accepted that it [the UK-US
extradition treaty] is an unbalanced treaty and it is not a fair
one, therefore I think that is a big change by the British
government.”

This is a deliberate distortion of what happened during
Prime Minister’s Questions last Wednesday, when Corbyn
ended the session by first asking about Anne Sacoolas, the
CIA operative who ran down and killed teenager Harry
Dunn. Corbyn denounced “our country’s one-sided
extradition treaty with the USA,” asking whether Johnson
would commit to seeking a “balanced extradition
relationship with the United States…”

Johnson, under immense pressure over revelations that his
government allowed Sacoolas to leave the country knowing

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