

Assange Rally Martin Place Sydney

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The CCL across its 57 years has always fought to protect whistle-blowers and a free and independent press as fundamentals to democracy.

Civil Liberties has long supported Assange: initially as a facilitator providing transformational protection for whistle-blowers - and then as a publisher/journalist (and a prize winning one at that) in his own right.

In May 2011, 182 days into the progressive publication by the Guardian, NYT and Des Spiegel of the 250 000 leaked US diplomatic cables, we speculated on the significance of Assange and Wikileaks:

[were we seeing] a major shift in the balance of power between citizens and the State ...in control of information?

and if so

should we fear the reaction of Governments?"

The answer to the latter of course- and very sadly – was Yes!! Too right we needed to fear the reaction of Governments- including our own.

By 2013 Civil Liberties AGM formally recognised Assange (and Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden) as

“courageous, global champions of democracy who have made, at great personal cost, extraordinary contributions to civil society by challenging the excessive secrecy of the state “

And condemned

‘the unprecedented and ferocious attack on and relentless pursuit by the USA and other states of Assange and Manning and Snowdon as traitors and spies.

We noted:

These attacks pose a global threat to the capacity of a free press to inform the people - and to the citizens’ right to know what governments are doing in their name.

The NSW council for civil liberties reaffirms those resolutions today.

Today Assange’s position is far worse than it was – or seemed- in 2013.

- He has been without liberty for all that time- effectively in solitary confinement within the Ecuadorian embassy – and since its appalling withdrawal of diplomatic protection – in the notorious Belmarsh prison
- his mental and physical health have been severely compromised

- he faces what he and his lawyers always feared – extradition to a vengeful USA charged with serious offences relating to espionage - with the potential for an extremely lengthy prison sentence. (though he is not an American citizen and published outside of America)
- And the Australian Government has abandoned him to that fate

What is happening is terribly wrong for multiple reasons:

- i) The treatment of Julian Assange has been cruel and excessive and amounts to psychological torture
- ii) It appears that he has been and will continue to be unfairly treated within UK courts
- iii) If he is extradited to the USA he will face 17/18 espionage charges exposing him to a potential 175 years imprisonment – excessive and inappropriate
- iv) As Andrew Wilkie has recently stated – Assange is effectively a political prisoner
- v) Assange is an Australian citizen. The Australian Government should:
 - provide protection to him and intervene to prevent his extradition to the USA by the UK and
 - allow him to return to Australia – and
 - should drop any thoughts of itself extraditing him to the USA.
- vi) If Assange is extradited and convicted in the USA, the long term implications for journalists anywhere in the world publishing leaked material relating to the US Government are dire – especially if related to security matters
- vii) And in Australia where:
 - draconian secrecy legislation, especially in relation to National Security, has hugely expanded in recent years
 - whistle blower protection is weak
 - freedom of information processes are a public joke
 - the AFP has publicly raided the ABC and Australian journalists

We should all be very afraid for the future of an effective free media and therefore – deeply concerned about the health of democracy.

NSWCCL joins other concerned organisations and citizens in calling on the Australian Government to intervene with the UK and the USA to drop the extradition process against Julian Assange and allow him to return to Australia.

Lesley Lynch

NSWCCL executive member and convenor of National Security and Counter-Terrorism group.