

The Betrayers of Julian Assange

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This is an abridged version of an address by John Pilger in Sydney on 10 March to mark the launch in Australia of Davide Dormino's sculpture of Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, 'figures of courage'.

I have known Julian Assange since I first interviewed him in London in 2010. I immediately liked his dry, dark sense of humour, often dispensed with an infectious giggle. He is a proud outsider: sharp and thoughtful. We have become friends, and I have sat in many courtrooms listening to the tribunes of the state try to silence him and his moral revolution in journalism.

My own high point was when a judge in the Royal Courts of Justice leaned across his bench and growled at me: 'You are just a peripatetic Australian like Assange.' My name was on a list of volunteers to stand bail for Julian, and this judge spotted me as the one who had reported his role in the notorious case of the expelled Chagos Islanders. Unintentionally, he delivered me a compliment.

I saw Julian in Belmarsh not long ago. We talked about books and the oppressive idiocy of the prison: the happy-clappy slogans on the walls, the petty punishments; they still won't let him use the gym. He must exercise alone in a cage-like area where there is sign that warns about keeping off the grass. But there is no grass. We laughed; for a brief moment, some things didn't seem too bad.

The laughter is a shield, of course. When the prison guards began to jangle their keys, as they like to do, indicating our time was up, he fell quiet. As I left the room he held his fist

high and clenched as he always does. He is the embodiment of courage.

Those who are the antithesis of Julian: in whom courage is unheard of, along with principle and honour, stand between him and freedom. I am not referring to the Mafia regime in Washington whose pursuit of a good man is meant as a warning to us all, but rather to those who still claim to run a just democracy in Australia.

Anthony Albanese was mouthing his favourite platitude, 'enough is enough' long before he was elected prime minister of Australia last year. He gave many of us precious hope, including Julian's family. As prime minister he added weasel words about 'not sympathising' with what Julian had done. Apparently we had to understand his need to cover his appropriated posteria in case Washington called him to order.

We knew it would take exceptional *political* if not moral courage for Albanese to stand up in the Australian Parliament — the same Parliament that will disport itself before Joe Biden in May — and say:

'As prime minister, it is my government's responsibility to bring home an Australian citizen who is clearly the victim of a great, vindictive injustice: a man who has been persecuted for the kind of journalism that is a true public service, a man who has not lied, or deceived — like so many of his counterfeit in the media, but has told people the truth about how the world is run.'

'I call on the United States,' a courageous and moral Prime Minister Albanese might say, 'to withdraw its extradition application: to end the malign farce that has stained Britain's once admired courts of justice and to allow the release of Julian Assange unconditionally to his family. For Julian to remain in his cell at Belmarsh is an act of torture, as the United Nations Rapporteur has called it. It is how a dictatorship behaves.'

Alas, my daydream about Australia doing right by Julian has reached its limits. The teasing of hope by Albanese is now close to a betrayal for which the historical memory will not forget him, and many will not forgive him. What, then, is he waiting for?

Remember that Julian was granted political asylum by the Ecuadorean government in 2013 largely because his own government had abandoned him. That alone ought to bring shame on those responsible: namely the Labor government of Julia Gillard.

So eager was Gillard to collude with the Americans in shutting down WikiLeaks for its truth telling that she wanted the Australian Federal Police to arrest Assange and take away his passport for what she called his 'illegal' publishing. The AFP pointed out that they had no such powers: Assange had committed no crime.

It is as if you can measure Australia's extraordinary surrender of sovereignty by the way it treats Julian Assange. Gillard's pantomime grovelling to both houses of the US Congress is cringing theatre on YouTube. Australia, she repeated, was America's 'great mate'. Or was it 'little mate'?

Her foreign minister was Bob Carr, another Labor machine politician whom WikiLeaks exposed as an American informant, one of Washington's useful boys in Australia. In his published diaries, Carr boasted knowing Henry Kissinger; indeed the Great Warmonger invited the foreign minister to go camping in the California woods, we learn.

Australian governments have repeatedly claimed that Julian has received full consular support, which is his right. When his lawyer Gareth Peirce and I met the Australian consul general in London, Ken Pascoe, I asked him, 'What do you know of the Assange case.'

'Just what I read in the papers,' he replied with a laugh.

Today, Prime Minister Albanese is preparing this country for a ridiculous American-led war with China. Billions of dollars are to be spent on a war machine of submarines, fighter jets and missiles that can reach China. Salivating war mongering by 'experts' on the country's oldest newspaper, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and the *Melbourne Age* is a national embarrassment, or ought to be. Australia is a country with no enemies and China is its biggest trading partner.

This deranged servility to aggression is laid out in an extraordinary document called the US-Australia Force Posture Agreement. This states that American troops have 'exclusive control over the access to [and] use of' armaments and material that can be used in Australia in an aggressive war.

This almost certainly includes nuclear weapons. Albanese's foreign minister, Penny Wong, 'respects' America on this, but clearly has no respect for Australians' right to know.

Such obsequiousness was always there — not untypical of a settler nation that still has not made peace with the Indigenous origins and owners of where they live — but now it is dangerous.

China as the Yellow Peril fits Australia's history of racism like a glove. However, there is another enemy they don't talk about. It is us, the public. It is our right to know. And our right to say no.

Since 2001, some 82 laws have been enacted in Australia to take away tenuous rights of expression and dissent and protect the cold war paranoia of an increasingly secret state, in which the head of the main intelligence agency, ASIO, lectures on the disciplines of 'Australian values'. There are secret courts and secret evidence, and secret miscarriages of justice. Australia is said to be an inspiration for the master across the Pacific.

Bernard Collaery, David McBride and Julian Assange — deeply moral men who told the truth — are the enemies and victims of this paranoia. They, not Edwardian soldiers who marched for the King, are our true national heroes.

On Julian Assange, the Prime Minister has two faces. One face teases us with hope of his intervention with Biden that will lead to Julian's freedom. The other face ingratiates itself with 'POTUS' and allows the Americans to do what they want with its vassal: to lay down targets that could result in catastrophe for all of us.

Will Albanese back Australia or Washington on Julian Assange? If he is 'sincere', as the more do-eyed Labor Party supporters say, what is he waiting for? If he fails to secure Julian's release, Australia will cease to be sovereign. We will be little Americans. Official.

This is not about the survival of a free press. There is no longer a free press. There are refuges in the *samizdat*, such as this site. The paramount issue is justice and our most precious human right: to be free.

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