

Liberating Assange: A woeful lack of leadership

For years there has been widespread and growing support for Julian Assange in many parts of the world. This I have learned from a variety of sources, including so-called alternative media, and queries addressed to me in consequence of my own modest efforts to inform (see www.julian-assange.se and www.nnn.se/nordic/assange.htm).

Recently, for example, two correspondents in France inquired if I had any opinion of or additional knowledge relating to an article containing brutal criticism of Julian's lawyers. Both women expressed what one referred to as "my frustration and sense of powerlessness" concerning Julian's predicament.

Such sentiments are far from uncommon, and may in large measure be explained by the sorrowful fact that Julian's supporters worldwide — who at this point number in the millions and are clearly prepared to contribute time, energy and money — have been left unorganised and poorly informed.

That observation is in no way meant to disparage or trivialise the efforts of individuals like John Pilger, who for years has been conducting an extensive one-man information service, making himself available to all sorts of media for interviews, etc. — while donating large amounts of time and energy that he might devote to more personal matters if there were equally knowledgeable, accessible and responsive additional sources to share the burden. I, for one, have not discovered any.

Discouraging initiative

It was due to my great respect for John Pilger, both for his unflagging support to Julian Assange and for his many journalistic achievements, that I unhesitatingly assented when he earlier this year asked me to help with a project in Sweden.

The objective, at least initially, was to gather a respectable number of endorsements for a statement in support of Julian Assange to be published in Swedish media, commissioned and financed by the WikiLeaks organization. The name-gathering began on 22 May and soon everything was arranged for full-page ads to be published in two leading Swedish newspapers on Monday, June 3rd, with a statement endorsed by over 100 citizens in various walks of life.

But a few days before scheduled publication, WikiLeaks leaders informed John that it had decided not to go ahead with publication "at this time". No discussion. No consultation. No explanation. Only some vague noises about publication at some unspecified later date which became increasingly vague and less specific as the days passed. In the end, under mounting pressure from endorsers to act upon their eagerness to openly declare their support of Julian, the statement was published on a website established for that purpose. (More detailed account at <https://julian-assange.se/english/history.htm>.)

To put it mildly, this episode indicated a state of disarray or worse among the presumptive leaders of Julian's most crucial and well-informed support in London. It also seemed to express a dismal lack of respect for John Pilger, who through the years has contributed so much. And, of course, it demonstrated an utter disregard for all the Swedes who donated their time, energy and good names to the project.

It would be difficult to devise a more effective method for repelling adherents and discouraging initiative.

What's happening, how to know?

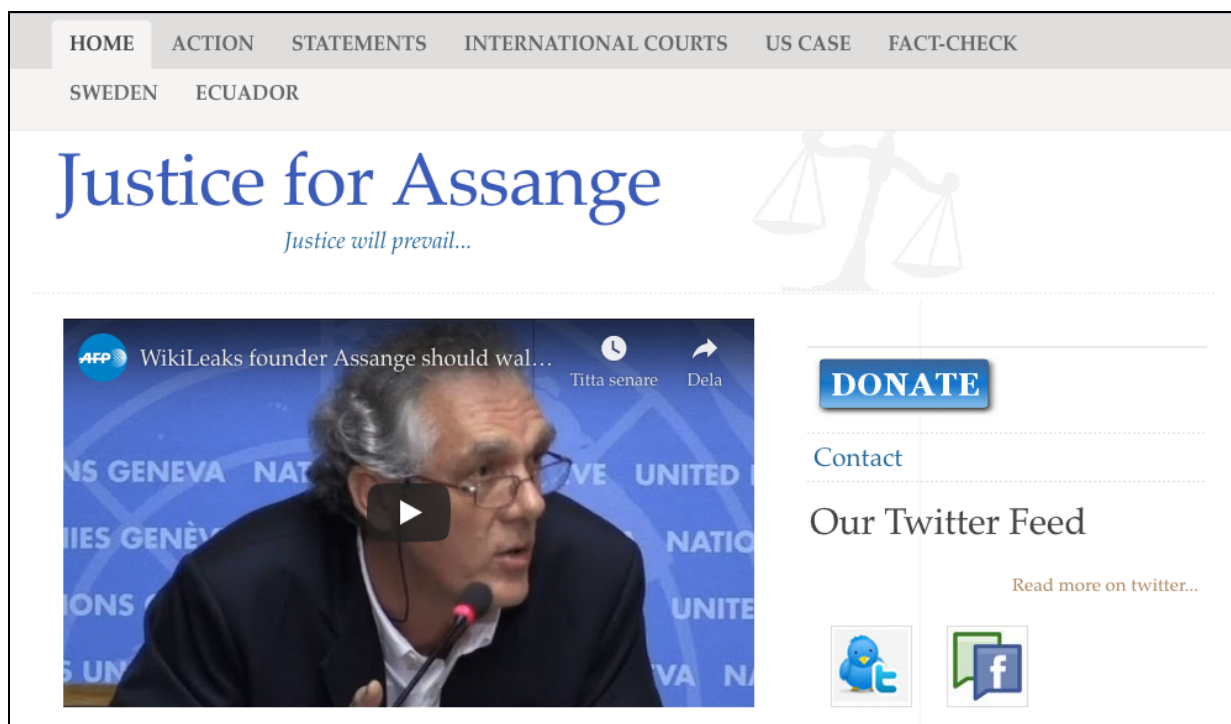
The arbitrary cancellation of the Swedish initiative is one of many signs that a coherent, well-organised campaign in support of Julian Assange is notable by its absence. Much the same can be said of the information available to those who may wish to participate in such campaign. For an uninitiate in Saskatchewan, Sweden or Sri Lanka wanting to learn and help, where to turn for enlightenment?

One obvious place to start, of course, is with the organisation that Julian is world-famous for having founded. But a visit to the WikiLeaks website does not have much to say about his persecution. There is nothing about it on the home page at www.wikileaks.org. In the "News" subsection there are a couple of related articles, the most recent dated June 7 of this year. Those who seek further under the "About" heading will, toward the end of the page, find this reference: "Julian Assange's ongoing detention without charge is best described here: <https://justice4assange.com/3-Years-in-Embassy.html>"

That's all there is to learn about the Assange case from the WikiLeaks website.

Not so incidentally, the link to the *justice4assange* website does not appear to be functioning. When I yesterday and today clicked on that link with both Firefox and Chrome, I got either a blank page or this message: "Error. Bad request or the file you have requested does not exist. Please wait few minutes and try again."

Those who know what to do next *may* be able to access the Justice for Assange website via its home page at <https://justice4assange.com> — but often first after receiving and complying with the "Bad request" error message. If they eventually succeed, they are greeted with this sight:



The video is a 37-second excerpt from a statement on 5 February 2016 by Christophe Peschoux, identified only as "UN working group secretary".

The group in question is presumably the UNWGAD. Note that the date is Feb. 2016, more than 3½ years ago. Among many other things not mentioned is the far more powerful statement by the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture from May of this year.

Beneath the video are some Frequently Asked Questions which include "When did Assange enter the embassy, and why is he there?", indicating that the website has not been updated since before Julian's arrest in April this year.

Otherwise, the site does not appear to be functioning well or at all. Clicking on the section headings in the top menu (Action, Statements, etc.) has no effect, i.e. one remains on the home page. But it does produce some mixed headings in the menu, for example:



These and other problems, including the frequent reappearance of the "Bad request" error message, render this website of little or no use. Yet it is recommended by WikiLeaks as the source where "Julian Assange's ongoing detention without charge is best described".

Defending WikiLeaks – not Julian Assange

Apparently some person(s) decided several years ago that the principal source of information about the Assange case on the Internet should be the website entitled "Defend WikiLeaks" (not "Defend Assange"). It may, however, be questioned how widely that is understood or agreed.

I routinely explore a broad range of sources via the Internet for information about Julian Assange and many other subjects, but rarely come across any reference to Defend WikiLeaks.

WikiLeaks' own website makes no mention of its Defender, but instead links readers to the error-prone site of Justice for Assange.

The Defend WikiLeaks website seems to be equally prone to the "Bad request" error message. Those who succeed in gaining access see this home page:

The top menu clearly indicates that “Julian” is a subsidiary issue.

There is no photo or other image of Julian on this, the opening page of the section labelled “Julian” on the Defend WikiLeaks website.

The banner headline seems to suggest that the arrest of Julian was a recent event, not something that occurred over half a year ago.

The 45-second video was *apparently* produced by the British Labour Party. After a half-second with the puzzling opening image — *apparently* taken during the arrest of Julian in April — the video segues to a statement in support of Julian recited by an unidentified but presumably Labour politician, accompanied by excerpts from the infamous “Collateral Murder” video.

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In relation to Julian’s current predicament, the relevance of the video and the quote beginning “Congress shall make no law” is not immediately evident.

The appeal for money is very clear, however.

Visitors — presumably from all over the world and with many different native tongues that are not English — are apparently expected to understand what “Liveblog” means, and that in this case it involves current news about the Assange case. Those who, for whatever reason, choose to click on the Liveblog link are at risk of being met with the “Bad request” error message. If and when they do gain access to that page, they will probably find it difficult to navigate — sluggish and erratic, as appears to be the case with navigation within and between most pages of the website.

How much life there is in the Liveblog is open to question; the most recent entry is from October 16, three days ago. The lead headline is “Julian Assange Arrested, Donate to the campaign now”. Beneath that is a small subhead: “Arrest info and how

else to get involved here". Clicking on that link opens either the "Bad request" error message or a page headlined "Emergency: Julian Assange has been arrested". That again.

There is some mention of his imprisonment in "About Julian Assange" — 142 of the 2519 words on that page touch upon the subject. The "Prison Updates" page contains two entries with a total of 491 words, the most recent dated 30 September 2019.

The section labelled "Take Action" opens with another appeal to "Donate". That is followed by some fairly self-evident suggestions about what one might do to help. It is noted that "There are numerous local groups and campaigns that have sprouted up in support of Julian Assange around the world". But no effort has been made to unite them into a coherent force, or even to document them and their activities.

Then there is the question of the website's visual appeal. Design is a matter of taste, of course. But I am fairly confident that if a random sample of Internet users were asked to compare this website with just about any other — www.wikileaks.org or www.julian-assange.se, for example — the harsh yellow-blackness of defend.wikileaks.org would not be seen as especially inviting.

Clearly inadequate

Etc., etc.... In short, the website designated by some obscure process to serve as the primary Internet source of information about the Assange case is clearly inadequate. Among other things, I have never before encountered a website that performs so poorly from a purely technical standpoint — more than slightly perplexing, given the technical expertise of those associated with Julian Assange and WikiLeaks. The failure to provide vital, up-to-date information is even more perplexing, to indulge in understatement.

Of course, it can be and has been reasoned that there are many other sources available among alternative and even mainstream media, some of which are referenced on the Defend WikiLeaks website. But how to interpret and choose among them?

To take one of countless examples: Some media have recently reported that Julian is in very poor health, others that he is in good health. Which to believe?

What is very much needed is an *authoritative* source, acting on Julian's behalf, which provides reliable fresh information while resolving the contradictions, confusions and inaccuracies of media and other reports. That would appear to be a precondition for any global campaign to secure his freedom.

Needless to say, such a campaign would be very difficult to organise and coordinate. But difficult tasks have been accomplished before — by Julian Assange, for example. It may well be that those who have been leading current efforts, whoever they are, have been doing their very best. If so, their efforts are to be gratefully acknowledged.

But in a situation like Julian's, the need for dedicated and effective leadership does not dissipate just because certain individuals are unable to provide it. The time to identify and recruit such leadership is long overdue, and that will no doubt require some blunt and open discussion.

Initial suggestions

By way of imitating such a discussion, here are a few suggestions about what needs to be done:

- Launch an *independent* global campaign dedicated solely to the release of Julian Assange from captivity, with an appropriate title such as "Assange Freedom Now!"
- Recruit a qualified steering committee to lead and legitimise the campaign. Names like Mairead Maguire, Craig Murray and Ray McGovern come to mind. So does John Pilger's, of course; but he has already done so much that it seems impertinent to contemplate asking.
- Establish an adequately staffed and funded campaign headquarters, presumably in London but possibly elsewhere, to carry out tasks including:

Create and constantly maintain an attractive, easily read and technically efficient website to provide continual and *authoritative* reports on Julian's current situation and related matters, correct errors in other media, answer reader enquiries, etc.

Develop and maintain a comprehensive list of solidarity groups around the world, document their actions, respond to their requests for information and guidance, etc.

Help plan, organise and execute major actions.

Anyone who wishes to discuss these and related issues is very welcome to contact me.

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