

**Mary Kostakidis' speech when presenting the Sydney Peace Medal to
Julian Assange on behalf of the Sydney Peace Foundation**

10 May, Frontline Club, London

We are here today to honour a great Australian – Julian Assange – cofounder and leader of Wikileaks – the ingenious and heroic website that has shifted the power balance between citizens and the state by exposing what governments really get up to in our name.

In its short life, Wikileaks' achievements have been extraordinary.

It has contributed to enhancing democracy globally, ensuring that critical evidence is made available to citizens all over the world in their struggle for justice, dignity and respect, by providing a safe and secure way for whistleblowers to upload material anonymously.

Governments manage & control information tightly – even in democracies – and are incensed by a grass roots organisation that has been able to strengthen transparency and accountability in this way.

Despite enormous pressure and intimidation, it has been able to continue to do so because of the courage and determination of its leader, and the equally heroic courage of whistleblowers who take great risks for our benefit.

Exposing secrets can be a dangerous business.

We know the cost of that courage for the individuals involved is overwhelming.

Today's award acknowledges the value of that courage and determination to society.

There is a big disconnect between what the law stipulates for the corporate world and the world of government when it comes to accountability. If a Board is lying to its stakeholders, the Directors can be prosecuted. They are expected to blow the

whistle. They must not continue to be collegiate, compliant & complicit. We have signalled through laws that directors who don't blow the whistle could end up in jail.

A healthy democracy relies on whistleblowers as much as a healthy corporate culture but not only is there no onus on those serving in govt institutions to blow the whistle, there are vastly inadequate safeguards and indeed there is draconian punishment.

The US wants to shut down WikiLeaks and criminalise the activity of this publisher. This despite the landmark Pentagon Papers case in which the US courts acknowledged the importance of balancing a government's need to have secrets with the need to protect democracy from governments that keep secrets, upholding the First Amendment. The press, the Courts decreed, should be free to publish secrets that do not present a clear & present danger to society – that is grave harm – that it was not enough to merely embarrass the government, or expose them.

The Pentagon Papers case reaffirmed the primacy of freedom of speech & taught us many lessons: that the media and freedom of information are critical in a robust democracy; that governments lie and that their actions can and do cause grave harm to many people; and that we need to support those courageous people who have taken risks to reveal the truth – the whistleblowers, the journalists & the publishers. If we don't support whistleblowers and their publishers, we will get the society we deserve.

The case should also have been a lesson for governments. Of course there are situations that genuinely warrant secrecy at the time they are unfolding. But governments must be aware that what they say & do privately can & should be made public at a future time so it must be in accordance with their publicly held position or policy and demonstrate they have acted ethically.

Among recent revelations are cables showing the Australian government privately lobbied with the US to weaken a key international treaty to ban cluster bombs, in contravention of Australia's publicly held position.

One of Daniel Ellsberg's disturbing revelations was the widespread belief in government circles at a senior level and among their advisors, that the public had to be lied to because they would otherwise feel they had a right to have a say – there was an unchallenged culture of collusion to deceive the public.

Whilst governments privately act in contravention of their public position, there will be individuals who will want to reveal the hypocrisy.

It is disturbing that there should be any intimation that Julian Assange would be in jeopardy if he had encouraged whoever leaked the documents. This is a threat to all journalists. That's what journalists do – they encourage sources to divulge information. Courts would I hope be wary of criminalising such an activity.

These moves by US authorities all target Wikileaks alone – not any of the other publishers also publishing the leaks – Wikileaks and its intrepid Australian leader, who has been vilified by US politicians & commentators calling for his assassination. There has been no censure of these calls by the Australian leadership.

Unlike Britain, Australia made no effort to remove its citizens from Guantanamo Bay. Despite recently paying one detainee, Mamdouh Habib, compensation, there is no public enquiry into whether the Australian government was complicit in abusing the human rights of one of its own citizens.

The GB dossiers published by Wikileaks show a disturbing picture of the calibre of evidence and the methods by which it was obtained. They corroborate Habib's claims he was tortured in Egypt.

In David Hicks' case, the document used for the historic first military commission trial, shows his identity was confused with that of a former soldier and consequently has Hicks fighting in a country he has never visited. How much more evidence do we need that he did not receive a fair trial? Yet he continues to be referred to as a "convicted terrorist". His conviction should be set aside.

Many of us have come to journalism because of its core purpose – to scrutinise the decisions & actions of those in authority because of the impact of those decisions & actions on the lives of many people.

The Howard government's Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer was asked by Australia's ABC whether he has read the dossiers. He said he couldn't be bothered – all that was "just history now", revealing precisely what we need to guard against – arrogance, contempt for truth, contempt for justice and contempt for other people's lives.

The most important obligation of the State towards its citizens is to protect their human rights. They get away with not doing so because of our indifference and failure to imagine ourselves in other people's shoes.

Like millions of people all over the world, many Australians are very grateful to Julian Assange and very proud of the work he and his team are doing.

As Professor Rees mentioned, this award is made infrequently and for extraordinary achievement.

On behalf of the University of Sydney's Peace Foundation, it is with great pleasure that I present you with the Sydney Peace Medal, or your conviction that truth matters and that justice depends on it. And for your leadership, courage & tenacity in journalism & publishing.