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***Hicks and the conspiracy theorists hijack the WikiLeaks debate***

by [Matthew Knott](#)

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The longest round of applause at last night's WikiLeaks forum at Sydney Town Hall was reserved not for one of the three star speakers: John Pilger, Andrew Wilkie or Julian Burnside. Nor for Julian Assange. Or even Bradley Manning.

In fact, the adulation was saved for one David Hicks, perched in the front rows of the audience.

Two-thousand Sydneysiders crammed into the opulent centennial hall last night for the leftie love-in, organised by GetUp!, the Sydney Peace Foundation, Amnesty International and the Stop the War Coalition.

John Pilger was first to speak. Standing in front of the enormous Grand Organ — once the biggest of its kind in the world — he looked like a preacher, delivering a sermon from the pulpit. He sounded like one, too. His voice was deep and resonant, his words untouched by any sense of complexity or doubt. This is a polemicist with only two colours on his palette: black and white.

Instead of brandishing a Bible, he waved WikiLeaks cables. The crowd loved it.

"This meeting tonight is about Australia's silence on the denigration of basic liberties such as freedom of speech and the presumption of innocence," he proclaimed. Then he introduced his special guest: "Like Julian Assange, he is a courageous Australian citizen who was denied the help of his government. His name is David Hicks."

The crowd exploded into 30 seconds of uninterrupted applause.

Pilger took no prisoners. The Swedish prime minister is a "war mongering mate of George Bush". Julia Gillard — in her speech to the US congress — reminded him of a "grovelling Stalinist party boss in Eastern Europe summoned to Moscow during the Cold War".

"Have we no pride?" he admonished. "Have we no historical sense that with every prime minister we elect the first priority is the wishes of the United States — a nation whose record of violence is documented in the crushing of 50 governments since WWII, many of them democracies?"

At times though his rhetoric seemed designed less to inform than to deceive: "We have a right to know that Kevin Rudd advised America to attack China if the Chinese didn't do what they were told. We have a right to know that Kim Beazley wanted to commit the Labor Party to an American war with China over Taiwan."

(Well, not quite. Rudd told Hillary Clinton that, in regards to China, he favours "multilateral engagement with bilateral vigour ... while also preparing to deploy force if everything goes

wrong.” And Beazley said that, under the ANZUS Treaty, Australia would be obliged to side with the US over China in any future war over Taiwan.)

As for Pilger’s claim the cables prove “that Obama is no different to Bush”, he offered no evidence.

Tasmanian independent MP Andrew Wilkie, by contrast, admitted he has some qualms with the way WikiLeaks operates. And that Assange does face serious accusations in Sweden.

Wilkie stands by his criticisms of the Gillard government for its “contempt for rule of law, the presumption of innocence and free speech”.

“Remember: presumption of innocence is not a luxury,” he lectured. “It is a fundamental human right. It is unacceptable that anyone — and particularly unacceptable that the government of our country — could show such contempt for the presumption of innocence.”

But he said the public, as well as the government, must take some of the blame: “The government is reflecting the cultural mood of the country. A lot of Australians don’t like whistle-blowers. It’s a dirty word.” He would know (and he’s hopeful the parliament will pass strong snitch protection legislation before the next election).

Burnside said Assange and WikiLeaks had committed no greater crime than embarrassing America. “I suppose the best thing you can say to America is: if you don’t want to be embarrassed, stop doing embarrassing things,” he said last night.

“The USA has really disgraced itself many times in the last few decades, but especially in its treatment of Bradley Manning and its attacks on Julian Assange.”

The Swedish authorities, he says, had only taken the sexual assault allegations seriously after the cable-gate revelations. He was especially incensed by the government consideration of cancelling Assange’s passport — a fundamental breach, he says, of the contract between citizens and the state.

Like Wilkie, he argued that governments are unlikely to change without public pressure: “For the first five years of David Hicks’ incarceration the public at large were unconcerned even though we knew what was going on; even though we knew he was being tortured. Governments learn they can get away with this.”

Moderator and former SBS newsreader Mary Kostakidis wisely asked the audience to keep their questions short and sharp. Sadly she didn’t ask to keep them relevant — as shown by questions about the Northern Territory intervention and the supposedly Mason-controlled Liberal Party.

When a man arose to ask about why the World Trade Centre number seven building collapsed on September 11 — despite not being directly hit by an aircraft — I switched off my recorder and escaped into the drizzly night. Free speech is a marvelous thing, but sometimes it has its limits.