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<http://news.ninemsn.com.au/world/8225203/assanges-crime-is-embarrassing-us-lawyer>

Assange's crime is embarrassing US: Lawyer

A high-profile human rights lawyer claims Julian Assange's only crime is embarrassing the US government and if America doesn't want to be embarrassed it should "stop doing embarrassing things".

Supporters of the WikiLeaks founder packed Sydney's Town Hall last night to hear Julian Burnside QC and others denounce the treatment of the whistleblower website and the Australian-born Assange at the hands of the Australian and US governments.

A panel which included journalist John Pilger and federal MP Andrew Wilkie, a former intelligence analyst and Iraq war whistleblower, said the saga has followed a narrative similar to that of former Guantanamo detainee David Hicks.

"Like Julian Assange, he's a courageous Australian citizen who was denied the help of his government," Pilger said of Hicks, who attended the event.

Wilkie expanded on the theme, comparing Assange to Mamdouh Habib, another ex-Guantanamo inmate, and Allan Kessing, who blew the whistle about inadequate security practices at Sydney Airport.

Wilkie described the heavy price he said he paid for challenging the Howard government over their case for war with Iraq in 2003.

"Julian Assange is going through the whistleblower grinder ... and my experience is that when you stand up and try to speak the truth to power it is tough. "For my efforts you were told that I was mad," said Wilkie, adding that whistleblowers commit suicide at a higher rate than the rest of the Australian population.

Burnside said a successful prosecution of the accused WikiLeaks Bradley Manning, a US Army private, is unlikely to have any impact on whistleblowers coming forward in the future.

"The First Amendment right of free speech in the US means that the publication would not be an offence, even though the leaking was an offence and the only exception to that ... is if the leaking creates a real and present danger and there's no suggestion of that in this case," said Burnside, responding to a question from ninemsn.

The panelists and moderator, former SBS presenter Mary Kostakidis, were all adamant in their view that WikiLeaks has a role to play in an open and democratic society.

Kostakidis pointed out that WikiLeaks had successfully published footage of two Reuters cameramen gunned down by a US helicopter, after the news agency tried and failed through Freedom of Information laws to obtain the same footage for more than two years.

Pilger also highlighted the revelations WikiLeaks published about the Australian government's relationship to the US and the secret advice it received from the likes of influential right-wing Labor MP Mark Arbib.

Arbib was outed in leaked cables last December as a key source of intelligence on government and internal party machinations to the US embassy.

"We have a right to know these things just like the people of Egypt and Tunisia had the right to know about the corruption of their regimes," Pilger told the audience.

The speakers were also equally united in their sense of outrage at the perceived injustice Assange has faced.

"Julian Assange and WikiLeaks have broken no law and are charged with no crime and yet it's clear the Gillard government is trying to do to Assange what Howard did to David Hicks," said Pilger.

Although not related to his work with WikiLeaks, Assange is in fact facing charges that he sexually assaulted two women in Sweden last year.

The 39-year-old is currently appealing against a UK court's decision to extradite him to Sweden to answer the accusations.

Assange denies the allegations and says the charges against him are part of a wider political conspiracy to silence WikiLeaks.