

Julian Assange delivers first speech since release from UK prison: “I pleaded guilty to journalism”

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WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange delivered a powerful speech Tuesday in Strasbourg, France during a 90-minute session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). He described 14 years of extra-judicial persecution, lawfare and imprisonment against him by the United States and Britain and its chilling effects on media freedom worldwide.

Assange travelled from Australia to appear before PACE in person. He was seated alongside his wife Stella and WikiLeaks editor-in-chief Kristinn Hrafnsson. It was Assange’s first public speech since his release from Belmarsh prison four months ago after a plea deal with the US Department of Justice.

Assange said of the deal, in which he pleaded guilty to conspiring with US Army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning to obtain and disclose classified documents: “I eventually chose freedom over unrealizable justice after being detained for years and facing a 175-year sentence with no effective remedy”. He emphasised, “I am not free today because the system worked, I am free today after years of incarceration because I pled guilty to journalism.”

He said that without an unprecedented global campaign for his freedom, waged by activists, citizens, legal and medical professionals and political representatives, “I never would have seen the light of day.”

Assange was appearing at a specially convened parliamentary session on his detention and conviction. It was introduced by Icelandic representative Thórhildur Sunna Ævarsdóttir, General Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders for the Council of Europe and member of the Pirate Party. On Wednesday PACE will debate her report, “The

detention and conviction of Julian Assange and their chilling effects on human rights.”

The personal toll on Assange wreaked by the US-led vendetta against WikiLeaks was evident. Assange told PACE: “The experience of isolation for years in a small cell is difficult to convey. It strips away one’s sense of self, leaving only the raw essence of existence. I am yet not fully equipped to speak about what I have endured, the relentless struggle to stay alive both physically and mentally. Nor can I speak yet about the death by hanging, murder and medical neglect of my fellow prisoners.”

He continued: “Isolation has taken its toll, which I am trying to unwind, and expressing myself in this setting is a challenge. However, the gravity of this occasion and the weight of the issues at hand compel me to set aside my reservations and speak to you directly.”

Assange used his appearance to warn of the far-reaching implications of his prosecution under the Espionage Act, which had criminalised journalism and ushered in a regime of “transnational repression.” His conviction meant that any journalist anywhere in the world could be charged, extradited and imprisoned for exposing war crimes and other human rights abuses by the US government.

After 14 years’ incarceration in Britain, under house arrest, inside the Ecuadorian Embassy in London and then prison, Assange described emerging from “the dungeon of Belmarsh” and finding “how much ground has been lost during that time... how expressing the truth has been undermined, attacked, weakened and diminished. I see more impunity, more secrecy, more retaliation for telling the truth and more self-censorship.

“It is hard not to draw a line from the US government's prosecution of me, it's crossing the Rubicon by internationally criminalizing journalism, to the chilled climate for freedom of expression that exists now.”

Assange said WikiLeaks had “obtained and published the truth about tens of thousands of hidden casualties of war and other unseen horrors, about programs of assassination, rendition, torture and mass surveillance. We revealed not just when and where these things happened, but frequently the policies, the agreements and the structures behind them.”

He recalled how WikiLeaks' *Collateral Murder video* published in 2010—showing US Apache helicopter crew “eagerly blowing to pieces Iraqi journalists and their rescuers”—had exposed the reality of modern warfare and “shocked the world.”

Assange described the persecution that followed, including covert actions by the CIA: “It is now a matter of public record that under [CIA Director Mike] Pompeo's explicit direction, the CIA drew up plans to kidnap and to assassinate me within the Ecuadorian Embassy in London and authorized going after my European colleagues, subjecting us to theft, hacking attacks and the planting of false information.

“My wife and my infant son were also targeted. A CIA asset was permanently assigned to track my wife, and instructions were given to obtain DNA from my six-month-old son's nappy. This is the testimony of more than 30 current and former US intelligence officials.”

He concluded: “The CIA's targeting of myself, my family and my associates through aggressive extra-judicial and extra-territorial means, provides a rare insight into how powerful intelligence organizations engage in transnational repression.”

In the Q&A period that followed, Assange responded to a question about his plans for the future. He spoke of the transformed political climate facing WikiLeaks: “Where we once released important war crimes videos that stirred public debate, now every day there are livestreamed horrors from the wars in Ukraine and the war in Gaza. Hundreds of journalists have been killed in Gaza and Ukraine combined. The impunity seems to mount, and it is still uncertain what we can do about it.”

Asked whether he had known at the start how few legal protections were available to WikiLeaks in

Europe, Assange said he had expected legal harassment and was prepared to fight. But he added, “My naivete was believing in the law. When push comes to shove, laws are just pieces of paper, and they can be reinterpreted for political expediency. They are the rules made by the ruling class more broadly, and if those rules don't suit what it wants to do, it reinterprets them.”

Another PACE representative asked whether, in retrospect, Assange would have done anything differently. He replied: “Once I was trapped in the United Kingdom, it took me time to understand what UK society was about—who you could trust, who you couldn't trust, the different types of manoeuvres that are made in that society. There are different media partners that perhaps we could have chosen differently.”

Assange's then media partners, led by the *Guardian* newspaper and the *New York Times*, published WikiLeaks' explosive revelations before promptly breaking relations with Assange. They conspired with the Pentagon, CIA and the British state in a decade-long slander campaign aimed at destroying Assange and contributing directly to the “chilling environment” of state terrorism and precision-guided assassination of journalists in Gaza and beyond, armed, financed and directed by the imperialist powers of Europe, the United States and Australia.



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