

Why Doesn't Julian Assange Leave WikiLeaks?

blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2012/08/24/why-doesnt-julian-assange-leave-wikileaks/

2012-8-24



"WikiLeaks, c'est moi"

If the Swedish legal pursuit of Julian Assange is, as he seems to suggest, part of an assault on WikiLeaks, why doesn't he simply separate himself from the organisation for a while?

WikiLeaks has millions of supporters around the world, a team of journalists/technicians, and collaborators in both global mainstream media and in alternative networks such as Anonymous. Surely they can keep up the good work while Assange deals with his personal legal difficulties?

That way it can get back to revealing secrets instead of demanding that international legal systems be changed to suit one individual making speeches from the balcony of the Ecuadorean embassy.

It's a stupid question of course. But the answers to it tell us a lot about the current Problem With WikiLeaks.

In my generally supportive [book about the significance of WikiLeaks](#) I identify sustainability as the key issue for its future. Not just survival against all those wishing its demise, but what form it might take to prevent implosion or increasing irrelevance.

Personality Vehicle

The least favourite option that I listed was that it remains a personality vehicle for Julian Assange supported by people from the Oppositionist Tendency. This is exactly where it now is. It's a very comfortable place to be but generally it is also a lonely and ineffective location for a campaigning media group. That's why he teamed up with the people from the Guardian etc in the first place. However, I fear, there is no escape while its founder, moving spirit and domineering presence remains painted into this corner of his own making.

The fact that WikiLeaks can't operate without Julian Assange marks it out from just about every other significant media, political and advocacy organisation that I can think of. It's another indication of how un-political Assange is, in the sense that he does not seem capable of building alliances, creating capacity or evolving a successful tactical approach to any of his challenges.

WikiLeaks was an extraordinary achievement, largely of Assange's making*, and its continuation is remarkable. Yet, its brief period as a consensus-shaker working both with and against the Establishment is apparently over. That stunning 12 months when the New York Times, Der Spiegel and The Guardian put their resources behind WikiLeaks disclosures seems like a long time ago.

Liberal Insult

'Liberal' is now an insult used by WikiLeaks supporters. Many of them seem to inhabit a Manichean universe where you are either for or against WikiLeaks and Assange. [If you don't believe that, then please give me a reference to a quote from Assange or any WikiLeaks staffers where they have admitted any fault or accepted any criticism while engaged in a real debate] In this version of reality all their troubles are sourced to the American administration and their lackies.

I'm not going to get into an argument about whether the sex crime allegations are all part of a plot to close WikiLeaks down. I really don't think they are, but even if they were there is no reason for that legal process to stop WikiLeaks if it was a healthy organisation. It isn't.

In fact, the Swedish Scenario allows WikiLeaks' core supporters to equate Assange's own freedom with WikiLeaks' survival. Yet, as I said before, surely an organisation that is such a threat to American power is strong enough to survive without one 41 year-old Australian computer geek/global visionary at the helm for a while?

Real Politics

WikiLeaks/Assange needs this conspiracy theory to justify its own failure to adapt to the real politics of the world as it is. This is a world according to Assange where Russia and Ecuador are preferred partners and where Sweden is seen as a human rights abuser and lapdog of US Imperialism.

OK, I know I am hopelessly naïve, but how can anyone who read the diplomatic cables that WikiLeaks themselves revealed to the world really think that? Yes, the US does evil things and has selfish, destructive policies in many areas. The UK government hasn't covered itself in glory by trying to browbeat the Ecuadoreans either. But funnily enough, US diplomatic officials, at least according to their Cables, still seem to think that the main underlying principles of policy are freedom and human rights.

If someone publishes a vast swathe of your secret information then as a state you are obliged to go after them with the usual means – even the more shadowy ones such as a Grand Jury. But I am sure more intelligent figures in the State Department realise that any over-zealous pursuit of WikiLeaks will backfire in terms of American interests.

Soap Opera

Meanwhile, a highly promising media initiative that could have developed as a model for all kinds of investigative journalism is reduced to a soap opera where Leftists are reduced to the most baroque fantasies of power that include denigrating feminism.

Technically, there probably is no alternative for Assange between staying in the Ecuadorean embassy and facing the Swedish legal process. But his real choice is between increasing irrelevance and credibility. Leaders of real courage make the choices that put themselves at risk because they have faith in their cause. By resisting due process Assange is showing the opposite to everyone but his most committed supporters.

[*Though without Bradley Manning, where would it be?]

[NB WikiLeaks is not, of course, the only leaks website. In many ways John Young's Cryptome was a precursor. As I mention in my book he even worked briefly with Assange although he ended up denouncing it before anyone else had a chance to. Cryptome is still going, albeit on a smaller scale, with a much lower profile and in a much more 'traditional' isolationist/Leftist/purist vein. Some interesting links from Young [here](#) [HT @TomWatson]]

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science