

# A Champion for Justice – My Tribute to John Pilger

by Stuart Rees,\* Australia

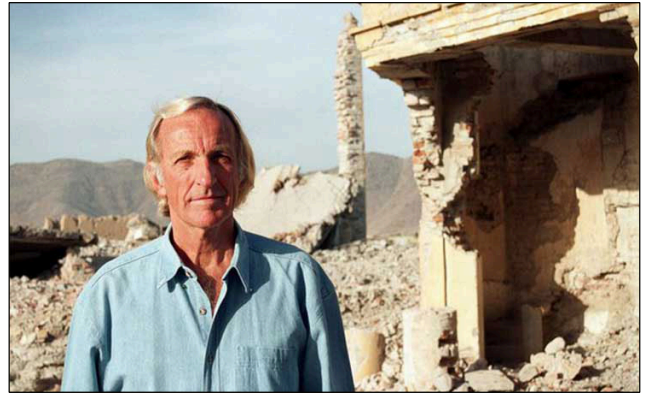
*People of the world who cherish human rights have lost a champion. The courageous, skilled, inimitable John Pilger, prolific author, film maker, foreign and war correspondent died in London on 30 December 2023. He was 84 years old.*

His books and films, his advocacy for the powerless were struggles for justice which he conducted by holding governments and powerful institutions accountable for abuses of power. He taught that keeping people in a state of ignorance about the real objectives of policies should be challenged by speaking out, by disobedience, by hearing the voices of the vulnerable, asylum seekers, people in poverty, prisoners and, the most persecuted of all – Indigenous citizens.

John invited us to break the silence of abuse, to realise, in *Edward Bernay's* terms, that in democracies and dictatorships, people were regimented, controlled and conned.

John identified Australia's culture of conservatism, cowardly journalism and politicians' illiteracy about non-violence as reasons why inequalities were slow to be addressed, why corporate interests could stifle human rights, why privatisation of public resources was taken for granted.

He exposed Australia's illusion that it was egalitarian, promoted mateship and inclusiveness; and took particular aim at the violence central to US foreign policies. When accepting the 2009 *Sydney Peace Prize*, he reminded his audience that since the end of the Second World War, US administrations had overthrown 50 governments, crushed 30 liberation movements, but still pretended to be the land of the free.



John Pilger † (Picture ma)

John's decades-long defence of the publisher, journalist, whistleblower *Julian Assange* derived from his opposition to the brutality of US foreign policy. John described as a sickening injustice the possibility that Julian would be extradited to face a potential 175 years in a US jail for revealing the murder and mayhem practised by the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan. He showed that such cruelty had been nurtured by the US desire for revenge, by a privileged and indifferent English court system and by cowardly silence from Australia.

Never afraid to confront the powerful, John led by example. He had no respect for governments' demands for continued, uncritical respect for military interventions, let alone for the glories of war. In common with *Shakespeare's* Luddite-like critic *Sir John Falstaff*, and with the First World War poet *Wilfred Owen*, John saw as utter nonsense the claim that there was honour in dying for your country. His witness to carnage and death in Vietnam and Iraq promoted his life-long critiques of the politicians, generals and arms manufacturers who profited from war.

John opposed countries' assumptions that they were exceptional, therefore above the law, never accountable for murder and dispossession or the for the ideals of a common humanity.

I wonder if John's death was hastened by the end-of-time slaughter by the Netanyahu government of Israel of tens of thousands of citizens of Gaza, 70 percent of whom are women and children, a genocidal slaughter justified by the *Or-*

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*wellian* notion that the oppressor is the victim, that Israel can do what it likes as long as Washington supplies arms and vetoes UN Security Council Resolutions for a ceasefire.

Throughout his life, John championed Palestinians' rights to self-determination. He knew history. He tried to tell that 75 years of frequent killing and destruction by successive Israeli governments preceded the Hamas slaughter of October 7, 2023. He was pleading 'break your silence, know your history, do what you can to stop the brutality of the powerful. Beware, they are capable of dictatorship.'

John's challenge to convention, to powerful, violent governments, organisations and individuals made him numerous enemies but won admiration and gratitude from millions saddened by his death but now left to justice to his lessons and legacy.

What a champion to know! What life enhancing John Pilger principles to follow. 'If we apply justice and courage to human affairs, we begin to make sense of our world.'

*Source: <https://sydneypeacefoundation.org.au/a-champion-for-justice-my-tribute-to-john-pilger-stuart-rees/>, 2 January 2024 (This piece was originally published in New Matilda.)*