

Eyewitness to the Agony of Julian Assange

By [John Pilger](#) and [Timothy Erik Ström](#)

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*John Pilger has watched **Julian Assange's** extradition trial from the public gallery at London's Old Bailey. He spoke with Timothy Erik Ström of Arena magazine, Australia.*

Timothy Erik Ström: Having watched Julian Assange's trial firsthand, can you describe the prevailing atmosphere in the court?

John Pilger: The prevailing atmosphere has been shocking. I say that without hesitation; I have sat in many courts and seldom known such a corruption of due process; this is due revenge. Putting aside the ritual associated with 'British justice', at times it has been evocative of a Stalinist show trial. One difference is that in the show trials, the defendant stood in the court proper. In the Assange trial, the defendant was caged behind thick glass, and had to crawl on his knees to a slit in the glass, overseen by his guard, to make contact with his lawyers. His message, whispered barely audibly through face masks, WAS then passed by post-it the length of the court to where his barristers were arguing the case against his extradition to an American hellhole.

Consider this daily routine of Julian Assange, an Australian on trial for truth-telling journalism. He was woken at five o'clock in his cell at Belmarsh prison in the bleak southern sprawl of London. The first time I saw Julian in Belmarsh, having passed through half an hour of 'security' checks, including a dog's snout in my rear, I found a painfully thin figure sitting alone wearing a yellow armband. He had lost more than 10 kilos in a matter of months; his arms had no muscle. His first words were: 'I think I am losing my mind'.

I tried to assure him he wasn't. His resilience and courage are formidable, but there is a limit. That was more than a year ago. In the past three weeks, in the pre-dawn, he was strip-searched, shackled, and prepared for transport to the Central Criminal Court, the Old Bailey, in a truck that his partner, Stella Moris, described as an upended coffin. It had one small window; he had to stand precariously to look out. The truck and its guards were operated by Serco, one of many politically connected companies that run much of Boris Johnson's Britain.

The journey to the Old Bailey took at least an hour and a half. That's a minimum of three hours being jolted through snail-like traffic every day. He was led into his narrow cage at the back of the court, then look up, blinking, trying to make out faces in the public gallery through the reflection of the glass. He saw the courtly figure of his dad, John Shipton, and me, and our fists went up. Through the glass, he reached out to touch fingers with Stella, who is a lawyer and seated in the body of the court.

We were here for the ultimate of what the philosopher Guy Debord called *The Society of the Spectacle*: a man fighting for his life. Yet his crime is to have performed an epic public service: revealing that which we have a right to know: the lies of our governments and the crimes they commit in our name. His creation of WikiLeaks and its failsafe protection of sources revolutionised journalism, restoring it to the vision of its idealists. Edmund Burke's notion of free journalism as a fourth estate is now a fifth estate that shines a light on those who diminish the very meaning of democracy with their criminal secrecy. That's why his punishment is so extreme.

The sheer bias in the courts I have sat in this year and last year, with Julian in the dock, blight any notion of British justice. When thuggish police dragged him from his asylum in the Ecuadorean embassy—look closely at the photo and you'll see he is clutching a Gore Vidal book; Assange has a political humour similar to Vidal's—a judge gave him an outrageous 50-week sentence in a maximum-security prison for mere bail infringement.

For months, he was denied exercise and held in solitary confinement disguised as 'health care'. He once told me he strode the length of his cell, back and forth, back and forth, for his own half-marathon. In the next cell, the occupant screamed through the night. At first he was denied his reading glasses, left behind in the embassy brutality. He was denied the legal documents with which to prepare his case, and access to the prison library and the use of a basic laptop. Books sent to him by a friend, the journalist Charles Glass, himself a survivor of hostage-taking in Beirut, were returned. He could not call his American lawyers. He has been constantly medicated by the prison authorities. When I asked him what they were giving him, he couldn't say. The governor of Belmarsh has been awarded the Order of the British Empire.

At the Old Bailey, one of the expert medical witnesses, Dr Kate Humphrey, a clinical neuropsychologist at Imperial College, London, described the damage: Julian's intellect had gone from 'in the superior, or more likely very superior range' to 'significantly below' this optimal level, to the point where he was struggling to absorb information and 'perform in the low average range'.

This is what the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, Professor Nils Melzer, calls 'psychological torture', the result of a gang-like 'mobbing' by governments and their media skills. Some of the expert medical evidence is so shocking I have no intention of repeating it here. Suffice to say that Assange is diagnosed with autism and Asperger's syndrome and, according to Professor Michael Kopelman, one of the world's leading neuropsychiatrists, he suffers from 'suicidal preoccupations' and is likely to find a way to take his life if he is extradited to America.

James Lewis QC, America's British prosecutor, spent the best part of his cross-examination of Professor Kopelman dismissing mental illness and its dangers as 'malingering'. I have never heard in a modern setting such a primitive view of human frailty and vulnerability.

My own view is that if Assange is freed, he is likely to recover a substantial part of his life. He has a loving partner, devoted friends and allies and the innate strength of a principled political prisoner. He also has a wicked sense of humour.

But that is a long way off. The moments of collusion between the judge—a Gothic-looking magistrate called Vanessa Baraitser, about whom little is known—and the prosecution

acting for the Trump regime have been brazen. Until the last few days, defence arguments have been routinely dismissed. The lead prosecutor, James Lewis QC, ex SAS and currently Chief Justice of the Falklands, by and large gets what he wants, notably up to four hours to denigrate expert witnesses, while the defence's examination is guillotined at half an hour. I have no doubt, had there been a jury, his freedom would be assured.

The dissident artist Ai Weiwei came to join us one morning in the public gallery. He noted that in China the judge's decision would already have been made. This caused some dark ironic amusement. My companion in the gallery, the astute diarist and former British ambassador [Craig Murray wrote](#):

I fear that all over London a very hard rain is now falling on those who for a lifetime have worked within institutions of liberal democracy that at least broadly and usually used to operate within the governance of their own professed principles. It has been clear to me from Day 1 that I am watching a charade unfold. It is not in the least a shock to me that Baraitser does not think anything beyond the written opening arguments has any effect. I have again and again reported to you that, where rulings have to be made, she has brought them into court pre-written, before hearing the arguments before her.

I strongly expect the final decision was made in this case even before opening arguments were received.

The plan of the US Government throughout has been to limit the information available to the public and limit the effective access to a wider public of what information is available. Thus we have seen the extreme restrictions on both physical and video access. A complicit mainstream media has ensured those of us who know what is happening are very few in the wider population.

There are few records of the proceedings. They are: Craig Murray's [personal blog](#), Joe Lauria's live reporting on [Consortium News](#) and the [World Socialist Website](#). American journalist Kevin Gosztola's blog, [Shadowproof](#), funded mostly by himself, has reported more of the trial than the major US press and TV, including CNN, combined.

In Australia, Assange's homeland, the 'coverage' follows a familiar formula set overseas. The London correspondent of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Latika Bourke, [wrote this](#) recently:

The court heard Assange became depressed during the seven years he spent in the Ecuadorian embassy where he sought political asylum to escape extradition to Sweden to answer rape and sexual assault charges.

There were no 'rape and sexual assault charges' in Sweden. Bourke's lazy falsehood is not uncommon. If the Assange trial is the political trial of the century, as I believe it is, its outcome will not only seal the fate of a journalist for doing his job but intimidate the very principles of free journalism and free speech. The absence of serious mainstream reporting of the proceedings is, at the very least, self-destructive. Journalists should ask: who is next?

How shaming it all is. A decade ago, the *Guardian* exploited Assange's work, claimed its profit and prizes as well as a lucrative Hollywood deal, then turned on him with venom. Throughout the Old Bailey trial, two names have been cited by the prosecution, the *Guardian*'s David Leigh, now retired as 'investigations editor' and Luke Harding, the Russiaphobe and author of a fictional *Guardian* '[scoop](#)' that claimed Trump adviser Paul

Manafort and a group of Russians visited Assange in the Ecuadorean embassy. This never happened, and the *Guardian* has yet to apologise. The Harding and Leigh book on Assange—written behind their subject’s back—disclosed a secret password to a WikiLeaks file that Assange had entrusted to Leigh during the *Guardian*’s ‘partnership’. Why the defence has not called this pair is difficult to understand.

Assange is quoted in their book declaring during a dinner at a London restaurant that he didn’t care if informants named in the leaks were harmed. Neither Harding nor Leigh was at the dinner. John Goetz, an investigations reporter with *Der Spiegel*, was at the dinner and testified that Assange said nothing of the kind. Incredibly, Judge Baraitser stopped Goetz actually saying this in court.

However, the defence has succeeded in demonstrating the extent to which Assange sought to protect and redact names in the files released by WikiLeaks and that no credible evidence existed of individuals harmed by the leaks. The great whistle-blower Daniel Ellsberg said that Assange had personally redacted 15,000 files. The renowned New Zealand investigative journalist Nicky Hager, who worked with Assange on the Afghanistan and Iraq war leaks, described how Assange took ‘extraordinary precautions in redacting names of informants’.

TES: What are the implications of this trial’s verdict for journalism more broadly—is it an omen of things to come?

JP: The ‘Assange effect’ is already being felt across the world. If they displease the regime in Washington, investigative journalists are liable to prosecution under the 1917 *US Espionage Act*; the precedent is stark. It doesn’t matter where you are. For Washington, other people’s nationality and sovereignty rarely mattered; now it does not exist. Britain has effectively surrendered its jurisdiction to Trump’s corrupt Department of Justice. In Australia, a *National Security Information Act* promises Kafkaesque trials for transgressors. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation has been raided by police and journalists’ computers taken away. The government has given unprecedented powers to intelligence officials, making journalistic whistle-blowing almost impossible. Prime Minister Scott Morrison says Assange ‘must face the music’. The perfidious cruelty of his statement is reinforced by its banality.

‘Evil’, wrote Hannah Arendt, ‘comes from a failure to think. It defies thought for as soon as thought tries to engage itself with evil and examine the premises and principles from which it originates, it is frustrated because it finds nothing there. That is the banality of evil’.

TES: Having followed the story of WikiLeaks closely for a decade, how has this eyewitness experience shifted your understanding of what’s at stake with Assange’s trial?

JP: I have long been a critic of journalism as an echo of unaccountable power and a champion of those who are beacons. So, for me, the arrival of WikiLeaks was exciting; I admired the way Assange regarded the public with respect, that he was prepared to share his work with the ‘mainstream’ but not join their collusive club. This, and naked jealousy, made him enemies among the overpaid and undertalented, insecure in their pretensions of independence and impartiality.

I admired the moral dimension to WikiLeaks. Assange was rarely asked about this, yet much of his remarkable energy comes from a powerful moral sense that governments and other vested interests should not operate behind walls of secrecy. He is a democrat. He explained

this in one of our first [interviews](#) at my home in 2010.

What is at stake for the rest of us has long been at stake: freedom to call authority to account, freedom to challenge, to call out hypocrisy, to dissent. The difference today is that the world's imperial power, the United States, has never been as unsure of its metastatic authority as it is today. Like a flailing rogue, it is spinning us towards a world war if we allow it. Little of this menace is reflected in the media.

WikiLeaks, on the other hand, has allowed us to glimpse a rampant imperial march through whole societies—think of the carnage in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Yemen, to name a few, the dispossession of 37 million people and the deaths of 12 million men, women and children in the 'war on terror'—most of it behind a façade of deception.

Julian Assange is a threat to these recurring horrors—that's why he is being persecuted, why a court of law has become an instrument of oppression, why he ought to be our collective conscience: why we all should be the threat.

The judge's decision will be known on the 4th of January.

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***John Pilger**, journalist, author and film director, has won many distinctions for his work, including Britain's highest award for journalism twice, an American 'Emmy' and a British Academy Award. His complete archive is held at the British Library. He lives in London and Sydney. Visit his website at www.johnpilger.com*

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