

Julian Assange's Political Indictment: Old Wine in Older Bottles

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*The book of hours on **Julian Assange** is now being written. But the scribes are far from original. Repeated rituals of administrative hearings that have no common purpose other than to string things out before the axe are being enacted. Of late, the man most commonly associated with WikiLeaks' publication project cannot participate in any meaningful way, largely because of his frail health and the dangers posed to him by the coronavirus. Having already made an effort to attend court proceedings in person, Assange has come across as judicial exotica, freak show fodder for **Judge Vanessa Baraitser's** harsh version of Judge Judy. He was refused an application to escape his glass commode when he could still attend in person, as permitting him to descend and consult his defence team in a court room would constitute a bail application of some risk. This reading by the judicial head was so innovative it even puzzled the prosecutors.*

What we know to date is that restrictions and shackles on Assange's case are the order of the day. Restricted processes that do nothing to enable him to see counsel and enable a good brief to be exercised are typical. Most of all, the ceremonial circus that we have come to expect of British justice in the menacing shadow of US intimidation has become gloomily extensive. On July 27, that circus was given yet another act, another limping performance. As before, the venue was the Westminster Magistrates' Court in London.

During the proceeding, Assange did appear via video link from Belmarsh Prison, albeit it an hour late, and only at the insistence of his legal team. *The Guardian* report on his presence [reads](#) like an account of a sporting engagement. "Wearing a beige sweater and a pink shirt, Assange eventually appeared from Belmarsh prison after an earlier attempt was aborted."

Others were alarmed. During his call-over hearing, [noted](#) Martin Silk of the Australian Associated Press, "neither the Australian, nor his guards, were wearing face masks. I don't understand the reason for that given we have to wear them inside shops." This point [was also made](#) by Assange's partner, Stella Moris: "Belmarsh hasn't provided Julian with a face mask throughout this #covid crisis. The prison guards he interacts with don't wear them either." WikiLeaks supporter Juan Passarelli also [felt](#) that Assange "was having trouble following the proceedings due to the Judge and lawyers not speaking loud enough and into the microphones."

Arrangements for the hearing for observers proved characteristically sloppy. Freelance journalist Stefania Maurizi [was unimpressed](#) by being on the phone for two hours during which she "couldn't understand more than 20 percent of what has been discussed." She was adamant that "UK authorities don't care at all about international reporters covering"

the Assange proceedings. “Dial in system is, as usual,” [agreed](#) Passarelli, “a shambles!”

The topic of discussion during this administrative hearing was what was [announced](#) by the US Department of Justice on June 24, namely the second superseding indictment. That [document](#) proved to be a naked exercise of political overreach, adding no further charges to the already heavy complement of eighteen, seventeen of which centre on the US Espionage Act. The scope of interest, however, was widened, notably on the issue of “hacking” and conferencing. Assange is painted as devilish recruiter and saboteur of the international secret order, a man of the conference circuit keen to open up clandestine governments and make various reasons for doing so. “According to the charging document, Assange and others at WikiLeaks recruited and agreed with hackers to commit computer intrusions to benefit WikiLeaks.”

Edward Fitzgerald QC, in representing Assange, fulfilled his norm, [submitting](#) that the recently revised document did little to inspire confidence in the nature of clarified justice. “We are concerned about a fresh request being made at this stage with the potential consequences of derailing proceedings and that the US attorney-general is doing this for political reasons.” Fitzgerald reminded the court that US **President Donald Trump** had “described the defence case as a plot by the Democrats.”

This should have been obvious, but Baraitser’s court would have none of it. To admit at this point that Assange is wanted for political reasons would make it that much harder to extradite him to the United States, given that bar noted in the [US-UK Extradition Treaty](#). Whilst it was good of Fitzgerald to make this point, he should know by now that his audience is resolutely constipated and indifferent to such prodding. Assange is to be given the sharpest, rather than the most balanced, of hearings. Accordingly, Baraitser insisted that Fitzgerald “reserve his comments” – she, in the true tradition of such processes, had not been supplied, as yet, with the US indictment. This made the entire presence of all the parties at the Westminster Magistrates’ not merely meaningless but decidedly absurd.

Assange’s defence team could draw some cold comfort from Baraitser’s comments that July 27 was the deadline for any further evidence to be adduced by the prosecution before the September extradition hearing. One exception was permitted: psychiatric reports.

The current chief publisher of WikiLeaks **Kristinn Hrafnsson** had [a few choice words](#) for the prosecutors of Wikileaks. “All the alleged events have been known to the prosecution for years. It contains no new charges. What’s really happening here is that despite its decade start the prosecution are still unable to build a coherent case.” The scrapping of the previous indictments [suggested](#) that they were “flagrantly disregarding proper process.”

Assange is facing one of the most disturbing confections put together by any state that claims itself to be free. Should this stratagem work, the publisher will find himself facing the legal proceedings of a country that boasts of having a free press amendment but is keen on excluding him from it. What is even more troubling is the desire to expand the tent of culpability, one that will include press outlets and those who disseminate classified information.

To the next circus instalment we go: a final call-over hearing in Westminster Magistrates’ Court on August 14, then the September 7 extradition hearing, to be held at the Central Criminal Court most of us know as the Old Bailey. Will justice prove blind, or merely blinded?

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