

# Dangerous Detentions: Julian Assange and Remaining in Belmarsh Prison

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Global Research, October 01, 2019

Region: [Europe](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Law and Justice](#)

*Much ink has been spilt in textbooks describing situations where autocratic states can behave badly. They abuse rights; they ignore international law and they ride roughshod over conventions. Liberal democracies may boast that they follow matters to the letter of the law, and make sure that citizens are given their fair and just cause in putting forth their cases. The practice suggests all too glaringly that the opposite is true.*

The English legal tradition, with its historically brutal punishments, adoration of the fetish known as the rule of law, and a particular tendency towards a miscarriage of justice, has found a rich target in **Julian Assange**. Behind the stiffness of procedure and the propriety of convention, cruelties are being justified with grinding regularity.

On September 22, Assange would have been released from HMP Belmarsh, a maximum security centre whose reputation betrays much in the way the authorities wish to handle the publisher. The 50-week jail term imposed for skipping bail was a mild matter relative to others serving life sentences in the prison, but a statement had to be made both to those wishing to emulate Assange and Britain's cousins across the Atlantic. But that term of imprisonment was never meant to be genuinely observed in the scheme of things; its termination merely being a point in a broader scheme of ongoing detention. It was a mere hiccup in a conversation which involves US power. The Washington security establishment is salivating for its quarry, and Britain is playing minder.

This means keeping him in indefinite detention, or at least till US authorities make their case, however unconvincing. At the Westminster Magistrates court hearing on September 13, **District Judge Vanessa Baraitser** [was](#) short and sharp.

*"You have been produced today because your sentence of imprisonment is about to come to an end. When that happens your remand status changes from serving prisoner to a person facing extradition."*

The District Judge explained how she had given Assange's lawyer "an opportunity to make an application for bail on your behalf and she has declined to do so, perhaps not surprising in light of your history of absconding in these proceedings." In that explanation, a cosmos of meaning can be discerned. Any application for bail would have been futile in any case, given that the judge had made up her mind. "In my view I have substantial ground for believing if I release you, you will abscond again."

The judge was also being more than a touch disingenuous. The hearing could not, in any genuine way, be described as a bail hearing, despite being represented as such. It was, in

fact, a [technical hearing](#), meaning that the magistrate had effectively refused bail even before a formal request by the defence. Such tendencies towards premature adjudication do not do the legal profession proud.

The curious reference to “these proceedings” suggested a continuum of prosecution against Assange conflating both Swedish and US attempts to extradite him. His punishment for skipping bail was not connected to the current US case, at least directly, but avoiding the extradition to Sweden in an attempt to question him over allegations of sexual assault.

To the judicial officer, it was all the same picture of reason, the same cheek shown in avoiding the inevitable. Never mind that Assange exercised his rights to asylum, that the reason he fled to the Ecuadorean embassy in 2012 was based on a genuine, and now proven fear, that he could be extradited to the United States to face charges with a cumulative prison time of 175 years. Best bang him up in the cells as a warmer for the US effort, which is set to gather steam for a February extradition hearing.

While Britain continues its immolating ritual in how it leaves the European Union, there are murmurings of protest keeping the matter of Assange’s fate alive. On Saturday, a modest protest took place outside Belmarsh, sporting the staple banners: “Don’t shoot the messenger”; “Free, free Julian Assange”; “Hands off Assange”.

Labour **MP Chris Williamson** was on hand [to address](#) those gathered.

“Here we have a situation where someone who we should be celebrating is facing solitary confinement, which is tantamount to torture taking place on British soil. This cannot be allowed to stand.”

Williamson’s rationale is based on a traditional suspicion of the overreach of US power, and not a view shared by the mainstream plodders in British politics. “We have a moral duty to fight for Julian Assange, whose only crime is to expose war crimes by the US and the abuse of state powers.”

Williamson has also made the [observation](#) that his country has become rather slapdash with its application of legal principle, despite taking some historical pride in defending human rights. “Britain is increasingly behaving like a tin-pot dictatorship in its dealing with him.” While Assange suffers, British politicians, notably those in Camp Brexit, see only one dictatorship: the EU. Their idea of the Sceptred Isle remains pure.

There are accounts about Assange’s failing health that jab and trigger the occasional splash of publicity. Assange’s father, John Shipton, [has described how](#), during a visit in August, his son looked “a bit shaky, and is suffering from anxiety. He has lost a lot of weight. It is very distressing, and the intensity of his treatment has increased over the past year.”

The UN Special Rapporteur, Nils Melzer, has also issued [stirring assessments](#) of Assange’s detention, with its compounding cruelties. “In 20 years of work with victims of war, violence and political prosecution, I have never seen a group of democratic states gang up to deliberately isolate, demonise and abuse a single individual for such a long time and with so little regard for human dignity and the rule of law. The collective punishment of Julian Assange must end here and now.” Sadly, and depressingly for publishers, the process continues, wearily and destructively.

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