

Britain: Don't extradite Julian Assange

Friday 27 May 2022, by [KELLAWAY Dave](#) (Date first published: 20 May 2022).

Dave Kellaway reviews the powerful film on the case of Julian Assange, 'Hacking Justice' which also included a Q&A with Stella Assange, Apsana Begum and the film's director Clara Lopez Rubio.

Yesterday I attended a film showing in central London of **Hacking Justice** that tells the decade long story of Julian Assange, persecuted by the US government for exposing war crimes with his *Wikileaks* organisation. One of his lawyers and now partner, Stella Assange, spoke powerfully after the film. She emphasised that it really was a matter of life and death since she feared for his health if he was forced into what would be a vindictive and repressive US penal system. Stella explained that the US government had successfully appealed the original court ruling that he could not be extradited because of the risks to his wellbeing.

Apparently, new assurances given by the US government have convinced a high court judge that he could be extradited. The ball is now in Home Secretary, Priti Patel's court. She can decide to extradite or not. If she were to do so the Assange campaign can then make another appeal against that ruling. At the moment it is urgent for as much pressure as possible to be put on Patel.

Teresa May, a former Tory Home Secretary did refuse the extradition of Gary McKinnon, another hacker of US government information. McKinnon had Asperger's syndrome and his revelations did not include the video of US army airborne artillery shooting civilians like the one Wikileaks exposed. Priti Patel is not May and her politics is much further to the right, as her proposals for the Royal Navy to push refugee boats back to France demonstrate and more recently her plan to send any migrants who did get through to Rwanda for processing. However pressure on local MPs, including Tories, on a broad democratic, human rights basis, can have some impact even on someone like Patel.

Clara Lopez Rubio's film originally aimed to include a visit to Sweden to examine the allegations against Assange that had complicated his defence. In the end, as she explained in the Q&A after the film she decided to focus on the key members of the defence team. This included the internationally renowned human rights lawyer, Baltasar Garzón [\[1\]](#), who famously tried to get Pinochet indicted in 1998 while he was visiting London for health reasons. Several other women lawyers such as Stella Assange play a leading role too.

Rubio sticks to a straightforward chronology of events marked by meetings and statements to the camera. You see Garzon and the others literally age over time. There is a physical sense of how such defence campaigns are a marathon. It shows how hard the struggle has been, the toll it has taken on Assange and the heroic steadfastness of the team of lawyers supporting him. The film shows the combination of painstakingly detailed legal work and the need for broad-based campaigning. I liked the artistic intervention in Berlin's Alexanderplatz where statues of Edward Snowden, Assange and Chelsea Manning are placed on chairs. There was an empty chair where you could stand and say something or have a photo taken in solidarity.

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Most of all you note the physical and mental effects on Assange. He was obliged to seek asylum in the Ecuadorian London embassy to avoid immediate extradition to the US. Although this was not like Belmarsh's high security, where he is held now, it was not a healthy environment to be under virtual house arrest. You have to be blind or extremely hard-hearted not to recognise the mental and physical burden Assange has taken on in defence of his beliefs. He has paid in flesh and blood for his support for people everywhere to have transparency about what their governments are up to in their name.

We see how he was forcibly removed by the British state from the embassy once the progressive government in Ecuador fell. Since then he has been detained for 4 years - without any criminal charge - in Belmarsh. As his partner movingly explains, he has lost the prime years of his life. Before his various incarcerations, he was at the top of his game as a leading international investigative journalist. Today, he has restricted visiting rights and very basic living conditions. We were informed by Apsana Begum that even MPs are not able to easily visit. For those 4 years, he has been cut off from the outside world.

This film is a useful way of building support for Assange. It has been on public TV in Belgium and Germany and has been seen in over 80 cinemas in France. We should be campaigning for the BBC and other broadcasters to put it on network TV here. You can try and ask your local cinema to put on a showing or even organise your own screening.

A powerful point made by Stella Assange after the film was that once the public knows the facts of the case the defence campaign becomes popular. The international campaign has been reasonably successful in raising money. Recently a number of digital currency holders organised a fund drive and millions were raised. This sounds a lot but the legal battles, if it comes to the US legal system, soak up enormous sums of money. If you showed the average person the video of war crimes exposed by Wikileaks they would sympathise with Assange rather than believe that such transparency puts 'lives at risk'. When pushed to give evidence of military personnel or agents jeopardised the US authorities never really come up with much.

What we should remember is what the Assange case is really about. It represents a real and present risk to anyone who is politically opposed to the US war machine. You risk getting removed by the British government to the US for extreme punishment. It particularly affects journalists, 1800 have written to Priti Patel calling for the extradition to be stopped.

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Members of the Socialist Campaign group of MPs such as John McDonnell, Apsana Begum and Richard Burgon have stood by Assange but Starmer's virulently pro-Nato leadership has remained silent. Starmer in fact has defended the existing extradition treaty [2]. When the Director of Public Prosecutions, Starmer is alleged to have encouraged the Swedish prosecutors [3]. In fact, Labour has form on this, Yvette Cooper, Shadow Home Secretary at the time challenged May to give more evidence on the medical conditions she cited justifying her decision not to extradite McKinnon. Alan Johnson, former Labour Health minister and Home Secretary went even further in criticising the decision [4].

If you need any more convincing or want more detailed information there is an excellent book published by Verso and written by Nils Melzer who was the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture. He makes an appearance in the film and is very convincing since he has long and respected experience in these matters and in the beginning, admits he was quite sceptical about Julian Assange. As John Pilger comments:

"This is a landmark book, the first by a senior international official to call out the criminality of Western governments, and their craven media echoes, in the persecution of Julian Assange. Mark my word, persecution, says Nils Melzer, as well as 'our' responsibility for the ravages inflicted on an heroic man for telling forbidden truths and on democracy itself."

The defence campaign has grown over the years. It was somewhat stymied at the beginning by charges of non-consensual sexual behaviour by the Swedish prosecutors. Assange was always willing to meet the prosecutor in the embassy, as the film details. The charges have since been dropped. Apart from the obvious trap that staying in Sweden would have left him open to extradition by the US the charges helped smear Assange in the eyes of some progressive opinion and made it more difficult at the beginning to build a broad defence campaign. It is truly international with support from well-known human rights defenders like Noam Chomsky, Daniel Ellsberg, Alice Walker and organisations like Amnesty International.

At the moment there are regular pickets outside Belmarsh prison from 12:00 to 2:00 pm every Wednesday.

Other actions you can take:

- Lift his spirits by writejulian.com, Mr Julian Assange, Prisoner #A9379AY, HMP Belmarsh, Western Way, London SE28 0EB
- Tell your MP to free Julian Assange, use the website, writetothem.com
- Donate to his defence fund: crowdjustice.com/case/assangeappeal and to wikileaks.org
- Organise grassroots street actions and campaigns, and send an email to jadc@protonmail.ch for materials, there is a Facebook site, Committee to Defend Julian Assange.
- Put forward a motion in your student union, trade union or Labour party branch, model motions [here](#).

Dave Kellaway

P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 20 May 2022:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/dont-extradite-julian-assange/>
 - Dave Kellaway is on the Editorial Board of Anti*Capitalist Resistance, a member of Socialist Resistance, and Hackney and Stoke Newington Labour Party, a contributor to International Viewpoint and Europe Solidaire Sans Frontieres.
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Footnotes

- [1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baltasar_Garz%C3%B3n
- [2] <https://www.counterfire.org/articles/analysis/20920-starmer-sides-with-trump-against-assange-expect-more-of-the-same-if-he-s-leader>
- [3] <https://skwawkbox.org/2022/02/07/video-starmer-flees-shouts-of-traitor-and-questions-about-targeting-of-assange-and-journalism/>
- [4] <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-19957138>