

# The Campaign to Free Assange: Reflections on Night Falls

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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*The town hall meeting is the last throbbing reminder of the authentic demos. People gather; debates held. Views converge; others diverge. Speakers are invited to stir the invitees, provoke the grey cells. Till artificial intelligence banishes such gatherings, and the digital cosmos swallows us whole, cherish these events.*

And there was much to cherish about [Night Falls in the Evening Lands: The Assange Epic](#), part of a global movement to publicise the importance of freeing WikiLeaks founder, Julian Assange, who remains in the forbidding confines of Belmarsh Prison in London. Held on March 9 in Melbourne's Storey Hall, it was a salutatory minder that the publisher's plight has become one of immediate concern. Worn down by judicial process and jailed by a US surrogate power, he faces a vicious political indictment of 17 charges focused on the Espionage Act of 1917 and one on computer intrusion. A UK High Court appeal on the matter of extradition hangs in the balance.

The thematic nature of such events can be challenging. One should never be too gloomy – and in Assange's case, be it in terms of health, torture, injustice and pondered attempts by US intelligence officials to take his life or kidnap him – there is much to be gloomy about. Bleakness should be allowed, but only in modest, stiff doses. Try, as far as you can, to inject a note of encouraging humour into proceedings. Humour unsettles the tyrannically inclined, punctures the ideologue's confidence. Then reflect, broadly, on the astonishing legacy on the subject and ask that vital question: Where to now?

The sessions, superbly steered through by Mary Kostakidis ("Try to avoid lengthy preambles to your questions, please"), covered a fanned out universe: the nature of "imperial law" and extra-territorial jurisdiction; the stirring role of WikiLeaks in exposing state atrocities; the regenerative tonic Assange had given to an ungrateful, envious Fourth Estate; the healthy emergence of non-mainstream media; and the tactics necessary to convince politicians that

the publisher's release was urgently warranted.

Two speakers were spear-sharp on both the legacy of Assange and what had to be done to secure his release. The Greek former finance minister and rabble-rousing economist, Yanis Varoufakis, was encouraging on both scores. A picture of pugilistic health, Varoufakis pondered "what Julian had taught" him. People forget, Varoufakis reminded his audience, Assange's genius as one of the original cypherpunks, able to build a website that has managed to weather hacking storms and stay afloat in treacherous digital waters. Whistleblowers and leakers could be assured of anonymous contributions to the WikiLeaks website.

He was also impressed by the man's towering, almost holy integrity. As much as they disagreed, he recalled, "and as much as I wanted to throttle the man", he brimmed with intellectual self-worth and value. On the subject of revealing his sources, quite contrary to the spirit and substance of the US indictment, Assange was scrupulous to a fault. To betray any would endanger them.

Most movingly, Varoufakis reflected on his own intellectual awakening when reading Assange's meditations on the internet; how it might, just might, fracture the imperium of information guarded so closely by powerful interests. Finally, the common citizenry would have at their disposal the means of returning the serve on spying and surveillance. The digital mirror would enable us to see what *they* – the state operatives, their goons and their lickspittle adjutants – could see about us. This was as significant to Varoufakis as George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, books he read with some anxiety during the days of Greece's military junta.

On the nature of power – in this case, the menace posed by the US imperium – Australia had to be break free and embrace non-alignment. With characteristic flavour, Varoufakis characterised Washington's exertion of influence over its satellite states as that of a mafia gang: "They manufacture insecurity in order to sell protection." It was a brilliant formulation and goes to the centre of that infantile desire of Australian policy makers to endorse AUKUS, a dangerous military compact with the US and the UK that will mortgage the country to the sum of A\$368 billion.

Even assuming that this arrangement would remain in place, those in the nation's capital, including Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, had to ask the fundamental question on Assange. "Make it a condition of AUKUS that Assange returns to Australia," insisted Varoufakis. "And the powerful will respect you even if you disagree with them." To date, the PM had been a sore disappointment and hardly likely to be respected, even by the near comatose US President Joe Biden.

Virility, however, may be returning. That theme was evidenced in the sharp address from Greg Barns, a seasoned barrister and campaign strategist who has been involved in the WikiLeaks journey since 2012. While drawing attention to the outrageous assertion of extra-territorial jurisdiction by Washington to target Assange, he saw much promise in the political dawn in Canberra. A few years ago, he would never have envisaged being in a room where the Australian Greens leader, Adam Bandt, would be seated next to a fossil fuel advocate and Nationals senator, Matthew Cannavan. "Beside Mr Green sat Mr Coal." Their common purpose: Assange's release and the termination of a state of affairs so unacceptable it is no longer the talk of academic common rooms and specialist fora.

For the audience and budding activists, Barns had sound advice. Pester local political representatives. Arrange meetings, preferably in groups, with the local member. Remind them of the significance of the issue. "Make it an alliance issue." There is nothing more worrying to a backbencher than concerned "traffic" through the electoral office that suggests a shift in voter sentiment. "I will bet good odds that the treatment of Assange has made it into party room discussions," declared Barns with certitude.

In closing, Assange's tireless father, John Shipton, washed his audience with gentle, meditative thoughts. Much like a calming shaman, he journeyed through some of the day's themes, prodding with questions. Was AUKUS a bribe? A tribute? A payment for knowledge? But with optimism, Shipton could feel hope about his son: "Specks of gold" had formed to stir consciousness in the executive. Those in power were at long last listening.

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*Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He currently lectures at RMIT University. He is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG). Email: [bkampmark@gmail.com](mailto:bkampmark@gmail.com)*

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