

Julian Assange: COVID Risks and Campaigns for Pardon

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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Before the January 4 ruling of District Judge Vanessa Baraitser in the extradition case of Julian Assange, the WikiLeaks publisher will continue to endure the ordeal of cold prison facilities while being menaced by a COVID-19 outbreak. From November 18, Assange, along with inmates in House Block 1 at Belmarsh prison in south-east London, were placed in lockdown conditions. The measure was imposed after three COVID-19 cases were discovered.

The response was even more draconian than usual. Exercise was halted; showers prohibited. Meals were to be provided directly to the prisoner's cell. Prison officials described the approach as a safety precaution. "We've introduced further safety measures following a number of positive cases," [stated](#) a Prison Service spokesperson.

Assange's time at Belmarsh is emblematic of a broadly grotesque approach which has been legitimised by the national security establishment. The pandemic has presented another opportunity to knock him off, if only by less obvious means. The refusal of Judge Baraitser to grant him bail, enabling him to prepare his case in conditions of guarded, if relative safety, typifies this approach. "Every day that passes is a serious risk to Julian," [explains](#) his partner, Stella Moris. "Belmarsh is an extremely dangerous environment where murders and suicides are commonplace."

Belmarsh already presented itself as a risk to one's mental bearings prior to the heralding of the novel coronavirus. But galloping COVID-19 infections through Britain's penal system have added another, potentially lethal consideration. On November 24, Moris revealed that some 54 people in Assange's house block had been infected with COVID-19. These included inmates and prison staff. "If my son dies from COVID-19," concluded a distressed Christine Assange, "it will be murder."

The increasing number of COVID-19 cases in Belmarsh has angered the UN Special Rapporteur on torture, Nils Melzer. On December 7, ten years from the day of Assange's first arrest, [he spoke](#) of concerns that 65 out of approximately 160 inmates had tested positive. "The British authorities initially detained Mr. Assange on the basis of an arrest warrant issued by Sweden in connection with allegations of sexual misconduct that have since been formally dropped due to lack of evidence." He was currently being "detained for exclusively preventive purposes, to ensure his presence during the ongoing US extradition trial, a proceeding which may well last several years."

The picture for the rapporteur is unmistakable, ominous and unspeakable. The prolonged suffering of the Australian national, who already nurses pre-existing health conditions, amounts to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Imprisoning Assange was needlessly

brutal. “Mr. Assange is not a criminal convict and poses no threat to anyone, so his prolonged solitary confinement in a high security prison is neither necessary nor proportionate and clearly lacks any legal basis.” Melzer suggested immediate decongestion measures for “all inmates whose imprisonment is not absolutely necessary” especially those, “such as Mr Assange, who suffers from a pre-existing respiratory health condition.”

Free speech advocates are also stoking the fire of interest ahead of Baraitser’s judgment. In *Salon*, Roger Waters, co-founder of Pink Floyd, [penned](#) a heartfelt piece wondering what had happened to the fourth estate. “Where is the honest reporting that we all so desperately need, and upon which the very survival of democracy depends?” Never one to beat about the bush, Waters suggested that it was “languishing in Her Majesty’s Prison Belmarsh.” To extradite Assange would “set the dangerous precedent that journalists can be prosecuted merely for working with inside sources, or for publishing information the government deems harmful.” The better alternative: to dismiss the charges against Assange “and cancel the extradition proceedings in the kangaroo court in London.”

In the meantime, a vigorous campaign is being advanced from the barricades of Twitter to encourage President Donald Trump to pardon Assange. Moris stole the lead with her appeal on Thanksgiving. Pictures of sons Max and Gabriel [were posted](#) to tingle the commander-in-chief’s tear ducts. “I beg you, please bring him home for Christmas.”

Hawaii congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard has added her name to the Free Assange campaign, directing her pointed wishes to the White House. “Since you’re giving pardons to people,” [she declared](#), “please consider pardoning those who, at great personal sacrifice, exposed the deception and criminality in the deep state.”

Pamela Anderson’s approach was somewhat different and, it should be said, raunchily attuned to her audience. She made no qualms donning a bikini in trying to get the president’s attention. “Bring Julian Assange Home Australia,” went her carried sign, tweeted [with a message](#) to Trump to pardon him. Glenn Greenwald, formerly of *The Intercept*, proved more conventional, [niggling](#) Trump about matters of posterity. “By far the most important blow Trump could strike against the abuse of power by CIA, FBI & the Deep State – as well as to impose transparency on them to prevent future abuses – is a pardon of @Snowden & Julian Assange, punished by those corrupt factions for exposing their abuses.” Alan Rusbridger, formerly editor of *The Guardian*, [agrees](#).

While often coupled with Assange in the pardoning stakes, Edward Snowden [has been clear](#) about his wish to see the publisher freed. “Mr. President, if you grant only one act of clemency during your time in office, please: free Julian Assange. You alone can save his life.” As well meant as this is, Trump’s treasury of pardons is bound to be stocked by other options, not least for himself.

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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Kampmark](#)

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