

Time is running out for Julian Assange. If MPs do not act, how can they say they value free speech?



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A lifesize bronze statue of him appeared in Parliament Square over the weekend but the real Julian Assange could very shortly be taken, handcuffed and protesting, from Belmarsh prison in London and flown off to a high security jail in the US.

The statue, created by the Italian sculptor Davide Dormino, stood alongside two others, of Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, at a rally to remind us that Assange's extradition could now be very imminent. Manning, of course, was the former US soldier who leaked the damning information that Assange published through WikiLeaks; Edward Snowden waits in Russia to see whether all the talk of the sanctity of free speech in his country amounts to more than words.

The very last message I received from Daniel Ellsberg before he died earlier this month was about Assange. Having risked his own freedom so bravely in 1971 with his revelations about the Vietnam war, Ellsberg was one of Assange's most vocal supporters, not least because he identified with what he had done to expose what had been happening in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. He argued that if the case against Assange went ahead, "any journalist anywhere in the world could now be extradited to the US for exposing information classified in the US".

Along with Alice Walker and Noam Chomsky, Ellsberg had called on the US president, Joe Biden, to halt the extradition, saying: "Biden's justice department, which has proclaimed a renewed commitment to press freedom, could end these proceedings at any moment." After all, it was Biden, when still a Democrat senator, who campaigned against the extradition of IRA suspects to the UK to face trial. He did so on the grounds that to allow it would mean "admitting that the justice system in Northern Ireland is fair – a notion I absolutely abhor".

Biden could indeed act but then so could our own politicians. Stella Assange, Julian's wife and the mother of his two young children, said at the Parliament Square rally, "We're really at the endgame now ... we have to free him. His life depends on it." The Labour MPs John McDonnell, the former shadow chancellor, and Apsana Begum spoke at the gathering but only a few other MPs have campaigned on his behalf. Richard Burgon, MP for Leeds East, says that Assange is "being persecuted for exposing US war crimes ... a blatant attack on journalism". Where are all those MPs who voted last month for the passing of the Conservative government's Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act, aimed at fighting what is portrayed as "cancel culture" in universities? What is extradition if not an extreme form of cancellation?

Those Conservative MPs who may feel this is just something for lefties and liberals to worry about should read the recent article by Peter Hitchens in the Mail on Sunday, in which he reprised his powerful 2020 attack on what he described as a "lawless kidnap" and a "basic violation of our national sovereignty". He added, "It is unimaginable that the US would hand over to us any of its citizens who had been accused of leaking British secret documents ... yet if Mr Assange is sent to face trial in the US, any British journalist who comes into possession of classified material from the US, though he has committed no crime according to our own law, faces the same danger." For all those MPs anxious that Britain should always "take back control", here is a perfect way to do so.

Assange has now served four years in Belmarsh without trial, not to mention the years he spent in the Ecuadorian embassy where his private moments with his wife and family were shamefully filmed and spied on. It is still unclear what sort of conditions he would be held in if extradited, but the publication in the Guardian last month of Abu Zubaydah's illustrations of the torture and degradation that he and others were subjected to in Guantánamo Bay should be a chilling reminder of what can still happen to political prisoners under the jurisdiction of the US.

Parliament Square is a site that celebrates in statue form such heroic figures as Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. The statue closest to those of the trio erected at the weekend was that of the suffragist Millicent Fawcett, with the famous quotation beneath it: "Courage calls to courage everywhere." As the final act in this saga approaches, the judiciary could still show the courage that has so far failed them. If they do not, then the home secretary, Suella Braverman, can still step in and demonstrate the same independence Theresa May showed in halting the extradition of the hacker Gary McKinnon in 2012. But if our judges and politicians fail to end this charade, then please can we be spared the hypocrisy of concerns about "cancel culture" and any grandstanding about the importance of free speech?

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