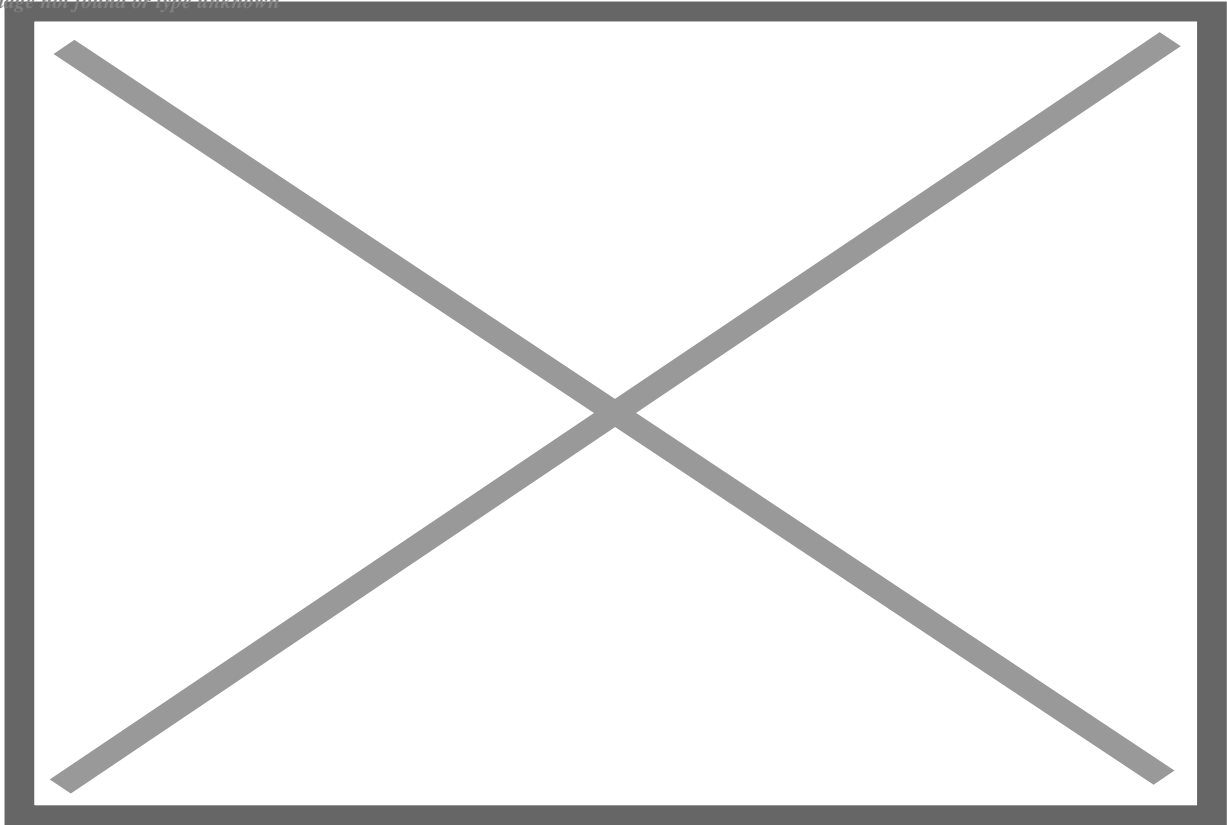


Ultra right-wing British journalist Peter Hitchens strongly opposes extradition of Julian Assange

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PETER HITCHENS: I have no time for Julian Assange but I MUST beg you to join me in opposing his shameful handover to the US. Only one person can stop it now

By PETER HITCHENS FOR THE DAILY MAIL

It could happen any day now. After yet another brief, unsuccessful court hearing, a column of vans and police cars roars out of Belmarsh prison in London and hurries to Heathrow, where a manacled, stooped and blinking prisoner is handed over to American officials and bundled aboard a plane bound for Washington DC.

There he will face the strong possibility of decades buried alive in some federal dungeon, the sort of place intended for mass murderers or terrorists. But the man involved is neither of these things.

This will be an irrevocable and shameful event, against which all patriotic, freedom-loving people in this country should be ranged.

But by the time most of us have realised what has happened, it will be over. So now is the moment to act.

I must beg you to join me, as soon as you can, in protesting against the fast-approaching extradition of Julian Assange to the USA.

I am sorry to say I do not believe he will receive justice when he gets there. I simply cannot see why our supposedly independent courts have so far permitted this, when the extradition is so blatantly political – something clearly banned under the UK-US Extradition Treaty.

I am astonished at how few people in Parliament or the media have spoken out against this grave injustice.

I am amazed that it should have fallen to me – a person who has no great love for Mr Assange or his politics – to speak for him. The only time we ever met, in debate, we clashed angrily. But his extradition would be an outrage.

He faces absurd charges of spying, when he never spied. His crime was to embarrass the US government by selectively releasing information that Washington had tried and failed to keep secret. I do not think this is a crime, here or there.

Claims are made against him, by supporters of the extradition, which I do not think are true.

He took considerable care not to release material which would endanger or compromise individuals, and if he were an American citizen he would certainly be protected by the First Amendment to the US Constitution, which safeguards journalists – as Mr Assange is – from the anger of the state.

It is almost three years since I asked here: 'Do we really want the hand of a foreign power to be able to reach into our national territory at will and pluck out anyone it wants to punish?'

Are we still even an independent country if we allow this? The Americans would certainly not let us treat them in this way.'

The question is perhaps more urgent now we have seen the dismissive way in which President Biden has twice treated our Prime Minister.

Do we think that the Biden White House will be nicer to us if we do their bidding over Julian Assange? Or just even more contemptuous than they are already?

As France's mighty Charles de Gaulle proved long ago, the Americans treat independent nations much better if they stand up to them than if they suck up to them.

I also explained exactly why this is a political extradition, a case I have never seen answered: for a start, different US administrations have taken opposite views, clear proof that it is about politics above all.

Prosecutors working for the Obama White House (2009-2017) decided, for legal reasons, not to prosecute Mr Assange almost a decade ago.

They concluded that charging him would have meant they would then have to prosecute any journalist who published information alleged to endanger national security. That would have violated the US constitution.

Under Donald Trump's rule, US policy veered wildly. In April 2017, US Attorney General Jeff Sessions declared that the arrest of Mr Assange was now a 'priority'.

Yet at one point Donald Trump himself had said, 'I love WikiLeaks' and rejoiced that the source was 'like a treasure trove'.

Mike Pompeo, Trump's director of the Central Intelligence Agency, later promoted to the even higher office of Secretary of State, said on April 13, 2017, of Mr Assange and his WikiLeaks colleagues: 'They have pretended that America's First Amendment freedoms shield them from justice. They may have believed that, but they are wrong.' He added: 'Julian Assange has no First Amendment freedoms... he's not a US citizen.'

He also made a long and excoriating personal denunciation of Mr Assange and WikiLeaks.

If any British official or Minister of similar standing had made these statements about a person accused of a crime in a UK court, the trial would have to be stopped on the grounds that it had been hopelessly prejudiced.

Yet our courts are apparently ready to pass Mr Assange over to a justice system, in my view gravely inferior to ours, where this is acceptable.

Only one person stands between Mr Assange and this hole-in-corner handover. The Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, can – if she chooses – refuse to hand him over.

There is a precedent for this. One of her forerunners, Theresa May, did so in the case of Gary McKinnon, who had hacked into US defence computers, saying: 'Mr McKinnon's extradition would give rise to such a high risk of him ending his life that a decision to extradite would be incompatible with Mr McKinnon's human rights.'

Britain faced no adverse consequences as a result.

I think Lady May deserves great credit. I think Ms Braverman, likewise, would deserve much credit for courage and compassion – and justice – if she halted the extradition and allowed Mr Assange to go home to his wife and two small children.

If you agree with me, please write, politely and briefly, and soon, to The Rt Hon Suella Braverman MP, Home Secretary, the Home Office, 2 Marsham Street, London SW1P 4DF.

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