

“This ain’t a nice place to be: This ain’t Belmarsh, it’s Hellmarsh”

ITV documentary reveals conditions in prison holding WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange

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The two-part *Welcome to HMP Belmarsh*, which first aired on ITV on January 13 and 20, marks the first-time television cameras have been allowed inside the high security prison.

At a time when Belmarsh is under renewed scrutiny as “Britain’s Guantanamo,” holding the world’s highest profile political prisoner, Julian Assange, the ITV programme was intended to serve as a public relations piece. Even so, it managed to say more than it intended about appalling conditions inside the prison.

The programme was presented by actor Ross Kemp, who has produced several documentaries on gangs, armed police, and British military deployed in Afghanistan trading on his “hardman” image. He is a prominent Labour supporter but was formerly married to media oligarch Rupert Murdoch’s trusted deputy, Rebekah Brooks.

After the two-part series broadcast, Kemp was asked repeatedly on social media about Julian Assange. It seems that he did ask to interview Assange, but the WikiLeaks founder—subjected to a relentless campaign of public mobbing by the world’s press—refused to take part, no doubt fearing a stitch-up. Nonetheless, Assange was the subtext to everything shown and discussed.

Belmarsh was built in 1991 as Britain’s first “supermax” jail. It was particularly intended for prisoners regarded as a “threat to national security.” London’s first new men’s prison for a century was designed with specific provisions for holding terrorists, including a bomb-proof tunnel to nearby Woolwich Crown Court.

The programme mentioned several times the high number of Category A prisoners held there, and the frequent violent confrontations between inmates. Category A, the highest security category, is for prisoners “whose escape would be highly dangerous to the public or national security.”

Within its general design, Belmarsh includes a dedicated High Security Unit (HSU), described as a “prison within a prison.” This has housed prisoners regarded as the greatest risk, including KGB operatives, al Qaeda members and leaders, and international drug lords involved in organised crime and money-laundering (one of whom is interviewed). It has also been used to house violently anti-Islamic and fascist thugs, including Finsbury Park mosque killer Darren Osborne.

Aiden James, charged with joining an anti-ISIS Kurdish militia,

is also held in Belmarsh, alongside men convicted of fighting for ISIS. Such proximity, like the large concentration of rival gang members in the prison’s confined space, makes Belmarsh an intensely violent and dangerous place.

Warders showed Kemp the daily conflict lists, showing the assessed threat of violence between prisoners. One prisoner explained the risks inmates face in stepping from their cell each day. Because of its high security status, he said, “You’d think Belmarsh would be one of the jails you’d be safe in ... Far from that.”

In the past 12 months, three prisoners have died inside Belmarsh. On January 2, remand prisoner Liridon Saliuka was found dead in his cell, with relatives challenging official claims that he died from “self-inflicted” injuries (a fact not referred to by Kemp).

In 2009, the Chief Inspector of British Prisons noted an “extremely high” amount of force used against prisoners, with detainees reporting intimidation, threats and assault by staff. The inspector’s 2018 report noted that many of its recommended “improvements” had not been implemented, and some “outcomes to have been poorer than last time.”

HSU has its own dedicated segregation unit, described by the HSU governor as “the end of the world.” Kemp noted that this cell contained no bed and had no access to water.

The jail’s capabilities and planned purposes raises the obvious question of why it is being used to detain Assange, a journalist who has not been convicted of any crime and who is remanded in custody solely in relation to an extradition request from the US government aimed at silencing his award-winning journalism exposing war crimes and other illegal activities by governments in the US, Britain and Australia.

Perhaps to deflect this question, the programme repeatedly portrayed Belmarsh as being equipped to take any and every kind of prisoner. Along with high security prisoners, Belmarsh also houses a general prison population. Charlie Pope and his brothers, for example, are all repeat offenders from nearby Woolwich who have been in Belmarsh on several occasions. They describe the prison as “our local.”

This focus on the general population may have been aimed at normalising Belmarsh for the viewer, but it served to expose a wider social crisis. The Popes grew up in a family environment of drugs and petty crime. Charlie is shown signing up to a business

start-up programme in the hope of breaking the cycle of reoffending. It will only take one of the brothers to change their life for them all to do it, they say.

The programme Charlie Pope signs up to is crushingly cynical, its founder declaring that “People in prison are naturally entrepreneurial.” Pope is removed from the course following his involvement in a fight.

The programme also follows a “gang school,” which brings together members of rival gangs in an effort to get them to share their common problems. This was not shown in any detail, perhaps because the gang members were so blunt about seeing crime as an alternative to poverty: “I don’t want to be broke.”

Nearly one third of those leaving prison have nowhere to go and end up homeless, with some reoffending so they will have a place to sleep. It is commented in passing that housing and employment are the best options for getting people out of jails and keeping them out, but the programme showed only a firefighting exercise.

Mental health issues are worsening in UK prisons, while a drug crisis is escalating around the synthetic cannabinoid Spice. Underscoring the appalling conditions, one Pope brother describes Spice, which renders users catatonic, as “the worst drug,” but the “best” in prison.

Kemp’s documentary was concerned to show Belmarsh with a human face, with warders expressing their concern for some prisoners. Focus was placed in particular on staff interacting sympathetically with Claire Darbyshire, the prison’s only transgender inmate who was sent to a male prison because she was pre-operative. Darbyshire suffocated her father, who suffered from multiple-sclerosis, in what she claimed was both a mercy killing and a suicide pact that she failed to follow up on.

Similarly, warders were shown being sensitive towards 20-year-old Liam Waters. Transferred to Belmarsh following a riot in his local prison, Waters is made to wear distinctive escape-list garb. He looks fearful and small in his oversized prison issue and undersized flipflops, telling Kemp he knew that Belmarsh was “one of the most dangerous places.”

Notably, Kemp’s programme heavily promoted the prison’s healthcare wing. Belmarsh has the largest healthcare service of any UK prison, with Kemp describing prison doctor Rachel Daly as his “hero.” Daly spoke of the prison’s healthcare as duplicating “the NHS”—a claim belied by the documentary’s footage.

With mental health issues spiralling, Daly and her staff were shown fighting a rear-guard action for prisoner health. When Aiden James, who suffers PTSD following his experiences in Syria, began self-harming again, Daly was shown struggling to find him a bed in the health unit.

Despite going unmentioned, Assange’s deteriorating health and the concerns of independent medical professionals about his effective solitary confinement in the healthcare unit hung silently over the programme. Assange has now been moved to another part of the prison following protests from his legal team, campaign groups and, most strikingly, fellow prisoners.

While silent on these matters, Kemp’s programme featured several interviews with fascist poster-boy Tommy Robinson, detained in Belmarsh for contempt of court after attempting to collapse a serious rape trial.

Much of the programme smacked of free publicity for Robinson’s self-promoting claims of political martyrdom.

His transfer to Belmarsh was depicted as presenting a challenge for prison governor Rob Davis, forcing him into a delicate balancing act of maintaining peace among inmates while ensuring Robinson’s safety. The programme shows the friendly relations between governor Davis and Robinson, who spends his short time in Belmarsh in a relatively luxurious solitary suite and is released nine weeks early.

In one of the only mentions of Assange in the entire programme, sacks of mail for Robinson are shown alongside a smaller batch destined for Assange. The clear aim is to suggest that Assange, unlike Robinson, has little public support.

Kemp tells his viewers, apparently without irony, that Belmarsh has “so far” kept Robinson free from publicity.

Davis is shown visiting a smirking Robinson in his cell after press reports he had been attacked in prison showers by an old age pensioner. In fact, Kemp’s interviews with Robinson mirror the saturation media promotion for Robinson’s every move.

Robinson is presented as a pathetic figure, crying about his desperate plight in “solitary”—prompting Kemp to say, “It’s not solitary confinement, as in terms of the cooler. It’s not a box with nothing in it. You’ve got a TV. You’ve got a kettle.”

Nevertheless, despite his stated reluctance to give a platform to the fascist thug, Kemp felt he “had to” ask Robinson about the protest called by his supporters outside the prison. Robinson made clear this was another anti-Muslim provocation, saying he might call on them to broadcast videos of the prophet Muhammad.

Inside a control room, prison officers view footage of the protest outside via multiple CCTV screens, zooming in to identify individuals of interest. Davis tells Kemp, “Any demonstration outside the prison puts my staff at risk.” Doubtless this particular scene will have been watched with interest by those—including “yellow vest” protesters from France—who have attended recent rallies for Assange outside the prison.



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