

UK: Johnson's mendacious defence of media "freedom", while Assange remains imprisoned

Julie Hyland
16 June 2021

Footage of BBC *Newsnight's* political editor Nick Watt being chased and abused by anti-lockdown demonstrators in Whitehall, central London on Monday evening has gone viral.

The protest of several dozen had gathered in the run-up to Prime Minister Boris Johnson's announcement that the lifting of the final, limited Covid-19 social distancing measures would be delayed from the scheduled June 21 for up to four weeks.

A masked Watt—who was wearing a BBC lanyard—was rounded on by the crowd when they realised he was a journalist. He was pursued by several angry people, with one shouting "traitor" repeatedly. As Watt attempted to move away, another man pushes the journalist, shouting in his face. Watt was forced to turn around and run towards Downing Street as he is chased behind the security barriers, with people shouting, "shame on you" and "how can it be legal to lock people in their houses?"

Many sharing the video were justifiably angry at the harassment of the journalist. *Newsnight* editor, Esme Wren, said "All journalists should be able to do their work without impediment or risking their safety."

The condemnation by Prime Minister Boris Johnson in contrast is both hypocritical and mendacious. In a tweet, Johnson declared, "Disgraceful to see the hounding of Nick Watt doing his job. The media must be able to report the facts without fear or favour—they are the lifeblood of our democracy."

Johnson leads a government that is continuing the vicious persecution of Julian Assange, WikiLeaks founder and multi-award-winning journalist. Alongside Chelsea Manning, he was responsible for the publication of the Iraq and Afghan war logs and the US diplomatic cables in 2010 and the Guantanamo files in 2011, which exposed war crimes, torture, coup plots and corruption by the US and its allies across the globe.

For these heroic endeavours, Assange has spent more than a decade victimised, slandered and imprisoned on trumped up allegations. April 11 marked two years since he was seized from the Ecuadorian Embassy. Upon Assange's arrest, Johnson tweeted, "It's only right that Julian Assange finally faces justice. Credit to foreign office officials who have worked

tirelessly to secure this outcome."

He has since then been imprisoned in London's Belmarsh maximum-security prison, fighting extradition to the US, where he faces a potential 175-year sentence for charges under the Espionage Act.

This is despite judge Vanessa Baraitser ruling in January that Assange's extradition would be "oppressive" by virtue of his mental health and risk of suicide in the US prison system. Nonetheless, the degrading show trial upheld all other aspects of the US government's hounding of the internationally renowned journalist.

His continued detention flouts all democratic and judicial norms. Assange has been denied bail while the Biden Democrat administration continues the inhuman efforts to silence the whistle-blower, taking over from Donald Trump.

The only charge he faces has been ruled out of order by a British court, yet he remains behind bars. This is the latest in a series of repeated and flagrant abrogating of his legal rights—including denying him access to his lawyer and materials necessary for his defence, strip searches and the ongoing disregard for his health, especially his vulnerability given his respiratory condition to the spread of COVID-19 in Belmarsh.

Stella Moris, Assange's partner, recently described him as "barely hanging on inside Belmarsh... this feels like an endless punishment. At times he is in such despair he thinks he is a burden, so suicide is a very real fear." Assange's father and brother, John and Gabriel Shipton, are currently touring the US to build support for his freedom, if the UK judge allows the US government's appeal. This is a real danger, especially given Johnson's efforts to mend relations with the Biden administration post-Brexit.

The treatment of Assange is state-orchestrated and sanctioned torture, easily equivalent to any meted out against journalists in countries routinely denounced as "authoritarian" and "anti-democratic" by the British government. Its implications for press freedom and journalistic safety more broadly are chilling.

That Johnson can tweet supposedly in defence of Watt while perpetrating the criminalisation of Assange speaks to the

atrophying of any constituency for democratic rights within the bourgeoisie.

Indeed, on June 10 parliament hosted a debate on the “safety of journalists”. It lasted less than 60 minutes, with just 14 MPs participating. The brief contributions were determined far more by Britain’s strategic geo-political interests than any real concern for the professed subject.

Hence, only one reference was made to Israel’s bombing of the media tower in Gaza housing the offices of Al Jazeera, the Associated Press (AP) and other outlets just three weeks prior. And only two MPs referenced the case of Assange—Labour’s John McDonnell and Richard Burgon.

This consisted of mealy-mouthed references to Assange’s imprisonment being a “continuing stain” on Britain’s “reputation” and appeals to Biden to “do the right thing.” Meanwhile, the Labour Party, to which both obsequiously defer, is led by Sir Keir Starmer who, as Director of Public Prosecution 2008-2013, was head of the Crown Prosecution Service that helped fast track Assange’s extradition and, according to leaked emails from August 2012, advised the Swedish legal team considering whether to continue pursuing Assange, “Don’t you dare get cold feet.”

As for the anti-lockdown protestors that intimidated Watt, they have been energised by the Johnson government’s own “herd immunity” policy and attack on scientists and honest reporting of the pandemic. Having been forced into lockdown in March due to public pressure, the government—with Labour’s support—has systematically withdrawn most social distancing measures. Schools and most workplaces are fully reopened to recoup the profits of the corporations and super-rich at the expense of workers’ lives and health, as Johnson made good on his pledge in October that there must be “no more f***ing lockdowns—let the bodies pile high in their thousands”.

Amongst those haranguing Watt was a supporter from Resistance GB. According to the *Times*, the anti-lock down, “pro-freedom” group was established by former Tory councillor, William Coleshill, “who was suspended from the party for making ‘racist remarks’.”

On Wednesday, a 57-year-old man was charged with threatening, abusive or insulting behaviour. But the reality is that the calls by the likes of Resistance GB to “Open the UK for business now,” has significant backing in parliament, particularly the Tory Party.

Those such as Jacob Rees-Mogg are vocal in opposing Johnson’s limited extension of certain social distancing measures, arguing “You can’t run society just to stop hospitals being full, otherwise you’d never let us get in our cars and drive anywhere... The Government doesn’t have the right to take charge of people’s lives purely to prevent them seeing the doctor.”

In parliament on Monday, Health Secretary Matt Hancock, said “It’s clear that a goal of eradication of this virus is

impossible. Therefore, we must learn to live with it and how we can live our normal lives with this virus.”

The *Daily Telegraph* rivalled Johnson for the most hypocritical defence of Watt, calling his treatment “disgraceful” just one day after denouncing the decision to delay the end of the last public health restrictions as an attack on the inalienable right to freedom. The paper published opinion pieces including, “It doesn’t matter what you say, Prime Minister-June 21 will still be our Freedom Day”, “Boris is right: we need to learn to live with Covid. So why not now?” and “Boris is still paying the price for the original sin of locking down”.

This is said as figures show the more contagious Delta variant now account for more than 90 percent of all positive tests in the UK, a 50 percent increase in one week. Infections are at the highest level since February, despite 40 percent of the population being fully vaccinated.

Just days before Johnson’s retreat, new modelling for the government’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) committee of experts highlighted the danger of a “substantial third wave” of infections and hospitalisations. The Imperial College Covid-19 Response Team has also warned that cases are growing rapidly and could lead to deaths on a similar level as in winter. Officially, more than 152,000 people have died from Covid-19 and deaths are rising, albeit slowly for the moment. Johnson has insisted, however, that he is “confident we won’t need [to delay the lifting of all restrictions] more than four weeks”.

The persecution of Assange and the exposure of workers and their families to a deadly and resurgent virus are the twin prongs of bourgeois class rule. At the same time the western imperialist powers are spewing the poison of the Wuhan lab lie in preparation for military confrontations with China, they declare openly that working people must “live” with Covid-19—that is, die or suffer prolonged ill-health—to satiate the greed of the financial oligarchy.

The defence of democratic rights, opposition to war and the implementation of emergency measures to eradicate the virus depend on the mobilisation of the international working class for the overthrow of capitalism and the building of a socialist world.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)