

## INTRODUCTION

The first snow arrived early in London in 2010, dusting Westminster with a white blanket on the morning of 7 December, the sun had broken through grey cloud cover, making life a little more bearable for those who had begun queuing in the street since well before dawn.

Outside the drab, 1970s City of Westminster Magistrates Court the first television crews were setting up behind steel barricades, separated from the passersby who were already hurrying to work. Back home that night, viewers around the world would be entertained and intrigued by the goings-on that would take place there later in the day. A couple of centuries ago, not far from where the courts now stand in Horseferry Road, there were public floggings to keep the crowds amused. Now they gawped at a new kind of entertainment: 24-hour news, and its bottomless appetite for sensation and celebrity.

In Julian Assange they had both. His WikiLeaks organisation had stunned the world with its sensational exposés of leaked material,

## INTRODUCTION

culminating in ‘Cablegate’—thousands of classified diplomatic dispatches from US embassies around the world that gave an extraordinary insight into American foreign policy: from spying on the UN to how Arab nations wanted Washington to bomb Iran. It was the biggest single leak in history.

In the furore that followed there were calls for Assange to be hunted down and even assassinated; in the United States, Vice President Joe Biden had called him a ‘high-tech terrorist’. Adding to the clamour, Assange was wanted in Sweden to answer allegations of ‘suspected rape and sexual molestation’ by two women—resulting in an Interpol arrest warrant for him to be extradited to answer the accusations.

Earlier that morning, Assange’s lawyers had phoned to say that he would be handing himself in, at North London’s Kentish Town Police Station, an event somewhat quaintly known as ‘arrest by appointment’. It was close to the journalists’ Frontline Club, where Assange had stayed in Paddington. The club name might suggest it’s only for foreign correspondents but its well-stocked bar and convivial atmosphere attract a wide range of members. It says much about the powers of investigative journalism that, despite Assange’s appearance at the club to announce one of WikiLeaks’ biggest secret document drops, no one thought to look for him there when he was supposedly ‘in hiding’.

Understandably concerned about his safety, WikiLeaks had played games with the media, putting out false stories about his whereabouts. One newspaper reported he might be in Abu Dhabi; his media assistant’s mobile said she was out of the country. By 9.25 a.m. that same day the games were over and Julian Assange was on his way to a

## INTRODUCTION

less glamorous location to fight attempts by Sweden to extradite him on the sex allegations.

Though clearly eager to defend himself against the sexual allegations, they weren't Assange and his legal team's principal concern. He was more worried about possible extradition from Sweden to the United States, where the Obama administration was investigating the possibility of prosecuting him for espionage. In raising the likelihood that, charged with spying, Assange could face the death penalty in the United States, his lawyers were pushing his case to the limits.

The journey to court took Assange on a tour past some of WikiLeaks' most powerful targets, down Whitehall and past the Downing Street, once home of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who was forced to defend the disclosure that his government had promised to protect US interests during an inquiry into the Iraq war. On the opposite side of the road stood the massive Ministry of Defence headquarters, with its bluff, off-white exterior.

Assange had posted the Ministry of Defence's Manual for Security on the WikiLeaks site. It put journalists in the same category as foreign intelligence services, criminals, terrorist groups and disaffected staff when it came to posing threats to the security of the country. In his present predicament it was hardly a comforting thought. Further south came the imperial neoclassical splendour of Thames House, the home of Britain's counterintelligence organisation MI5. Assange had given them a diplomatic headache by upsetting Britain's oldest ally, the United States, and exposing deception in its prosecution of war. He'd revealed the grim truth about America's invasion of Iraq, exposing potential war crimes, the torturing of Iraqi prisoners and revealing the true number of civilian casualties Washington had

## INTRODUCTION

so carefully kept from the public. As the MI5 building disappeared in the rear window, the car turned into the court's underground car park. The seven and a half kilometre journey had taken just nineteen minutes. For the next five hours, Assange sat in the bowels of the building in one of the twenty-nine 'holding cells' used for male prisoners about to appear before the court.

At a little after 2 p.m., following a hectic morning dealing with Tube fare-dodgers and traffic infringements, the court was ready for Julian Assange. The man in the neatly pressed dark suit and off-white shirt looked strangely out of place. His pasty face, synonymous with his challenge to authority, had made him one of the most recognisable people in the world. Yet here he was, as far from the freedoms he claimed for others as it was possible to get. In an area looking more like a terrorist's top security pen than a court, Assange stood confined behind the reinforced transparent bars of a small cage in the far corner of the room, whispering through the gaps to talk to his lawyer.

The maximum number of journalists allowed in the court is twenty-five. By the time Julian Assange entered nearly fifty had shoehorned themselves in. Like rival football crowds, the journalists had separated themselves: the reserved dowdy British on one side, the comparatively excitable blond Swedes a good distance away. They'd sparred outside in the corridor about the various rights and wrongs of the Swedish case—neither side letting the facts get in the way of a good argument. The French sat in the middle, clearly delighted by the story of politics, power and sex unfolding in the courtroom.

Assange's legal representative Mark Stephens, in a grey pin-striped suit and dark patterned tie, listened intently as Judge Howard Riddle

## INTRODUCTION

began Assange's bail hearing for an extradition case not scheduled to start until February 2011. Stephens is known in the trade as a media lawyer. It is not a kind description. There were questions about whether he was wearing more make-up than his sharp-minded and telegenic offsider, Jennifer Robinson, an Australian lawyer who made up for what Stephens lacked in finesse. Behind them sat the supporters, including a solicitor and a high-ranking academic. Never one to miss a good campaign, John Pilger, the Australian journalist whose exposés of government wrongdoing are legendary, listened intently, having earlier given the judge the benefit of his legal assessment. Pilger who, like Assange's other high-profile supporters offered £20 000 (AUD\$31 600) bail, told Judge Riddle in a cadence normally reserved for well-rehearsed TV pieces to camera: 'These charges against him in Sweden are absurd and were judged absurd by a senior Swedish prosecutor.' This was true, but another prosecutor had found that there was a case to answer—which was why Interpol had issued a warrant for his arrest.

Julian Assange, the once obscure Australian computer hacker, had become—through design or default—the biggest cause célèbre of the decade.

So who was this extraordinary individual who now threatened the political and military establishment of the world's most powerful nation? He had no fixed address, often dressed himself in worn-out, second-hand clothes, and travelled the world economy class with just a backpack and a computer. Like a beggar from the Buddhist philosophy he apparently once embraced, Assange repeatedly relies on the WikiLeaks community for sustenance. He developed the unusual habit of turning up at friends' places unannounced and

## INTRODUCTION

staying for sometimes days on end. ‘He’d just come out of nowhere and flop for a few days ... then he’d be gone’, according to one acquaintance. He’d been known to eat discarded takeaway food, fast going cold, with the question: ‘Has everyone finished with this?’ On any particular night he would stay with friends who he said loved and cared for him.

Yet he had marshalled hundreds of people around the world to work for WikiLeaks for free—supporting the organisation and its banks of secret computer servers that hosted some of the most sensitive, highly classified information in the world. And he’d done it very quickly. It would be wrong to think that WikiLeaks has been an overnight sensation—it has been a long time in the making. But it is also true that in just four years, WikiLeaks had produced an impressive strike record. At the start, however, its releases had been revelatory, rather than revolutionary.

In its short history, WikiLeaks had attracted serious attention and admiration, in particular from one of the world’s most celebrated whistleblowers, Daniel Ellsberg. It was Ellsberg whose dump of classified material in the early 1970s, known as the Pentagon Papers, revealed how repeated US administrations had lied about their conduct of the Vietnam War. Ellsberg had paid a high price for being so outspoken—he was the first person in the US ever to be prosecuted for leaking to the media. And, he points out, the first person to be accused of espionage for ‘revealing information to the American public’.

Ellsberg was called The Most Dangerous Man in America by President Nixon’s national security advisor, Henry Kissinger. Now Ellsberg, an articulate and energetic seventy-nine years old, was passing

## INTRODUCTION

on the baton to Assange—and going one step further. He agreed that Assange was a ‘good candidate for being the most dangerous man in the world’ and he should be ‘quite proud of that’. He also had some advice for Assange. He was ‘not safe physically wherever he is’.

Ellsberg knew first-hand how unsafe it is to make enemies in high places in Washington. At the height of the Pentagon Papers drama, the Nixon White House sent a CIA-sanctioned hit squad to ‘permanently incapacitate’ him. There were reports that the Pentagon had drawn together a group of operatives to track Assange down, using the vast array of America’s intelligence-gathering and surveillance machinery in an attempt to trap him.

Assange’s WikiLeaks’ message was simple yet unsettling for his political opponents, and particularly for those who saw his WikiLeaks website as anti-American. The enigmatic Assange strongly believed in the US Constitution’s First Amendment that enshrined freedom of speech. ‘We are, if you like, enforcing the First Amendment around the world,’ he said. The Most Dangerous Man in the World would be campaigning on a platform of free speech for all—a noble, but dangerous course. But then Assange has seldom shied away from danger. His two biggest qualities are ‘He stands up for what he believes in’ and, as one of his friends confided, ‘He enjoys taking risks’.

The problem, in Assange’s view, was the veil of secrecy surrounding government: ‘The citizenry have a right to scrutinise the state.’ But the question of what to publish and what not to publish would be an issue that would return time and again to haunt WikiLeaks as it fought to define itself in the uncharted waters of whistleblowing in cyberspace and journalism.

## INTRODUCTION

Much of the debate would settle around WikiLeaks' legitimacy as a media organisation deserving the same privileges as any other, including newspapers, in the way it operates with respect to leaked material and the protection of sources. It's a grey and slippery area for newcomers.

The way WikiLeaks arrived on the world stage in early 2010 proved it was no ordinary media organisation. It posted a leaked video of a US military helicopter killing unarmed civilians in a Baghdad street and provocatively called it 'Collateral Murder'. When we tracked Assange down in Melbourne for an interview for ABC TV's Foreign Correspondent program, he was keen to lay out his views about the old media, much of which he described as 'stillborn'—in other words, dead. He wanted to build a more open relationship with the public where they too, not just the journalists, could see the raw data and make their own decisions.

The gunship video, showing US troops killing unarmed civilians, had been part of that, but the title 'Collateral Murder' drew fierce criticism that WikiLeaks had a hidden agenda. Assange was making steadfast enemies, particularly in the US military. He seemed well aware of that, and moved around and slept in a different house almost every night.

Seven months later he wasn't hiding out anymore, but living in a friend's English country mansion in Norfolk—confined and under surveillance and curfew as part of his bail conditions while he waited for the Swedish extradition hearings to start. As we sat eating quiche and drinking tea in the kitchen of the rambling manor, the editor-in-chief of WikiLeaks had the air of an exiled country squire. A few hours earlier, outside the local police station Assange



## INTRODUCTION

attended as part of his bail conditions, he had been asked whether he thought his life would ever return to normal. 'I hope not,' he replied. Julian Assange wasn't embracing the trappings of wealthy living, but relishing the difference he believed he had already made to the world and to journalism.

It was shaping up to be an extraordinary struggle that would determine the parameters of freedom of speech in the years and decades to come.