

A CURIOUS CONVERSATION WITH MR ASSANGE

The Editor writes...

ON THE afternoon of Wednesday 16 February I had a phone call from Julian Assange. He told me that the piece I had published in that week's issue ("Man in the Eye: Israel Shamir", 1282) was "crap". I asked him in what way it was crap but he could not tell me because, he said, "I haven't read it".

This was not a promising start. When I summarised the piece for his benefit – it was about a Wikileaks associate in Russia with a record of anti-semitism – he said that I and *Private Eye* should be ashamed of ourselves for joining in the international conspiracy to smear Wikileaks. The piece was an obvious attempt to deprive him and his organisation of Jewish support and donations, he said angrily, and he knew perfectly well who had written it. He then named a Fleet Street hack who had nothing to do with it. Wikileaks' omniscience is clearly not yet complete.

Unabashed by this error, he went on to say that we were part of a conspiracy led by the *Guardian* which included journalist David Leigh, editor Alan Rusbridger and John Kampfner from Index on Censorship – all of whom "are Jewish".

I pointed out that Rusbridger is not actually Jewish, but Assange insisted that he was "sort of Jewish" because he was related to David Leigh (they are brothers-in-law). When I doubted whether his Jewish conspiracy would stand up against the facts, Assange suddenly conceded the point. "Forget the Jewish thing."

But the rest of his conspiracy wouldn't go away so easily. He told me, with apparent indignation, that Kampfner and Leigh live near each other in London and are often seen at the same parties – recently twice in the same week. This clearly explained why Kampfner had been rude about him in the *Sunday Times* when reviewing the two recent books about Wikileaks. I suggested that it is not very surprising to find two hacks living near each other in London nor both going to a lot of events, particularly where there is free alcohol. But he was not having any of that.

Kampfner had a further reason for malice, apparently, which was that he had wanted to ghost-write the forthcoming book about Assange but Assange had turned him down. (This is not exactly how Kampfner tells the story. He says he offered to write the book if he could have editorial control but was told the job was essentially to turn Assange's thoughts into prose and so declined.) *Private Eye* was meant to know about these connections and expose them, he said, rather than follow the *Guardian* into "yellow journalism".

Assange really is very cross indeed with the *Guardian* and its hacks. He says the reason they are all so rude about him now, having originally praised both him and Wikileaks to the skies, is that he stopped them "ripping him off" for millions of dollars. He is further outraged that the *Guardian*'s Nick Davies reported the leaked police material from the sex case against him in

Sweden, and that Alan Rusbridger did not stop the Swedish story going into the newspaper. The whole point of an editor, he said, is to control this sort of "inappropriate behaviour" by journalists.

This struck me as a bit odd, since I thought Assange's whole philosophy was about openness and the removal of all these editorial filters between information and the public.

"The reporters on the *Guardian* disappointed me," he continued. "They failed my masculinity test." Er, what? "They behaved like gossiping schoolgirls," he said.

After a slight pause in which the issue of what one might call his sexual politics hung in the air, I said that if he thought the notoriously po-faced *Guardian* staff were "gossiping school-girls" he was going to be very disappointed by us at *Private Eye*. He ignored the comment and told me to examine my conscience.

By this stage of the conversation, interesting though it was, I was not exactly sure what Assange wanted me to do. He agreed that it was probably pointless talking to me but added that *Private Eye* was "a mode of information flow" into the British press and it was therefore worth trying to put the story straight. We were finally back to the original subject, the piece on Israel Shamir in the last *Eye*. He said that Shamir was not the Wikileaks agent in Russia, that he had only met the man twice, that he was photographed with lots of people, and that Shamir was an independent journalist who could write for whoever he wanted and was not Assange's responsibility.

Okay, I said, what about the leaked email from Assange in September 2007 which appears to show him approving Shamir's involvement? Instead of answering, Assange told me the important thing was to work out who had leaked the email and then to work out their motives for betrayal.

Did it not strike him as funny that a man who ran an organisation called Wikileaks was complaining about a leak? "No." Not even a little bit amusing? "No". Did he not think that the need for transparency might be applicable to himself as well as to others? "Transparency is for governments. Privacy is for individuals." What about individuals not in government who are still powerful?

Suddenly I got the impression Mr Assange was bored. Bored of me. Bored of answering questions. The energy and anger seemed to have gone from his voice. He was almost weary when he told me that he was not powerful, but had been crushed by powerful global interests and the least I could do was not support them by running pieces critical of him.

I did feel guilty. Briefly. I told him that I would email him the whole piece and that I would happily run a letter from him, answer his points in full, or put him in contact with our lawyers if he wanted. He gave me an address and I sent him the article. I heard nothing back. In the circumstances I thought the best thing to do was to publish as much as I could remember of our conversation in *Private Eye*. As a "mode of information flow".