21st November 2024

Watching

"Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?

"Who watches the watchers?"

Star Trek, "The Next Generation", *Episode title*

Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? – used by the *Star Trek* writers as a clever title for an episode in the Sci-Fi series – is a Latin phrase from the *Satires* by the 1st/2nd century Roman poet, Juvenal. It's also translated as "Who will guard the guards themselves?" or "Who will watch the watchmen?"

The original context was marital fidelity. Through the years, however, the phrase has been more commonly used in the context of controlling the actions of people in positions of power. Plato explored this in the *Republic* in 400 BC. In 1861, John Stuart Mill quotes a version of it in *Considerations on Representative Government*. But it has never been put more clearly than by Alfred-Maurice de Zayas, the UN Independent Expert on the "Promotion of a Democratic and Equitable International Order", in his 2013 report to the UN Human Rights Council.

Crucial remains the conviction that the government should serve the people and that its powers must be circumscribed by a constitution and the rule of law. Juvenal's question *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes* … remains a central concern of democracy, since the people must always watch over the constitutional behaviour of the leaders and impeach them if they act in contravention of their duties. Constitutional courts must fulfil this need, and civil society should show solidarity with human rights defenders and whistleblowers who, far from being unpatriotic, perform a democratic service to their countries and the world.

Given what our world is like today, it seems to me that holding to account those who govern us is more crucial than ever. The watchers close to them have to do that *and* speak out as they do. The legal processes – which hold every citizen to account in a free and fair society – also have a responsibility. "Human rights defenders and whistleblowers" have a vital role too, as does balanced media coverage. We need people to "say it as they see it", for the good of all. Those in power *must* be held to account.

But you and I must continue to speak truth to power too. We, each and every one of us, must "guard the guards themselves", hold to account those who lead us. No one in power should be immune from that scrutiny.

A prayer for today

Lord, let me watch with care, speak with truthfulness, and act with boldness. Amen

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