Defending Human Rights Defenders will be a fantastic opportunity to provide practical support and solidarity to comrades facing death threats for standing up for human rights. Please circulate the event widely, and contact Haldane Vice-Chair Anna Morris at dhrd@haldane.org if you can offer practical assistance in the organisation of the event.

We are sad to report the death of Haldane Society Vice-President Professor Kader Asmal in June 2011, and we are proud and privileged to have been associated with him. Kader Asmal was a South African lawyer, stalwart of the freedom struggle and long-standing Haldane member, who worked while in exile principally at Trinity College, Dublin. Besides representing the ANC in Ireland, he found the time to champion human rights in Northern Ireland, chairing an inquiry into the British Army and RUC’s shoot to kill policy and helping to found British Irish Rights Watch. On his return to South Africa, after the fall of the apartheid-regime, he helped to write South Africa’s Bill of Rights and proposed setting up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as well as serving as Minister for Water and Forestry Affairs and then as Education Minister. Richard Harvey and Michael Seifert share their memories of Kader.

Kader told the ANC’s National Executive Committee in 1993, when some members were anxious to excuse human rights abuses committed by their own organisation: ‘Human rights are human rights, they belong to all human beings, whoever they might be’. Wise words, which the ANC was right to accept, and which we need to repeat whenever Theresa May, The Daily Mail and David Cameron try to whip up xenophobia and hatred.

In solidarity with our comrades defending human rights across the globe, The Haldane Society is holding a conference ‘Defending Human Rights Defenders’ on Friday 24th February 2012 in Central London. We will focus on supporting activists – lawyers, trade unionists, journalists, NGO workers, and political campaigners – who risk their lives for their commitment to social justice and human rights. We have invited delegations from Colombia, Palestine, the Philippines, Swaziland and the Caucasus region. We hope that the audience will include members of an even broader range of national and international campaigning organisations and solidarity movements. More details are on the back page.

Resistance to the cuts is a multi-faceted movement. The next big protest is the Pensions Justice Day of Action, on Wednesday 30th November 2011, called by the TUC. As I write, public sector unions are balloting their members for action and we encourage all Haldane members in the public sector to vote to defend their pensions and public services. The Haldane Society will be providing practical solidarity to workers on strike in defence of public services.

Len McCluskey in this issue calls for industrial action, and protest on the street – the oldest form of democracy. He voices support for UK Uncut and for the student protests, and opposition to the police tactics of kettling and other forms of containment. We agree with McCluskey that what is needed is resistance at all levels and across all groups.

Riots may not be a political tactic, but they certainly reflect the sheer desperation and alienation experienced by poor young people in urban environments. They have seen their access to higher education snatched away from them – through the increase in university fees and the abolition of the EMA – they regularly find themselves subject to heavy policing, they are at the sharp end of the cuts to welfare benefits and indeed legal aid, and in August 2011 it all just snapped. Connor Johnston, from Young Legal Aid Lawyers, gives a vivid account of observing the Hackney riots from his window and remarks on the ‘near impossibility of escaping poverty’ for many young people.

Meanwhile, the Tories have stepped up the attack on the Human Rights Act. The insidious propaganda against it relies on xenophobia and right-wing ‘law ‘n’ order’ type rhetoric; rights are appropriate for law-abiding British citizens but immigrants, criminals, travellers and others are demonised. This rhetoric deliberately misses the points that rights are rights no matter what. The whole point of human rights is that they should not be determined by political expediency or popular prejudices.

Human rights are under attack all over the world. Colombian trade unionist, human rights defender and academic Liliany Obando has been detained, without charge or trial, for over three years. Whilst the new Santos government in Colombia promised that his Government would have ‘a firm and unwavering’ commitment to human rights, on average one Colombian human rights defender is murdered every three days.

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