Message from the Chair

Standing up for human rights

Since the last issue, The Haldane Society has organised one of its most successful conferences in its history: Defending Human Rights Defenders held jointly with Amnesty International and European Lawyers for Democracy and Human Rights. 150 people heard from human rights defenders from Belarus, Chechnya, Dagestan, Colombia, Palestine, the Philippines and Turkey. This issue contains a short report and pictures can be viewed on our website. A longer report will be available in the autumn.

Our comrades from overseas are an inspiration to us. Lawyers, trade unionists, journalists and even judges put their lives at risk by standing up for human rights. We were sad that Aleh Volchek, a lawyer in Belarus, was unable to join us because he had been detained a month before the conference and his passport had been confiscated. In the Philippines, the National Union of Peoples’ Lawyers is challenging impunity by bringing a private prosecution against retired Army Maj. Gen. Jovito Palparan, accusing him of complicity in disappearances. The retired General is evading the court process. In Turkey, lawyers representing Kurdish or left-wing prisoners are frequently arrested. Perhaps the most striking observation was from the Palestinian comrades: since they came from East Jerusalem, Ramallah and Gaza, our invitation to visit London meant that the three of them could meet each other. In Palestine, Israel prevents travel between those areas. In Colombia, several leading members of the National Movement for the Victims of State Crimes (MOVICE) have been detained by the State, and, when they eventually face a trial, are at risk of false accusations.

We could only invite representatives from a few countries and are conscious that human rights defenders are at risk in many countries. In this issue, Brian Richardson describes political persecution in Zimbabwe: the prosecution of members of the Movement for Democratic Change.

The Haldane Society was pleased to provide a platform to bring some of those well-known and less well-known struggles together. We are committed to providing practical solidarity to our comrades, with calls for urgent action, statements in support and denunciations of repressive measures. We will work towards holding future conferences and facilitating electronic networks and communication. The issue of impunity was a recurrent theme: how to hold governments, and corporations, responsible for their crimes by due process of law.

The passing of the Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, despite the record number of Government defeats in the House of Lords, means that the changes to legal aid come into force next April. The lobbying campaign against LASPO was one of the most impressive and effective I have ever seen and, crucially, turned the issue from lawyers’ interests, as claimed by the Government, to an issue about welfare rights and access to justice.

How can we now stop the decimation of legal aid, the NHS, welfare benefits and the other pillars of the welfare state? Clever lawyering is one way forward. There are complex provisions in the Act permitting the Lord Chancellor to increase the scope of legal aid. But our interests, and those of the public, are identical to public-sector workers. Legal aid lawyers are effectively public-sector workers employed in the private sector. As the minimum salary for trainee solicitors is outrageously abolished, the profession will become more and more distant from the public we serve.

Mark Serwotka, General Secretary of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), spoke with Christine Blower, General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers, and John Hendy QC at a meeting jointly organised with the Institute for Employment Rights. Mark is also interviewed in this magazine. He tells us that his members’ fight to defend their pension rights is certainly an industrial dispute but it’s also ‘clearly a political dispute’. We will be joining the TUC and trade unions on their march for ‘A future that works’ on 20th October 2012. Watch out for The Haldane Society banner.

We are very sad to report the death of Lord Bill Wedderburn, pre-eminent labour and commercial lawyer of his generation and a committed Vice-President of The Haldane Society. His life will be remembered at a memorial service on Tuesday 3rd July 2012, 6pm at the London School of Economics and the Haldane Society will be in attendance. We send our condolences to his family and comrades.

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Our exclusive back page artwork has been kindly donated by
Jeremy Deller. Jeremy is an artist who won the Turner Prize in 2004. His work has included a film re-enacting the Battle of Orgreave which took place during the Miner’s Strike in 1984. His artwork was recently exhibited at The Hayward Gallery in London at the show ‘Joy in People’. His previous projects have included ‘Acid Brass’, a musical collaboration with the Williams Fairey Brass Band from Stockport, in a fusion of traditional colliery brass band music with acid house and Detroit techno.