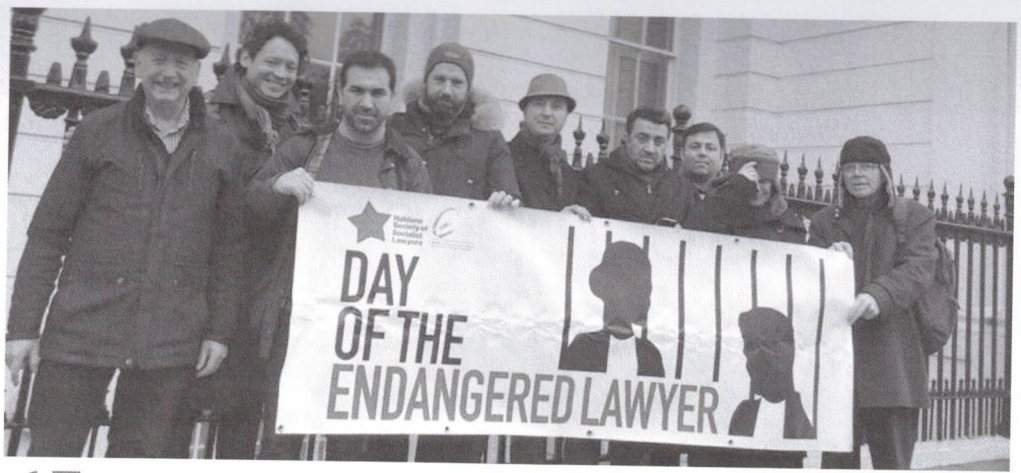




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‘Law is not emancipatory. But a good lawyer can do good work’

Liam Welch in conversation with **Bill Bowring**

I first sat down with Bill for this interview in May 2025. I have kept it back until now because it felt especially fitting for this 100th edition of *Socialist Lawyer*: a conversation with Haldane’s longest-serving executive member about law, politics, solidarity and a life spent in struggle. This year also marks 40 years since Bill joined the Haldane Society in 1986. As a veteran Haldanista of long standing, he is something close to its institutional memory: a link between the Society’s older communist traditions, its solidarity with the trade union movement and its principled internationalism.

Bill welcomed me warmly into his North Essex home. The walls carry portraits of Cromwell, Marx and most surfaces bear the tomes of every flavour of philosophical, economic and political thinker you could name. I wanted to talk to him about the arc of a life lived as a radical. From being surcharged £160,000 with his comrades by Margaret Thatcher’s Government, to bringing more than 200 cases against the Russian

Federation. From being a young Lambeth councillor at the height of the miners’ strike, to being deported from Russia twice and smeared on Russian national television as a ‘human rights traitor’.

He tells all of it without any of the self-mythologising you might expect from someone who has so much to mythologise. Bill is, as Haldane members will know, an unusually generous talker. What follows is a heavily compressed version of our conversation. I have tried to keep his voice intact and let him speak about what he has done, who he has worked with, and what he thinks the law can and cannot do for those who want to change the world. I mentioned to Bill that there was a fascinating memoir in all of this. He told me that there are too many memoirs already and he is far too busy for that. So, unless he changes his mind, which I hope he will, this will have to do. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I did spending the time with Bill.



Bill in 1972, holding a copy of Workers Press, in his Trotskyist days 1970 to 1974, from a painting.

LW: Let's go back to the beginning. You've spent much of your life on the radical left. Were there signs early on that you would end up there?

BB: There were certainly contradictions. My mother was Dutch American, descended from Philip Schuyler, the general from the *Hamilton* musical, but also an absolute bigot in her younger days who thought the Confederacy should have won. Her father was an American Nazi. My father came from a non-conformist English family that left for Newfoundland after the Peterloo Massacre. So, a bourgeois family, but with both sides of the Atlantic going on inside it.

I was sent to boarding schools from the age of eight, a prep school, which I hated, then on a Classics scholarship to Tonbridge School, known for cricket, which is still a mystery for me. The only subject I enjoyed was history, where the teacher lived in the seventeenth century

and taught us out of the Marxist historian Christopher Hill's books. That made a very big impression. I read the *Communist Manifesto* at 13 or 14. There were about five of us at a school of 600 who supported Labour, and my first political campaigning was for Harold Wilson in 1966. I was beaten black and blue for looking at the senior boys with contempt.

LW: How did you actually find your way into the law? What were the practical steps?

BB: By a long route. I left school at 16, with two As and an E at A-level, and went to sea on a tramp ship out of

Liverpool, around West Africa at the time of the Sierra Leone coup and the start of the Biafra War in Nigeria, then across the Atlantic, chartered by a French company, and up the East Coast of the United States, from Jacksonville, Florida to Halifax, Nova Scotia during the Vietnam War. Seeing British and French colonialism up close in West Africa, and then the anti-war protests in New York, was a political education in itself.

With my crap A-levels I had no chance of Cambridge University, where my father had studied. I went to Kent University instead, caught the philosophy bug, joined what became the Workers Revolutionary Party, sold newspapers at the Kent coal mines, and was involved in the 1970 sit-in. I was too much involved in politics, and graduated with a 2:2, so could not continue to post-grad.

After graduation I worked on the Dover Docks, in the local Kleenex factory, and as a lecturer in general studies for engineering apprentices, at the local tech. I then discovered you could become a barrister with a degree in anything. I took the Bar exams while working as a clerk at the the Greater London Council (GLC) and the Inner London Education Authority. After somehow passing, I advised at the Brixton Advice Centre. I would never have got started at the Bar otherwise. I became Ron Bailey's tame lawyer on squatting cases, was elected to Lambeth Council in 1978, and chaired the Lambeth Community Law Centre.

LW: I want to ask you about Lambeth, because you ended up personally surcharged £160,000 for refusing to set a rate. Tell me what happened.

BB: This was 1986, after the defeat of the miners' strike in 1985. Thatcher came to power in 1979, promising to take revenge on the miners, smash the trade unions and destroy local government. She abolished the GLC in 1986. In Lambeth we refused to set a rate in protest against her cuts, and initially had the support of Ken Livingstone, Margaret Hodge and David Blunkett. They ratted on us, and we were left on our own with Liverpool. We were done for wilful misconduct and surcharged personally, joint and several, for £160,000.

We knew we were breaking the law. Led by 'Red' Ted Knight, our council leader and a prominent municipal socialist, we wanted to follow the example of George Lansbury and the Poplar councillors, who in 1921 were sent to Brixton Prison where they continued holding their council meetings. Thatcher was determined we would not be sent to prison but bankrupted instead, as she had done to the Clay Cross councillors. I went to see my head of chambers, who was a Tory, and told him I was being surcharged. He asked whether I was being accused of dishonesty. I said, 'No, political stupidity', because we had thought we would be part of a general

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'We knew we were breaking the law. That was the point.'

>>> uprising with the miners. He told me that I was in the fine tradition of the Bar but that, if I was bankrupted, to come back and see him again.

We marched to the High Court under a replica of the Poplar banner. I was a barrister representing other people in one court of the High Court, and the criminal defendant in the Divisional Court two corridors along. The three Divisional Court judges called us 'the pinnacle of political perversity' in time for the Evening Standard headline. I made my house in Brixton over to my ex-wife to be safe, and a few years later, when we divorced amicably, she sold it and gave me back £15,000 to help me start again. We eventually raised the £160,000 for the surcharge through trade union solidarity, with the three big unions collecting for us every night.

LW: At some point you turned towards international human rights work. What was the catalyst?

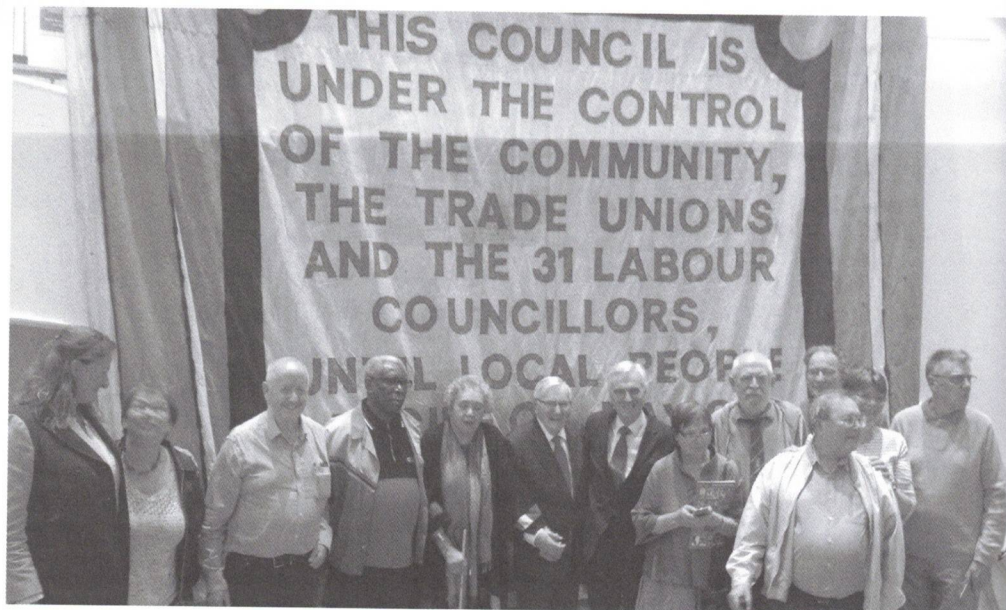
BB: Two things. In 1988 I was sent by the International Association of Democratic Lawyers and the Palestine Liberation Organisation to Israel and Palestine, and my eyes were opened to international law and humanitarian law. The Israelis were doing then on a smaller scale exactly what they are doing now. And when in 1992 Kevin Boyle, Françoise Hampson and the Kurdish Human Rights Project began taking cases to Strasbourg against Turkey, I volunteered to help with drafting and representation.

I had also been involved in Russia from 1983, through town twinning since World War Two between Lambeth and a Moscow borough. I learned Russian. I was in Moscow doing intensive language study during the 1991 putsch. Later, when Russia joined the Council of Europe, the cases against Russia followed, and they have been the main work of my professional life ever since.

Also, in 1990 my friend from Kent University John Strawson offered me a teaching post at the (then) Polytechnic of East London. I took a two-thirds drop in income and never looked back.

LW: The Kurdish work is where you cut your teeth at Strasbourg. Is there a case that stands out?

BB: The case I am proudest of is *Özgür Gündem* against Turkey. It was a Kurdish daily paper. Every single issue was prosecuted by the Turkish state. Eight of its journalists were murdered, the building was blown up and the records destroyed. We took it to



Strasbourg under Article 10. Halfway through the hearing the representative of the Turkish Government turned to the court and said, 'Your Excellencies, I am sorry to have to tell you that Professor Bowring is a terrorist. He is a member of the PKK.' In Turkey, if you represent people regarded as terrorists, you are a terrorist yourself. That is why so many of our comrades there are in prison today.

The court read every issue of the paper. It was clear that it was not inciting terrorism, but referred to Kurds and to the Kurdish language, which for Turkey is separatism, which is terrorism. The court developed in that case a new positive duty on states to protect freedom of expression. We could not prove the Turkish government had murdered the eight journalists, but we could prove it had failed to protect them. To my mind it was always about the right of the Kurdish people to exist, more than it was about Article 10.

LW: And then came the Russia work, which has dominated the rest of your career. Tell me how that built up.

BB: Putin started the second Chechen war in 1999, and the Russian army razed Grozny to the ground. Civilians were given a so-called safe route out, and the safe route was bombed. Children were killed. My first case against Russia was for families whose children died in that bombing. The only person working on these cases at Memorial, the Russian NGO, was not even a lawyer. So I applied to the European Commission for funding for a joint project between Memorial, the Bar

Human Rights Committee and North London University, and won a grant of a million euros. That was how the European Human Rights Advocacy Centre was founded. It is now at Middlesex University.

We had more than 200 victories against Russia. The judgments went further than we had pleaded. Several Russian generals were named with findings of fact amounting to war crimes. We had the judgments translated into Russian and distributed across the country. Then I joined others to try to get the named generals prosecuted under the Russian criminal code, which has provisions for war crimes. That is where I got into real trouble. I was arrested and deported in 2005, and again in 2007. In 2016 I was the subject of a smear programme on NTV, the mouthpiece of the security services. They had filmed me and two members of the Russian opposition meeting in a café. The programme called us 'human rights traitors' and me a top British spy. It is on YouTube if you want to see it.

LW: You have been involved in Haldane longer than anyone else now on the executive. What has the Society been to you across all this?

BB: Haldane is my political party. I joined when the Communist Party was still dominant. John Platts-Mills was Haldane's leading comrade, with his striped trousers and bowler hat at the Grunwick picket line. Haldane had supported the Moscow trials in the thirties. But Haldane's golden age was the miners' strike. At every moment since then when something has actually mattered, Haldane has been there. I am very proud of the European Lawyers for Democracy and Human Rights (ELDH), of which Haldane was a founder in 1992, especially of the recent joint mission to Northern Ireland and report. Haldane is where lawyers with skills find ways to use them in solidarity with the people who actually do change the world, which is the working class.

LW: You were Chair of Haldane in the

Bill with Ted Knight and other surcharged (in 1986) Lambeth Councillors, at their Reunion in Lambeth in 2016.

'The representative of the Turkish Government turned to the court and said, "Your Excellencies, I am sorry to have to tell you that Professor Bowring is a terrorist."'

late 1980s when Keir Starmer was Secretary, and you worked closely with him for years. What was he like then?

BB: Starmer never had any politics. He joined Haldane to make a career. He wanted to turn it into Liberty. He tried to get the name changed, and there was a battle with the Communist lawyers, which he lost. For a brief period under him we even had a charitable educational trust, premises and an employee, all of which failed.

What really made him was the 1990 Haldane mission to Northern Ireland. He initiated it. About 15 of us went, and I wrote the foreword to the report, which criticised the non-jury Diplock courts and even advocated a united Ireland. He made his contacts in the North, which led directly to his role in the peace process and the reform of the police and prosecutors there. That is how he became Director of Public Prosecutions in 2008.

I worked with him closely for several years, when I was Chair and he was Secretary. I never heard him refer to Marx, or to Trotsky, or to Pablo, despite his having previously written for a Pabloite journal. He was a good lawyer. He led me on the Litvinenko case in 2007, the murder of Alexander Litvinenko in London by radioactive poison, until he became DPP. I continued the case, and we finally got a judgment from Strasbourg in 2021, finding murder against the Russian Federation. Whilst Starmer was competent at human rights work, this was not because he believed in any human rights principles. That was simply where he made his career.

I joined Haldane in 1986 because I had deliberately broken the law, and looked for solidarity. Keir, who joined at the same time, would never knowingly break any law under any circumstances. If you had told him when he joined Haldane, that he would become Sir Keir Starmer KC, former Director of Public Prosecutions, Prime Minister, he would not have batted an eyelid.

'He has no politics... If you had told him when he joined Haldane that he would be Sir Keir Starmer KC, Prime Minister, he would not have batted an eyelid.'

LW: After everything, what do you think the law actually achieves? What can a lawyer do?

BB: Lawyers do not change the world. Law is not emancipatory. It is conservative by its very nature. That is what it is for. But it is an instrument, and a good lawyer can do good work. The Chechens and the Kurds did not become free, and they have not become free, but it mattered enormously to them to have the truth of what had befallen them recognised by the highest court in Europe. They were never in it for the money. They were in it for the vindication. I am not cynical about that.

Where I differ from some comrades is on what is sometimes called the 'revolutionary lawyer'. I regret having spoken at a conference in Istanbul called 'Being a Revolutionary Lawyer', with the image of a lawyer in a hard hat and a gas mask. I am very clear, as a Marxist, that you do not engage in terrorism, killing civilians. The Irish under occupation have the right to resist by force, but they do not have the right to kill civilians. My elder daughter missed by three minutes being blown up at Victoria Station in 1991. The same applies to ETA in the Basque country, and to Hamas and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. The right to resist, including by force, is absolute. But the laws of war apply, and civilians are not targets.

LW: Where do you see hope on the British left now?

BB: In the end of illusions. The illusion of a 'rules-based world order' has been

completely shattered by Trump. We are back into cold hard realism, and that is rather clarifying. Britain has never achieved a reckoning with its imperial history. Aden, Cyprus, Kenya, Malaya, Bengal, in the twentieth century, and Britain's enrichment through slavery. None of it is taught in our schools. So here we are. I think Ireland will unify in my lifetime, and that is unstoppable now that the Catholic Church has been defeated. Scotland will eventually go. Wales is restless. England will have to make up its mind that it is a middle-sized European country, the former United Kingdom, and that the empire is not coming back to save us.

The next leadership of the British left will not come from me, and it will not come from Corbyn, who is the same age as me almost to the week. It will come from much younger people, and probably not in a way we can now predict. The big cities are transformed. The Bangladeshi community is highly political. More than 15 per cent of London is now Muslim. I contribute to Muslim TV stations in London every week. The trade unions, which create the Labour Party, are increasingly critical of Starmer's leadership. That is where the energy is. No new party will get off the ground in Britain without the trade unions, and Britain is unique in that the unions made the party, not the other way round.

LW: What would you say to a young lawyer who wants to do something like what you've done?

BB: I had no plan, and people who tell you they had a life plan are lying. I worked in a Kleenex factory before I went to the Bar. I would not have got started without the Brixton Advice Centre. I would not have had my eyes opened to international law without the 1988 mission to Israel and Palestine. I would not have made the move to academia aged 40 without John Strawson's offer. I am now a professor with more than 150 publications, but I have no Masters or PhD. Everything I teach I have taught myself. You cannot predict any of it. What I tell my students is to take opportunities when they present themselves, because if you do not, you will regret it for the rest of your life. And join Haldane!

LW: A final question. After all of it, what is the principle you keep with you?

BB: Marx was once asked to sum up his principles in a single word. He replied: 'Struggle'. Humans will someday become extinct, and will not achieve the earthly paradise. We are mortal, we are self-destructive, and there is no interventionist God to rescue us. But here we are, and we do our best to fight against the things we know are wrong. That is what it is to be a good lawyer, and a good comrade, and a good human being. It is what Haldane has always been for. Long may it continue.

Bill with ELDH comrades Louis Lemkow, Thomas Schmidt, and Ceren Uysal, in Naples, in 2022.



Liam Welch is a lawyer, organiser and writer. He is the Co-Chair of Haldane.