
Interview: Gail Billington

Political persecution of LaRouche shocks Asians



This interview was conducted with Gail Billington, wife of political prisoner Michael Billington, on May 4, following her return from a two-week tour of India and Thailand, from April 13 to April 29, to discuss human rights violations in the United States, with respect to her husband, Lyndon LaRouche, and other associates of his who are in prison or facing prison as a result of political persecution. She was interviewed by Marianna Wertz.

EIR: You were just in India and Thailand for a two-week tour. Is this your first trip to Asia?

Billington: This was my first trip to Asia.

EIR: You're the wife of Michael Billington, who is currently in state prison in Virginia. Could you give some background on his case, and tell us what he's doing while in prison?

Billington: Mike was prosecuted in federal court with Lyndon LaRouche and five other individuals in Alexandria, Virginia in 1988. The charge there was mail fraud in the raising of funds to support the political movement. He was simultaneously prosecuted by the Commonwealth of Virginia on the same evidence and essentially the same charge, although Virginia called this "securities fraud" rather than mail fraud.

Mike was sentenced to three years in prison by the federal court in Alexandria. He served that time. He was tried and convicted in Virginia on nine counts of securities fraud. He was convicted on all counts in that trial and was given a sentence by the jury of 77 years, which was upheld by the judge. Beginning in September 1992, he started serving that 77-year sentence.

What he's doing in prison is concentrating on continuing to work on studies on China. One of the main projects right now is to work up an economic program for the development of China, to address the crisis that is coming up between the move toward a free market economy and the free-trade zones, and the fact that you have hundreds of millions of unemployed, who are providing the cheap labor for that process. The China work is something Mike has adopted since he was in federal prison. Over the course of the last three or four years, he has become the China desk editor for *EIR*. He has done extensive work on the epistemological history of China and recently completed a very lengthy paper on the "Leibnizi-

an" current in Chinese philosophy—going back to Confucius.

EIR: What is your and Mike's specific interest in Asia? Where does it come from?

Billington: Mike's interest stems from the fact that from 1969 to 1971 he was a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand, where he worked with the Department of Education in writing and teaching teachers the introduction of a math program into the Thai public school system. He was fluent in Thai as a result of that and almost stayed in Thailand. At the end of his two-year term in the Peace Corps, he was offered a position at Chiangmai University, but decided that it was time for him to return to the United States, which is when he began political activity in the United States.

EIR: And do you have any ties to Asia?

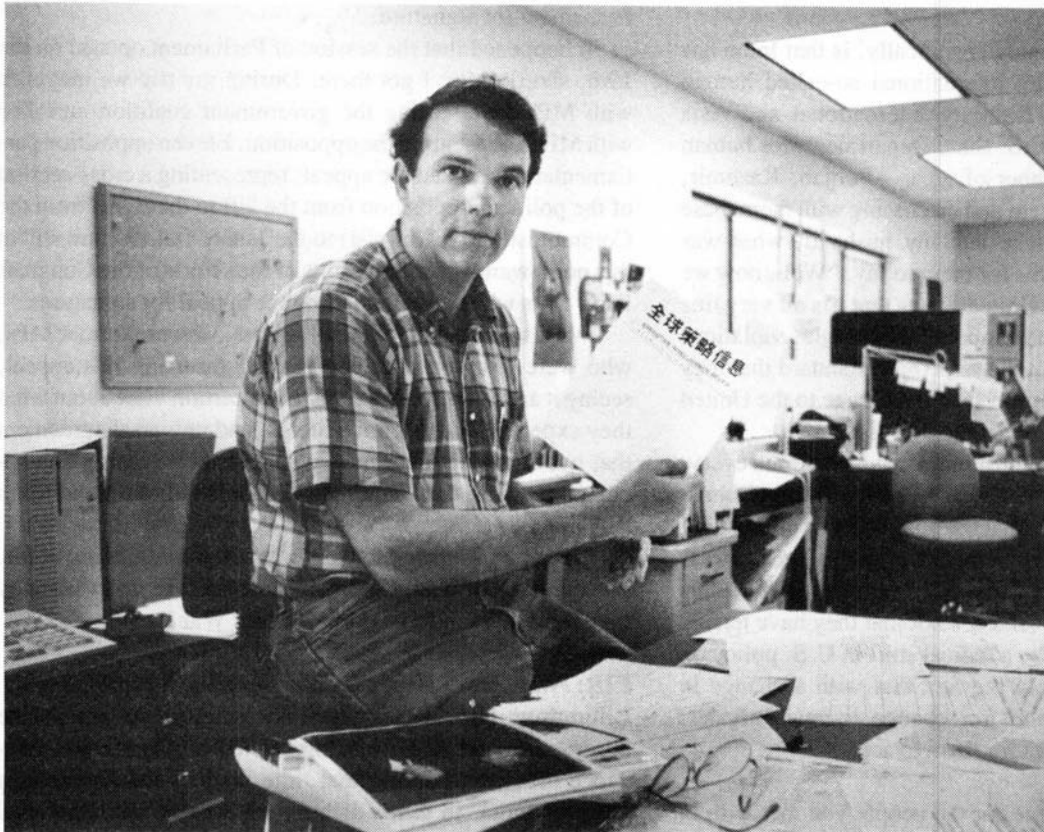
Billington: My interest in Asia stems a lot from the love that my husband has for Asia. Also, during the period that he first went to prison, I began to read about the independence struggle in India and about China, and developed a very deep respect for the Chinese people.

EIR: Your invitation for this trip was from friends and associates of LaRouche in Asia. Can you tell us your itinerary?

Billington: I was two weeks in India and Thailand. About ten days of that time was spent in India, all of it in New Delhi, meeting with parliamentarians and people in the legal community. I was only in Thailand for four days, for a couple of events and private meetings.

EIR: What is your observation about how people in India view the United States and the situation of the LaRouche movement?

Billington: I was in India to discuss the legal cases of my husband and the federal case, for which Lyndon LaRouche is still in prison at this time—the only one of the seven defendants in that case who remains in prison. I have to say—as I think is generally the case—that people in India have absolutely no conception that there could be such a thing as human rights violations in the United States. In fact, their view of politics in the United States tends to be fairly monotone, just what is fed to them: a bipartisan structure, etc., but



Michael Billington working on the production of EIR's Chinese newsletter in August 1992, before he began his unheard-of 77-year sentence in Virginia prison. From his prison cell, he is working on an economic program for the economic development of China.

not any real sense of the internal workings of politics here.

They think the U.S. sticks to the principles of its Constitution and Declaration of Independence, in the exercise of judicial authority and in the exercise of political rights under the Bill of Rights. Therefore, the most shocking thing to them was to hear that in fact, that's not the case.

EIR: Of the people that you met, does anything stand out in your mind, in terms of their views toward the LaRouche case?

Billington: One of the real breakthroughs in the trip to India was a meeting I had with India's most respected human rights attorney, V.M. Tarkunde, who was the defense attorney for the assassins of Indira Gandhi. He is a very rigorous person. The irony is that my associates had been in touch with him for a year, had given him, at his request, a lot of documentation on the case, particularly the arguments of the prosecution. Ironically, at the point at which I met him, he had not seen the latest motion that was filed on Mr. LaRouche's behalf, and his views of the case had been largely shaped by the prosecution's arguments.

After our meeting and discussion, and we provided him some additional documentation, he drafted a personal letter to President Clinton and forwarded a copy to the U.S. ambassador in India. It's an excellent letter. He says that he has no doubt that the trials against Mr. LaRouche and my husband

were politically motivated, that the evidence presented was one-sided, that the sentences given for LaRouche, who is now 70 years old and was given a 15-year sentence four years ago, were exorbitant. At worst, for such a crime in India, he said, he would be given a maximum of perhaps a couple of years sentence. As far as my husband's 77-year sentence, he said he can imagine *no court in the world* that could ever have imposed such a sentence for basically the same crimes for which my husband was tried, convicted, and served time in federal prison.

It's a very powerful letter, because this individual is beyond reproach in the legal community, and was one of the people to whom we were referred repeatedly by the parliamentarians and politicians, to be notified and asked to move on these cases. His letter will have a powerful effect on the U.S. State Department, because he is someone whom the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi has cultivated as an expert on human rights violations in India.

EIR: Did you find similar responses from others you met?

Billington: What I found to be universally the case with the very widely differing group of people that I had a chance to meet with, was an incredible openness, and actually a sense that now is a moment of opportunity, in which we can change the direction of politics internationally, of the interaction of nations internationally, on the basis of a commitment to jus-

tice and individual rights.

What I mean by that, very specifically, is that India has come under intense fire by international so-called human rights organizations like Amnesty International and Asia Watch, as well as by the U.S. State Department, for human rights violations in a number of areas—Punjab, Kashmir, Tamil Nadu. In briefing them and discussing with them these cases against Mr. LaRouche and my husband, what was universally the response was for them to say, “Well, now we can send a message to the United States that it’s all very fine and well for them to complain about human rights violations here, but they have to meet the same high standard that they uphold for India itself. We can send a message to the United States to clean up its own act.”

They did this under circumstances in which I think everyone fully appreciated that there was a change in the administration in the United States, that the possibility of intervening with the United States on such things as human rights violations in the United States simply did not exist before this change in administration. And it’s not that they have terrific illusions that there might be a radical shift in U.S. policy on these questions, but simply the fact that with a change in administration, the *potential* for change is much greater. Therefore, this is a moment for them to act.

EIR: Is the same thing true for the people you met with in Thailand?

Billington: Yes. Particularly the one key person I had a chance to meet. He was much more dramatic in his evaluation, and is much closer personally to the United States. The message which he thought was very important, was that the United States should take a very hard look at what has happened to the U.S. population under conditions of an economic and cultural crisis. His perception was, if you look at the drug problem in the United States, if you look at the collapse of the family institution, you see that the United States is headed toward a catastrophe, and that friends of the United States owe it to the United States to speak out.

EIR: One of things which you were asking the people to do was to sign an open letter to President Clinton, urging Lyndon LaRouche and Mike Billington’s immediate freedom. Did you get endorsements to this letter?

Billington: What happened on the India trip was very interesting. We started out with introductions to some young parliamentarians who are members of the Congress Youth Organization. What evolved over the course of the ten days, is that every single person we met with would give us references of eight other individuals or more, whom we should meet with immediately. So we had a kind of steamroller process. Every single Member of Parliament who we met with was forthcoming, totally open, and immediately agreed that they should and would not only sign this appeal, but they would circulate the appeal among their peers in the

Parliament for signature.

It happened that the session of Parliament opened on the 19th, shortly after I got there. During my trip we met both with MPs representing the government coalition and also with MPs representing the opposition. Eleven opposition parliamentarians signed the appeal, representing a cross-section of the political opposition from the left to the right, from the Communist Party (Marxist) to the Janata Dal. We are still at this point waiting for the results of the efforts of the Congress Party MPs who were circulating the appeal for signatures.

We also met older political figures, who are former MPs, who were likewise completely open on using this appeal, seeing it as a vehicle for expressing a certain view about what they expect from the United States, and universal agreement that not only was there no problem in their signing this appeal, but that in fact, hundreds of people in India should sign it.

One thing I stressed to them was that the beginning of Mr. LaRouche’s political activity, his perceptions, was shaped by his experiences in India during World War II.

EIR: What was LaRouche doing in India in World War II?

Billington: He was a medical corpsman in Assam and he observed the organizing being carried out by the independence movement during that time, and by the Communist Party of India, in terms of building a mass-based political movement in India, including distribution of a political newspaper, I believe. It was his observing that fight for independence which shaped and developed for him a deep commitment to the right to freedom and development for the nations of the South.

EIR: Did you have an opportunity to see any of the national monuments or museums in New Delhi?

Billington: We had an opportunity to visit the Taj Mahal and some of the other monuments of the Mogul emperors. The Taj Mahal absolutely deserves its reputation as one of the Seven Wonders of the World. It is an incredibly beautiful monument.

But what I found totally fascinating about the Moguls, is that at least several of the Mogul emperors, from Akbar to his grandson Shah Jahan, who was the builder of the Taj Mahal, had a commitment to ecumenical policy. Their idea was to unite India. They were foreign invaders. They moved in and sought to unite India on the basis of eliminating any taxes, eliminating conditions that would segregate the Hindu population from the Muslim population. The Moguls were Muslims themselves. Three emperors in succession had a very strong commitment to this kind of ecumenical policy, which was abandoned after Shah Jahan.

EIR: Did you see anything having to do with the fight for independence?

Billington: In New Delhi we visited the museum which is

set up at the home of Jawaharlal Nehru and documents the independence struggle in India. You could spend days going through the documentation, going to the earliest days from the founding of the Congress Party at the turn of the century, through the independence movement and beyond, to the civil wars that broke out when India and Pakistan separated.

What comes out of that, and what I also experienced in the meetings with MPs and others, is that they are *fiercely* proud of the fact that India is the largest democracy in the world today. There are some 870 million Indian citizens. By the turn of the century they will have a population of 1 billion.

So you have this fierce sense of the importance of these democratic freedoms. But at the same time, you see that the leadership, the statesmen of India, have led very modest, indeed austere lives. The Nehru home is very plain, in terms of decoration. One thing I noticed in the study of Nehru was that on his wall, facing his desk, is a portrait of Abraham Lincoln. You see the bedroom where Indira Gandhi grew up. Again, very plain, very few of the trappings which one might expect from a state leader.

The same thing was true in a meeting with the former secretary general of the Congress Party, who conveyed this deeply rooted sense of what Mahatma Gandhi did for India, which is to constantly remind people of the common man. Gandhi was overwhelmingly committed to compassion for his fellow human being, no matter how miserable the conditions of life, and constantly focused on raising people out of that misery as the main task of statesmen in India.

EIR: Did you have any public meetings in India?

Billington: We have a friend who is a journalist and teaches journalism classes, who arranged two events for me. We took over a post-graduate class in journalism with a group of about 20 students, which was very lively, a lot of fun. They were absolutely horrified at the description of these legal cases, of Mr. LaRouche and my husband, in the United States. They found it incomprehensible. Out of that group, 12-15 of them signed the open letter to President Clinton.

Out of that came a number of people who wanted more information, wanted to collaborate with my friends and associates in New Delhi, and who pledged themselves personally, they made a very personal commitment to do something on these cases.

The second event was a seminar that was organized by this journalist with professors and other people in the media, in which there was a broader-based discussion, but again the presentation on these cases electrified the audience. They became quite agitated after this and about a dozen of them signed the appeal to President Clinton. And also, there were a number of proposals and suggestions made that we are following up on, for press conferences, seminars, etc.

EIR: In your short time in Thailand, what were you able to do?

Billington: The main focus of the trip to Thailand was a private meeting with a former dean of the law faculty at Thammasat University in Bangkok, and then a public event in which this individual, Dr. Preedee Kasemsup, gave a presentation in which he outlined the political motivation behind the legal cases against Mr. LaRouche and my husband.

EIR: How is he familiar with that?

Billington: Dr. Preedee had been an observer in the United States during the Alexandria federal trial; he observed those proceedings for two or three days. Since that time he has supported all of the legal initiatives filed by Mr. LaRouche to overturn his conviction on the basis of government misconduct.

He met Mike during the Alexandria trial, and he has maintained contact with Mike and been a resource for Mike in pursuing his studies of philosophy and culture in Asia.

EIR: So you had a public event with him to present the case.

Billington: He discussed why LaRouche and associates are in prison from the standpoint, as he said, that LaRouche has been the only person who stood up to the U.S. political establishment in 50 years, and he had to be silenced. I went through the details of the case.

EIR: Were you able to get press coverage in either country?

Billington: I don't believe there was any while I was there. This was a big issue that we took up with the journalists in India, that the Indian press has so far, even though we've given them information for the last four years, not covered the legal prosecution of Mr. LaRouche, although they have covered positively his economic development program for India.

EIR: LaRouche has met with India's leaders, hasn't he?

Billington: Yes, and I referred to that. He met twice with Mrs. Gandhi while she was prime minister. As part of that, he sponsored the release of a 40-year perspective for the development of the Indian economy, the Indian subcontinent, which has been very widely circulated in India. LaRouche is known for several of the specific projects that were identified in that report.

EIR: Do you have any impressions of Thailand that you'd like to share?

Billington: By contrast with India, Thailand, or Bangkok, was a much more cosmopolitan, modern city, a very international city. The United Nations has set up major operations there.

EIR: On your return, I presume that you spoke with your husband about your trip. Did he have any comments?

Billington: He wants to know where I'm going next!