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Biography

John P Bowman engages in an arbitration practice representing international oil companies in commercial and investment disputes. He leads King & Spalding's upstream oil and gas practice, and in 2017 received the Institute for Energy Law's Lifetime Achievement in Energy Litigation Award. He served as president of the Association of International Petroleum Negotiators (2014–2015). He teaches International Energy Arbitration at Georgetown University Law Center, and is also an honorary lecturer at the University of Dundee's Centre for Energy, Petroleum and Mineral Law and Policy.

What inspired you to enter the legal profession?

After obtaining a BA in economics and humanities, I attended graduate school to study world religions. When that course of study no longer seemed to offer a viable career, I turned instinctively to law to make best use of my analytical, writing and advocacy skills.

What attracted you to a career specialising in international oil and gas disputes?

The School of Law at the University of Kansas had an excellent energy law curriculum, which attracted me because it combined politics, government, economics and resource issues. It offered a career as an advocate that focused on issues I considered of major importance.

You have been practising at King & Spalding for over a decade – what is it about the firm that sets it apart from its competitors?

I arrived at the firm at an ideal time, despite the world financial crisis that hit in 2008. The firm had just announced major initiatives involving the firm's international arbitration and energy practices – a perfect fit for my interests. These practices have grown exponentially over the past 10 years, helping set it apart from competitors.

To what extent is a technical background and particular scientific knowledge important on the part of a lawyer in this field?

My practice focuses entirely on international energy disputes. These cases deal with complex contractual relationships, frequently with host governments, and often with scientific evidence and technical arguments. Over the course of my career, I have worked closely with a variety of experts, and I have tried to learn as much as possible from them.

Sources note a recent uptick in the number of disputes between international oil companies and host governments. What would you say is driving this trend?

These disputes have been driven by a perfect storm of massive global investment in energy projects, a 10-year increase in energy prices and costs, followed by another oil price shock, a concomitant outburst of resource nationalism, and thousands of investment treaties and contracts with arbitration clauses.

What would you say is the biggest challenge currently facing lawyers in the oil and gas sector?

Understanding the sector's commodity cycles, keeping up with technical developments, wrestling with difficult contractual issues, and dealing with host countries that often seem not to care about promoting energy security, good governance, or strong economies.

What advice would you give to younger practitioners looking to specialise in the energy field?

To learn all you can about the historical development and future prospects of the energy industry, to study its contracts, and to enjoy working with its diverse and highly skilled participants.

Earlier this year you received the Lifetime Achievement in Energy Litigation Award from The Institute for Energy Law – tell us what this milestone means to you.

For me this recognition, however undeserved, gives added incentive to continue to work as an advocate and arbitrator and to teach and write about the international energy industry and its disputes.

What has been the most memorable matter that you have worked on?

An arbitration for a large independent oil company, which took six years, two conciliation proceedings, a two-week hearing, and weeks of settlement discussions to resolve amicably with a national oil company on the eve of delivery of the award, with a multibillion-dollar in-kind payment for the client and favourable amendments to the PSC.