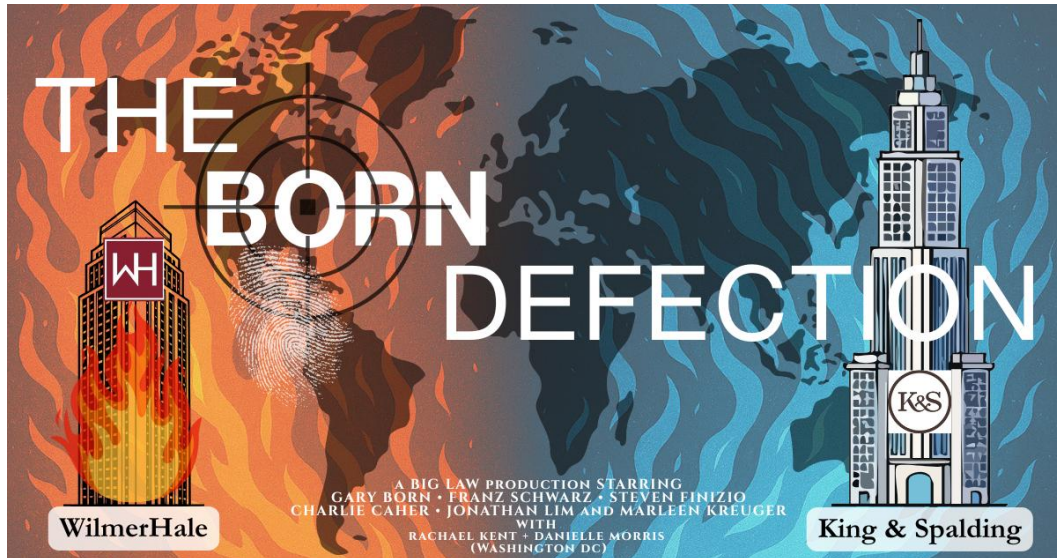


## WilmerHale – The Born Defection

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Every so often, the London lateral market produces a move that feels less like partner recruitment and more like the transfer of an institutional asset. **King & Spalding**'s June 2026 hire of an eight-partner, market-leading international arbitration and public international law team from **WilmerHale** — spanning London, Washington DC and New York, and led by “Hall of Fame” lawyer and sometime published novelist **Gary Born** — firmly falls into that category.

In London, the Atlanta-spawned outfit welcomes a sextet of laterals, including Born, who joins as co-head of international disputes.

Even without Born, the London WilmerHale team — containing several market-leading individuals and comfortably Band 1 in its own right — is truly formidable. But because Born, who has been practising for more than 40 years, is the closest thing to a universally accepted “most famous arbitration lawyer” in the world today, the team is, perhaps unfairly, synonymous with him, with some in the market describing it as “the Gary Born show”.

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For King & Spalding, already ranked Tier 1 by GAR — the Global Arbitration Review and, in international arbitration the only ranking that really counts — the move is less *Born Identity* than *Born Supremacy*. Subject to the usual integration risks that come with absorbing culturally distinct, big-personality disputes laterals, it has the potential to place the firm’s arbitration practice in a league of its own.

That said, the hire is not entirely without risk for King & Spalding. Born is very senior — he has been in practice for more than 40 years — and, rightly or wrongly, a significant proportion of the team’s market value is linked to his name.

For WilmerHale's London office, the consequences are sharper. In the US, the firm remains a formidable brand synonymous with quality and, although notionally full service, is primarily perceived as a disputes, regulatory and life sciences powerhouse rather than a competitor to Big Law's private capital-driven transactional elite, which now operates on a different economic plane.

In London, the firm has played to those strengths, completely side-stepping [Big Law's private capital lateral arms race](#) and instead focusing on three prestige pillars: IP/patent litigation, corporate crime, and international arbitration/public international law. It is a high-quality, low-growth model built around standout individuals, but one with clear concentration risk.

As recently as last year, WilmerHale could point to genuinely top-of-market individuals leading all three areas: **Justin Watts** (IP/patent litigation), **Stephen Pollard** (corporate crime), and **Gary Born** (international arbitration). However, with Watts and Pollard stepping back from the partnership over the past 18 months, and now the entirety of Born's team defecting to King & Spalding, the vulnerability of that model has been exposed.

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Growth in London has been sedate. Until very recently, the office had a reputation for making very few internal promotions and, on hiring, Edwards Gibson records just seven partner hires since its records began in 2007. Absent international arbitration, this historic lack of growth leaves the London office with just five partners (one of whom splits time between London and Brussels).

From a Mayfair base — in the UK version of Monopoly, the most expensive square — the economics of such a bonsai office will be challenging. The firm will need to scale up simply to balance the books, let alone retain its premium disputes brand outside of the US.

In a Big Law market increasingly defined by platform economics, momentum and depth matter as much as individual brilliance. Elite firms can still be built around star practitioners — but without sustained investment in growth, succession and breadth, even the most prestigious franchises risk being reduced, ultimately, to the sum of the individuals who leave. Right now, WilmerHale's London office looks less like a curated disputes boutique and more like a case study in why law firms need to grow.