

IRWIN COTLER BIO, Sept. 2023

Irwin Cotler is the International Chair of the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, an Emeritus Professor of Law at McGill University, former Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada and longtime Member of Parliament, constitutional and international human rights lawyer and counsel to Prisoners of Conscience. Feature articles refer to him as “Counsel for the Oppressed”, while the Oslo Freedom Forum characterized him as “Freedom’s Counsel.”

He is a member of the Organization of American States (OAS); Independent Panel of Legal Experts on Venezuela; member of the High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom; Canada’s first Special Envoy on Preserving Holocaust Remembrance and Combatting Antisemitism; and Special Envoy of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Community of Democracies on the case and cause of imprisoned Russian democratic leader, Vladimir Kara-Murza, who in 2023 was named Canada’s newest honorary citizen.

As parliamentarian from 1999 to 2015, Professor Cotler was at the forefront of the struggle for justice and human rights, both domestically and internationally. He served as chair of the first-ever Parliamentary Assembly for the International Criminal Court; chair of the Parliamentarians for Global Action (Canada); chair of the Inter-Parliamentary Group for Human Rights in Iran; chair of the Inter-Parliamentary Group of Justice for Sergei Magnitsky; chair of the All-Party Save Darfur Parliamentary Coalition; co-chair from Canada of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance for China; and co-chair of the International Parliamentary Coalition to Combat Antisemitism. He was elected 2014 Canadian Parliamentarian of the Year by his colleagues.

As Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada from 2003 to 2006, Irwin Cotler launched Canada’s first National Justice Initiative Against Racism and Hate; initiated the first-ever prosecution for the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda under Canada’s *Crimes Against Humanity and War Crimes Act*; initiated the first-ever law on human trafficking; crafted the *Civil Marriage Act*, the first-ever legislation to grant marriage equality to gays and lesbians; quashed more wrongful convictions in a single year than any prior Minister; initiated the first-ever comprehensive reform of the Supreme Court appointment process and helped make it the most gender-representative Supreme Court in the world; appointed the first-ever Indigenous and visible minority justices the Ontario Court of Appeal; and made the pursuit of international justice a government priority.

An international human rights lawyer, Professor Cotler has served as counsel to high profile Prisoners of Conscience including Nobel Peace Prize laureate Andrei Sakharov and leading human rights dissident, Nathan Sharansky (former Soviet Union); Nelson Mandela (South Africa); Jacobo Timmerman (Argentina); Professor Saad Eddin Ibrahim (Egypt); and was a Member of the International Legal Team of Chinese Nobel Peace Laureate Liu Xiaobo. More recently he has served as international legal counsel to imprisoned Saudi blogger Raif Badawi; Venezuelan political prisoner Leopoldo López; imprisoned Iranian human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh; and Swedish-Eritrean Dawit Isaak, the longest-imprisoned journalist in the world.

A constitutional and comparative law scholar, Professor Cotler is the author of numerous publications and seminal legal articles and has written upon and intervened in landmark Charter of Rights cases in the areas of free speech, freedom of religion, minority rights, peace law and war crimes justice.

He is the recipient of seventeen honorary doctorates, where he has been recognized as “a scholar and advocate of international stature” (as cited in his various honorary doctorates). He is a Privy Councillor, an Officer of the Order of Canada, an Officer of the National Order of Quebec, and is the recipient also of the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal. He has been awarded the Canadian Bar Association’s President’s Award; was the first Canadian recipient of the International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation’s Centennial Medal; the first recipient of the Romeo Dallaire Award for Human Rights Leadership; the recipient of the Sir Zafrullah Khan Award for Distinguished Public Service; the recipient of the Dalhousie University 2015 Ethical Leadership Award; and was the first recipient of the 2015 Sergei Magnitsky Global Human Rights Award.

In 2015, Professor Cotler received the Law Society of Upper Canada’s Inaugural Human Rights Award. In its citation, the Law Society recognized “The Honourable Irwin Cotler’s tireless efforts to ensure peace and justice for all. In his varied roles as law professor, constitutional and comparative law scholar, international human rights lawyer, counsel to prisoners of conscience, public intellectual, peace activist, Member of Parliament, and Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Mr. Cotler has been a leader and role model. Through his advocacy work both in Canada and internationally, he has transformed the lives of many.”

In 2022, Professor Cotler was honored by the Churchill Society for the Advancement of Parliamentary Democracy when they bestowed upon him their Award for Excellence. In the summer of 2023, The Lantos Foundation for Human Rights & Justice recognized him as one of

the world's foremost human rights lawyers, and will award him their highest honor, the Lantos Human Rights Prize in October in Washington DC. In September of 2023, Israeli President Isaac Herzog conferred upon Professor Cotler the Israeli Presidential Medal of Honor in a ceremony in Jerusalem, characterizing him as "a world-renowned human rights advocate who has made a special contribution in the field of the struggle for human rights, and in the fight against antisemitism, hate crimes, and racism."