

Canadian Irwin Cotler, who helped free Mandela, given prestigious human-rights award



Professor Irwin Cotler, an international human rights lawyer and former Justice Minister of Canada, holding his casebook for a portrait in his home on Sept. 3, 2020. ANDREJ

IVANOV/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Former Canadian attorney-general Irwin Cotler says he was only five or six years old when his father told him his mission in life would be the pursuit of justice.

Forty-odd years later, Mr. Cotler would help free Nelson Mandela from prison. Now, at 83, Mr. Cotler has been named the recipient of the 2023 Lantos Human Rights Prize, an honour previously bestowed on the likes of the Dalai Lama and Hillary Clinton.

The prize is awarded by the Lantos Foundation for Human Rights & Justice and is named after late U.S. representative and activist Tom Lantos, a Holocaust survivor.

“It’s a humbling, moving experience,” Mr. Cotler said of the award.

He grew up in Montreal in the 1940s with his father, a modest lawyer who devoted much of his time to pro bono work, and his mother, an endlessly caring woman who taught Mr. Cotler the importance of even the smallest gestures of kindness.

When he was old enough to understand it, Mr. Cotler said, his father began to read passages to him from the Jewish philosopher Maimonides, a 12th-century thinker who saw the world as divided equally into good and evil. Mr. Cotler said he understood then, and still does today, what such a division means for the actions of individuals.

“Therefore, one good deed by any one of us, at any given moment in time, changes the ledger from evil to good. So, every day, we can do a good deed and every day we can, so to speak, better the human condition.”

He points to the efforts of Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust, as proof.

“What the entire bystander international community did not do, one person showed that with the compassion and courage to act, you can transform history.”

[With their new film about Irwin Cotler, married Montreal filmmakers make a stand for human rights](#)

Mr. Cotler is now the founder and international chair of the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights. And while he is perhaps best known for the advocacy he does there and past legal work he has done to free political prisoners around the world, his efforts in politics and academia have also been extensive.

He served as Canada’s justice minister and attorney-general from 2003 to 2006, during which he overturned more wrongful convictions in one year than any previous minister, helped draft the country’s first law against human trafficking and issued Canada’s first National Justice Initiative Against Racism and Hate.

Prior to entering politics, Mr. Cotler taught law at McGill University and was the director of the school’s human-rights program.

His work has touched the lives of countless people, including Mutasim Ali, who was living in Israel after fleeing Sudan when he met Mr. Cotler in 2013. As a result of Mr. Cotler’s advocacy, Mr. Ali became the first African to ever be granted refugee status in Israel. He is now a legal adviser with the Raoul Wallenberg centre.

Mr. Ali said everything he does is in an attempt to follow in Mr. Cotler’s steps.

“I think if we had just a few more of him in the world today, we would be in a better place.”