

Canadian Human Rights Lawyer Irwin Cotler Receives Lantos Human Rights Prize Amid Global Surge in Antisemitism

WASHINGTON, DC, USA, October 30, 2023 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The Lantos Foundation for Human Rights & Justice has awarded the 2023 Lantos Human Rights Prize, its highest human rights honor, to distinguished Canadian human rights lawyer and former Minister of Justice Irwin Cotler. Professor Cotler received the award at a standing room only ceremony on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, attended by members of Congress, representatives of the Biden Administration, members of the diplomatic corps, and dozens of human rights leaders and activists.



2023 Lantos Prize recipient Professor Irwin Cotler delivers remarks at the ceremony. Photo credit: Emily Chastain

In addition to his many professional achievements, Professor Cotler recently concluded his service as Canada's first-ever Special Envoy on Holocaust Remembrance and Combating Antisemitism. He has been a clarion and prescient voice on these issues for many decades, so it was particularly relevant to honor him against the backdrop of the tragic events in Israel and Gaza, as well as the [global surge in antisemitism](#).

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Professor Irwin Cotler

Speaking at the Lantos Prize ceremony, Cotler said, “Antisemitism remains the bloody canary in the mineshaft of global evil today. We have learned only too compellingly and too well that while it begins with Jews, it doesn't end with Jews. Antisemitism is toxic to democracies, it is an assault on our common humanity and requires a constituency of conscience to combat it. I say this in the shadow of this historical inflection moment – the worst day

in Jewish history since the Holocaust.”

Cotler reflected on his experience of being in Israel on October 7, 2023, and having to take shelter from rockets, rather than attending synagogue with his family, as planned. “The rockets foreshadowed the worst of mass atrocities, of horrors too terrible to be believed but not too terrible to have happened. And they unfolded as we were sitting in the bomb shelter watching in real-time because Hamas was uploading in a celebratory manner the very atrocities that they were committing.”

He closed his remarks by invoking the memory of the late Congressman Tom Lantos, with whom he shared a deep bond and for whom the Lantos Prize is named. “We must now be the guardians of our common humanity,” he said. “We must come together as a constituency of conscience, at a governmental level, at a congressional level, at a civil society level, in common cause on behalf of our common humanity and with this sense of moral urgency that Tom Lantos represented all his life. The least we can do is act upon that historical inspiration.”

Professor Colter serves as International Chair of the [Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights](#), the organization he founded to carry forward his lifelong mission of pursuing justice for all people and advancing human rights for the vulnerable and oppressed. Both Cotler and Congressman Lantos were deeply inspired by the example of Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust. Lantos, who credited Wallenberg with saving his own life, introduced a bill conferring honorary American citizenship on Raoul Wallenberg as his first act following his election to Congress. This act inspired Cotler and others to push for Canadian honorary citizenship for Wallenberg, as well, which became a reality only a few years after Congressman Lantos’ bill was signed into law.



Professor Irwin Cotler, Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett, Ambassador Roger Carstens and Rep. Jim McGovern at the 2023 Lantos Prize ceremony. Photo credit: Emily Chastain



Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett, President of the Lantos Foundation, presents the 2023 Lantos Prize to Professor Irwin Cotler. Photo credit: Emily Chastain

Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett, President of the Lantos Foundation, described for the audience a memorial to Raoul Wallenberg that sits alongside the United Nations in New York and features a bronze sculpture of his briefcase – left behind as he hastened off to rescue Jews in peril. The suitcase represents the unfinished business of Wallenberg’s work, prompting Lantos Swett to pose the question, “Who would pick up the briefcase left behind? Who would step forth to carry on Wallenberg’s mission of rescue and hope?”

She continued, “Tom Lantos and Irwin Cotler, each in his own way, took up that briefcase...They chose to roll onto their own shoulders the duty to be their brother’s keeper. Irwin Cotler has carried that briefcase with extraordinary dignity, determination, intelligence, and integrity for many decades. It is in recognition for all that he has nobly carried across the years that we bestow on him the Lantos Human Rights Prize.”

The ceremony honoring Cotler marked the fifteenth year the Lantos Foundation has awarded the Lantos Human Rights Prize. Cotler joins the distinguished ranks of Lantos Prize laureates, including His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the late Professor Elie Wiesel, real-life hero of the film Hotel Rwanda Paul Rusesabagina, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, founder of the global Magnitsky movement Bill Browder, co-founder of the Afghan Women’s National Soccer Team Khalida Popal, NBA athlete turned activist Enes Kanter Freedom – among other notable figures (see a [full list of laureates here](#)). It is given to a human rights champion or champions each year to help draw attention to human rights violations around the world and to encourage governments to make human rights a priority on equal footing with other policy decisions.

The Honorable Jim McGovern, Co-Chair of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, and Ambassador Roger Carstens, Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs, also delivered remarks at the event. Additional speakers included: John Paul Schnapper-Casteras, Chair of the Lantos Foundation Board of Trustees; Tomicah Tillemann, grandson of Tom Lantos and Foundation Board Member; and Annette Lantos Tillemann-Dick, daughter of Tom Lantos and Chair of the Foundation’s Advisory Board. Video tributes were shared from: Natan Sharansky, former Soviet dissident and political prisoner turned human rights activist; Carl Gershman, founding President of the National Endowment for Democracy; Bill Browder, head of the Global Magnitsky Justice campaign and 2019 Lantos Prize laureate; and Evgenia Kara-Murza, human rights activist and wife of imprisoned Russian opposition politician Vladimir Kara-Murza.

For more information about the ceremony, including photos and video, please contact Chelsea Hedquist at press@lantosfoundation.org.

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