

## John Ralston Saul Interview

### PART ONE: 'We can get every Nobel Prize winner in the world to stand up for either Carlos Fuentes or for that part-time journalist. That's how we work': PEN and Campaigning for Free Expression

**Professor Rachel Potter (Freedom of Expression Project Leader):** So, I'm delighted to be interviewing President of Canadian PEN Centre from 1990-1992 and the President of International PEN from 2009 to 2015, John Ralston Saul. First of all I just wanted to ask you what motivated you to get involved with the PEN organisation in Canada in the late 1980s.

**John Ralston Saul:** Well, during the 1980s, I spent a good part of each year in South East Asia and North Africa. So I would see on a regular basis what it looked like in terms of authoritarianism. And what was being done to freedom of expression. I came to know writers who were constantly in trouble. Some of them are still in trouble. A friend of mine, Sulak Sivaraksa, maybe the greatest Buddhist activist/philosopher in Asia, who's now 85, has been in jail how many times? They've just tried to put him in jail again. We all intervened and in the end they dropped the charges.

So when I came back to live in Canada I thought to myself what, apart from writing, should I be doing? I've always liked action. People started talking to me about PEN. A lot of my friends were in PEN, most of the leading Canadian writers were in PEN, and they said would you come on the board. Before I knew it, that was that. We were organising a big congress and organising missions to various places and doing some really exciting things in terms of freedom of expression. And we were part of a group of PEN Centres, along with some of the Scandinavians, who ran Chinua Achebe for International President. We thought this was a

way of provoking the kind of changes that we thought were needed in the International organisation, which was still overly dominated by Europeans. It was still doing great work but it wasn't doing what it could have been doing. We came very close to getting Chichua elected. He was a great man and of course a great writer. He put himself through this terrible thing, you know, running against somebody who was not at all at his level. But politics are politics, right? So he didn't quite win, but that was the first step in what were a series of very interesting politics which led to a series of big changes and the modernisation of PEN. A first step to becoming the kind of organisation that it is now - far more democratic, far more international. A lot of people worked very hard for 10-15 years to make that happen.

From around 2000, people had been trying to get me to run for International President. By the time I did it, I was elected basically by Latin American, Africa and Asia - I'm simplifying. But people knew that even though I am what I am, I was going to carry the cause of the real internationalisation of the organisation. It would not be so attached to its origins in Western Europe.

**RP:** And so when you took over as International PEN President, what were your hopes about what you could achieve in that role?

**JRS:** I thought that there were a bunch of very specific things. We had to run the thing in a different way. It took a long time but now I really think it's running the way, it's doing the kinds of things that we wanted to do in terms of its structures and so on. It's boring but if you have an international organisation, if you've got over 150-odd PEN Centres around the world you've got to figure out how to do that, because it's like the United Nations without the money. It's really important to figure out how do you raise money? How do you administer it? And now they've done something which we always wanted to do, which is that they've

hired a very good young journalist, a woman who was in Mexican PEN and is very courageous, to be a kind of sitting representative of the administration of PEN in the whole section of Latin America. And I think that in a few years we'll have permanent representatives in other regions - almost like working embassies of PEN in these countries and in these regions. That will be fantastic because it means that we're actually on top of things really, really fast.

I think the other thing was that there is such an NGO model out there, which is all very centralised, they're usually based in London or New York or whatever and they may be doing good in the world from some big capital. Of course that's not what PEN is. You become President by being elected by tens of thousands of writers from all over the world. We're fundamentally not an NGO. We're not at all that sort of thing. We're a grassroots freedom of expression literary organisation. And in order to do that we have to make sure that the Centres feel they are directly involved in what's happening. So I knew that one of the things I had to do was travel about 70pc of the time for six years to be with the Centres most in danger, in the most difficult countries, where it was hardest to be a writer, and to stay alive, to stay out of jail. Sometimes you take a delegation. Sometimes you go on your own. Sometimes I found I was the first President who had ever come to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan or whatever. It gives an enormous sense of self-worth to the writers who are there that the International Organisation wants to know what they think. That has an effect on what they will do and how they will participate, whether they'll come to congresses. You have to keep asking yourself: how can we help them? Are we listening to them properly? That was really important.

There were some other things that I felt were really important. I felt very strongly that we had to work on minority languages. There was already a very strong movement for that in PEN. I used my time to support them and to push for a linguistic rights declaration in Gerona. We

consciously sat down – about 50 of us - and wrote it in four languages at once, so that it was not written in French, it was not written in English, it was written in English, French, Spanish and Catalanian at the same time. The idea was to break that idea that one language is the original language and everything else is a translation. The process was very interesting. It has had, I think, quite a bit of an impact.

What I wanted was that we create a series of documents focused on different areas, which like the Gerona Manifests would become the intellectual and ethical basis of our action. Now we have five of them, that have to do with women's rights, that have to do with peace, with the internet, with translation, and of course with minority language rights. We don't simply use them. When we go into meetings with corporations and governments we know exactly what our position is. How to fight the fight and how to make the arguments. You can't just make it up along the way. You have to get your ethics right and be able to express them clearly.

We had to rethink the basis of how we saw ourselves. So, for example, when I arrived people were still arguing about whether we are a literary organisation or a freedom of expression organisation. From the beginning I said this is an irrelevant argument. These are the same thing. You can't have one without the other. If you get great literature in dictatorships that is a statement for freedom of expression. So let's not waste our time on that anymore. We just have to make sure that we are doing both at the same time. That's a way of imagining yourself. We are also an organisation which includes all the Nobel Prizewinners, except the Chinese. But you have to say, well, who are we protecting? Of course we try to protect our own members – over 30,000 writers, journalists, bloggers. But we say no, that's not good enough. It's literature we're protecting. It's freedom of expression that we are protecting or working for.

The first delegation I led was to Mexico, and was very important. Jennifer Clement was then the President of Mexican PEN. The first meeting was with the Minister of Justice. You know, you work out beforehand how to handle these meetings. We talk a lot about what's probably going to happen. There he was in a large room filled with lawyers ready to talk us out and to use up all the time. Almost immediately he said: 'I don't know why you are here to try to stand up for these, unprofessional part-time people who say they're journalists. They don't even have a journalist card' (These are the journalists being murdered up in the North of Mexico). In other words, 'you're very grand people, what are you doing defending these miserable, unprofessional whatever...' We expected this and had thought it through, so I said 'Well Minister, we're not in the least bit interested in whether you give them an official journalism card or not. If you want to give them a card that's your business. Literature and journalism is decided by the readers not by governments. Secondly, it's not your job to tell us who we represent. We represent every writer in Mexico from Carlos Fuentes to these unknown volunteer part-time journalists up on the border. Every one of them equally. And we can ask every Nobel Prize winner in the world to stand up for either Carlos Fuentes or for that part-time journalist. And they will stand up! That's how we work. The point is this: the front edge of free expression moves around over time and is different in different countries. In many places bloggers and internet writers are on the front line. I think the number of cases we take on now that involve the internet is enormous. It's probably moving up into 40pc. And look at the LGBTQI community. You suddenly realise that from the point of view of freedom of expression, this is a front line for free expression. You only have to look at the Russian Laws against the LGBTQI community. These laws attack them by taking away freedom of expression. How? By isolating them, they prevent people from talking about them, those laws prevent them from talking about themselves. They make it a crime to talk about their reality. So, we started up what is now a really strong part of our work, supporting the LGBTQI community's freedom of expression.

**RP:** And so PEN, ever since the beginning has claimed for itself, that it represents writers around the world, that it's a sort of Republic of Letters made real almost, it just has a certain cultural capital but I just wanted to ask you about what sort of agency you think it wields in the world. So in your tenure as President, were there moments when you felt that PEN had really had an impact on legislation or freeing a writer from prison. Can you tell me a bit about the moments when that succeeded and perhaps the moments when it failed?

**JRS:** It fails all the time and it succeeds all the time. When you think that there's a list with over 800 names on it, of people in prison and in danger, plus over 200 writers being killed every year, plus thousands of writers who are censoring themselves because that's how they are not in jail, plus all the writers that are going into exile and so on, you are dealing with a massive task just on the personal, not the policy front. You are trying to run the equivalent of a foreign policy on each of those writers in prison, each of which is an individual case. It is very difficult. So there are great successes and great failures. On that first Mexican mission, I think about three days in, we sat down with about 3 or 4 leaders of the Senate, because one of the key things was to get the Mexican Constitutions changed so that attacks on the freedom of expression of journalists didn't come under the state governments. They came under the Federal Government. That's a way of getting out of the worst level of corruption and violence, onto a level where maybe they could deal with the corruption. Maybe! We sat there for an hour and a bit with these men, who had already decided that they were not going to be helpful. But we have a very interesting approach in meetings like these. I would never go in alone. We always have four or five, so it wasn't just one person talking. And we tried this argument with the Senators, and we tried that and so on. Politicians tend to have one argument, whereas we've got dozens. We're writers, right?

It was Eric Lax, the American writer, who was then Treasurer, who suddenly said something to do with the end of their civil war and how it permitted a change in political philosophy. The point is he had an argument which spoke to them. They hesitated, then sort of looked at us and said 'Oh, well...I guess we could pass the law. And they passed the law [laughs incredulously]. And they passed the law - it was an enormous breakthrough. The next step was to push to federal government to enforce it. But at least the clarity of government responsibility for violence against free expression had been legally established. Then we have something to work with.'

For each case of a writer in prison you have to develop a specific campaign. In one of the Central Asian Republics (it would be unwise to name it) we wanted two people out of prison. We were sitting there with the Vice President in the Grand Palace and we talked and talked and talked. Finally he sent us off to see the heads of the prisons. And there they were all in Soviet uniforms down one side of a long table. At the end of it all the head of all the prisons asked us to lunch in a fancy restaurant. We were a bit surprised. But we accepted. You never know. It turned out that he loved Literature. So we were able to arrange that Carles, our Executive Director, and a local writer would go to see one of the prisoners. The end result was that the prison term cut in half. This is very hard work! They just let the guy out for God's sake! [laughs] Whereas in another Asian republic I had to sit there while the President screamed at me for twenty minutes - him screaming in one ear and the translator in the other ear - and we made no progress on the writer we wanted out. But on the other hand we came to an agreement off the record that he would not allow a Russian-style anti-LGBT law to be put through. You know, sometimes it's very specific. You actually see the outcome. You get someone out of prison on the spot. Sometimes you're just creating an atmosphere where it's harder for the government to act as badly as it would like to act. Sometimes you are doing a combination of public and private events where you are just trying to create enough margin

of manoeuvre for the writers to stay alive. Really tough places like Honduras for example. Sometimes you are trying to change the public argument.

There are lots of places where no one talks about freedom of expression. It just doesn't seem worth it. It's too difficult. Too dangerous. So you try to create an atmosphere where people start talking about freedom of expression. The newspapers start reporting it, the politicians have to deal with it differently. There are lots of failures.

As President, you are very conscious that this kind of work began in the 1930's with two historic cases during The Spanish Civil War. There was the Arthur Koestler-case and the Gabriel Garcia Lorca case, Lorca was shot dead in a ditch and Koestler was released. One disaster. One success. The history of PEN is that you are struggling all the time to get more people released and fewer people shot in a ditch. And it's not at all easy.

**RP:** So you were President from 2009-2015, so two terms, and you've spoken about certain ways in which the organisation modernised during that time, it sounds like you strengthened the global links between different centres, you had a real interest in pushing linguistic rights and also other ethical coordinates like LGBT rights and such...

**JRS:** It's also, and this is ongoing, the importance of getting more and more of the Centres to understand how they can defend themselves. The mechanisms of defending themselves. Sometimes it's as simple as arranging for courses on security. Sometimes it's working with them on how they can actually carry out their own campaign. After all, why would they know? They're writers. So maybe you can help them in that way. A lot of our work is helping people help themselves. But we have to do this all over the world, in over 100 countries. Including in Europe! And all over the Americas. There are endless fights that need to be

fought. Right now. Western governments have given up on one of the most fundamental rights: the right to privacy, which is one of the fundamental elements of freedom of expression. They've just given up on it. In truth they would like to know more about their citizens. They've always wanted to know. They don't want us to know about them but they want to know about us. This is the eternal struggle between democracy and security. All of this has to do with the work it takes to strengthen the public debate.

**RP:** During that time - and you've always been a strong defender of freedom of expression - but the meaning of that shifts about a bit. Did it change during that period, 2009-2015?

**JRS:** The internet element became bigger and bigger. Suddenly you were faced with countries like China, for example, employing how many - 25 to 50,000 people - working on listening to people to try and control the internet. Ethiopia is a good example. 90 million people, most of whom are poverty-stricken. But the government are spending millions of dollars listening to the small intellectual class and interfering with the internet, in a very very sophisticated way. Consider that for eighty-nine million of the people having a donkey is a luxury. It's an astonishing contrast. You see this in lots of countries. Often there is a lot of foreign support. A poverty stricken population and authoritarian governments spending massively on controlling what is being said between people and between writers or journalists. So there has been a massive change over a short period of time.

**RP:** So you've obviously written very interestingly and for quite a long time about globalism as a manifestation as an economically-driven ideology, is the flow of information also part of that flow of globalisation picture? Has your role in PEN affected your philosophy?

**JRS:** When you are doing this PEN work every day, you see how it impacts, everywhere, at every level how close it is to people's lives. How some poor student in a Middle Eastern country, downloads a story which is – you know – a relatively innocent story onto a minute university online magazine and a Mullah decides that this is a religious crime. The next thing you know he's in prison on his way to being hung for virtually nothing. That kind of rapidity and misuse of the internet is happening all over the place, which makes you re-think how you imagine societies are going to function. I'm referring to a specific case where we were able to intervene. I made a very very personal intervention – I happened to know the President of the Republic. So I wrote a handwritten note to the President, which I got an Ambassador to hand to him asking him to do certain things and it was done within two weeks and the guy was out of the country.

Yes, all of this does have an effect on what you write. Travelling constantly into these countries has to change you. In Honduras, you're sitting there with authorities who are really the problem. You're asking people in justice to look after justice and really they're the core of the problem, of the violence and the deaths.

It makes you think, both as a novelist and an essayist. You are very often sitting down with murderers, enablers of murders, people who are indifferent to murder, or torture or disappearances. You do that on a regular basis and it can't help but have an enormous impact on what you write. There is a big difference between people sitting in rooms in democracies pumping out endless stuff without having seen any of this and having strong views: does privacy matter? Are you left-wing or right-wing? Does freedom of expression matter? You have to know what it's like to live these lives as a writer in a dangerous country; knowing what might happen to you.

I think I told you the story in one Central American country of a young man who had learned that the Head of a department at his University was selling degrees. The Head of the University and the authorities were trying very hard through criminal libel to destroy the student to put him in jail where he would be killed. One Sunday I got a phonecall from the head of the PEN Centre there saying that a bunch of guys with machine guns had surrounded this young man's house, shouting that they were going to kill him and was there anything I could do? It was a Sunday and I was in Canada. What are you going to do? I sat there thinking then I called up a friend who was a correspondent of EFE - the big Spanish News Agency - and said, can you get something up online immediately, this is what's happening. Maybe if you get it up immediately, it'll have an impact. So he did that. And immediately, the curtains that were down were up. After all, people will see it through the irregular. They'll see it right away. A lot of this kind of murder and imprisonment is because the curtains are pulled down. Things are hidden and not spoken about. In this case, suddenly people were paying attention, phonecalls were being made and people were appearing and they went away. So the guys with the machine guns evaporated.

You can imagine that hundreds of stories like this had an enormous impact on me and my life and the way I see things.

Let me put this question of how the PEN experience affected my life another way. We live in the West, with very centralized view of the world. Our view. One of the curiosities of Globalization is that it has simply reinforced this Western view. Globalization means what we want it to mean. It is our concept. So the reality is that Globalization is just a reformulation of the manifest destiny of the old Western empires.

It is merely a theory with some Austrian roots which was put together in England, the United States. New York, Washington, Chicago and a few places in Britain. Curious for THE big international theory. Nobody stopped to say, wait a minute, if this is the new modern international theory, why is it put together in these two English-speaking places using 19<sup>th</sup> century theories out of Britain. What's international about any of that? There were all sorts of assumptions being made that this new, globalist system, it was going to work for everybody. It was endlessly declared that the Chinese this and the Chinese that; but they never asked the Chinese what the Chinese thought about it! I know what the Chinese thought about it. You only had to ask them. The Chinese thought it was complete nonsense; they thought if the West is stupid enough to let them sell as many products into their countries as they want, great. It wasn't their job to worry about Western workers. They would go on pumping out exports until the West shut the doors. Then the Chinese would go back to dealing with their internal market.

**END OF PART I**

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