

Dr. Irwin Cotler, MP

Irwin Cotler, PC, OC, MP, Ph.D. (born May 8, 1940) was Canada's Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada from 2003 until the Liberal government of Paul Martin lost power following the 2006 federal election. He was first elected to the Canadian House of Commons for the constituency of Mount Royal in a by-election in November 1999, winning over 91% of votes cast. He was sworn into Cabinet on December 12, 2003.

The son of a lawyer, he was born in Montreal, Quebec, studied at McGill University there (receiving a BA in 1961 and a law degree three years later) and then continued his education at Yale University. For a short period, he worked with federal Minister of Justice John Turner.

Cotler was a professor of law at McGill University and the director of its Human Rights Program from 1973 until his election as a Member of Parliament in 1999 for the Liberal Party of Canada. He has also been a visiting professor at Harvard Law School, a Woodrow Wilson Fellow at Yale Law School and is the recipient of five honorary doctorates. He was appointed in 1992 as an Officer of the Order of Canada. He is a past president of the Canadian Jewish Congress.

Human Rights

Cotler has served on the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and its sub-Committee on Human Rights and International Development, as well as on the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights. In 2000, he was appointed special advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs on the International Criminal Court.

He is considered an expert on international law and human rights law. As an international human rights lawyer, Cotler served as counsel to former prisoners of conscience Nelson Mandela in South Africa, Jacobo Timmerman in Latin America, Mughtar Pakpahan in Asia, as well as other well known political prisoners and dissidents. Cotler represented Natan Sharansky, who was imprisoned in the Soviet gulag for Jewish activism. After his release, Sharansky went on to become Israeli Deputy Prime Minister.

Saad Eddin Ibrahim, an Egyptian democracy activist imprisoned by the Egyptian government, was represented by Cotler and acquitted in 2003. He acted as counsel to Maher Arar during part of Arar's imprisonment and supported demands for a public inquiry. He has also defended both Palestinians and Israelis against their own governments, and participated in a minor role in the Camp David peace agreement between Israel and Egypt. Dr. Irwin Cotler stood in defense of anti-jihadist Muslim journalist in Bangladesh, Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury, who faces sedition, treason and blasphemy charges in his own country for confronting radical Islam, for promoting interfaith understanding and for demanding relations between Dhaka and Jerusalem. According to Bangladeshi law, sedition bears capital punishment.

As Minister of Justice, Cotler tabled Canada's first-ever National Justice Initiative Against Racism, in parallel with the government's National Action Plan Against Racism.

Cotler has also fought against genocide and impunity. His attempts to bring Nazi war criminals to justice have won praise as has been his founding of all-party Parliamentary groups to bring attention and action to end the genocide in Darfur. Cotler has worked with a group of international jurists to indict Iranian President Ahmadinejad for incitement to genocide under the UN Charter and the Genocide Convention.