

JOHN RALSTON SAUL BECOMES FIRST CANADIAN TO HEAD MIGHTY PEN

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✘ By Vit Wagner, [The Toronto Star](#), 22 October 2009

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Past presidents of the organization, founded in 1921, include such literary heavyweights as John Galsworthy, Arthur Miller, Heinrich Böll and Mario Vargas Llosa.

"It's exciting. It's a real commitment," said Saul, 62, on the line from Austria. "And it's very moving to stand up in a room full of writers and intellectuals from around the world, knowing that you're in an astonishing line of people. That carries with it a real responsibility.

"One of the things I laid out was the importance of minority languages. There are hundreds of languages that are disappearing, mainly aboriginal indigenous languages, a lot of them in Canada. The ultimate removal of freedom of expression is to have your language disappear and, in a sense, to have your culture disappear."

International PEN, based in London, has 144 chapters globally, representing 18,000 writers around the world. Its responsibilities include lobbying for the release of writers who have been imprisoned

or exiled for their views.

"This means that Canada will play a bigger role in International PEN," said Toronto Star columnist and past PEN Canada president Haroon Siddiqui, who had a hand in nominating Saul for the position.

"PEN Canada is one of the most successful PEN centres in the world. This is partially a recognition of that and also a recognition that John would make a very good president."

Over the years, PEN Canada has lobbied on behalf of several celebrated dissidents, including former Czech president Vaclav Havel and Turkish Nobel Prize laureate Orhan Pamuk. In 2002, the organization helped secure the release of Jose Francisco Gallardo, a Mexican brigadier-general sentenced to 28 years for writing an article urging his country to appoint a military ombudsman.

Saul is the author of several fiction and non-fiction titles, including *The Collapse of Globalism* and *A Fair Country*. He is a past president of PEN Canada, which he joined in the 1980s.

As president, Saul will be in a position to influence the priorities of the organization. He expects to work out of both Toronto and London, besides "spending a lot of time on airplanes" – all without having to give up his day job.

"I've become very good at doing more than one thing at once," he said.

"In this case, it's essential. I don't think it would be very healthy for a writer, as the president of the most important writers' association, to stop writing."

The 30th International Festival of Authors (IFOA) opened Wednesday night at Harbourfront Centre with the annual PEN Canada benefit, featuring an onstage conversation between U.K. publishing legend Diana Athill and internationally acclaimed Canadian author Alice Munro.

The audience applauded and hooted when the announcement of Saul's election was made from the stage Wednesday night.

All IFOA events include the placement of an empty chair onstage, representing a persecuted writer. This year's honouree is newspaper editor Hrant Dink, who was assassinated in Istanbul in 2007.

