

# **PEN Centenary Congress Keynote Address**

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International President (2009 – 2015)

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Wonderful to be with all of you. And of course wonderful to be with my friends, Per Wästberg, who's there with Orhan Pamuk, a real stalwart of PEN International. And of course with Homero Aridjis and Jennifer Clement.

We four presidents represent 25 years of the history of PEN. We're celebrating 100 years - between us that's a quarter of the history of PEN. And these have been years of reform. I think that we've all done our best. We've all tried very hard with the membership to strengthen the organization.

When I ran, with a lot of people wanting me to do it, we had a bunch of ideas about what we thought needed to be done at that particular time. I remember people like Haroon Siddiqui and so many others. I remember that some of them were very particular intellectual problems. For example, there was a big argument going on inside PEN: were we a literary organization or a freedom of expression organization? There was a sort of division inside. And I just kept saying, "Look, these two things are intimately intertwined. These are one and the same. You can't have

PEN if you don't have these two things right from the beginning." We must not argue about this. We must think in a much more global way about how they're one and the same.

The other was more controversial. Not now perhaps. But increasingly the nonprofit world is dominated by NGOs and when you ask for money you have to fill out forms as if you were an NGO. The reality is PEN is not an NGO. We have never been an NGO. We will never be an NGO. We're not some organization sitting in a big city sending out messages to the world. We're an international democracy. We are a grassroots democracy of writers working for freedom of expression and literature. It's a very different body. If anything, we're like the United Nations. Except we have even less money than the United Nations. And so be it - we're writers. We make up for the less money with the influence that writers have and the fear that we create in people who hold power.

This was also a time when we needed to continue with some of the practical reforms. We had a board that was really functioning well, but it needed to be made to work in a more professional way. We needed to create a board executive, which we did, that would work together. We needed a very hardworking series of board committees, which were clear about what our tasks were. And we did all of that. The other thing that was very important is that we've always had fantastic staff, but we had to have fantastic staff who really spoke from - not for - from the membership of PEN, the 140 PEN Centres in over 100 countries. Who came from those countries. Very complicated. Expensive. Difficult to do. But we now have a staff which really represents the languages and the origins of what PEN is.

I personally, not alone, but I personally was determined to focus on minority and endangered languages. There was a lot of support for this. We have a very important committee in this area. We started creating these Manifestos. We now have about seven of them. The first was the Girona Manifesto on languages. These Manifestos are incredibly important because they are the underpinnings - the explanations - of the Charter. We understand our obligations under the Charter better because of these amazing Manifestos. Again, this is not something that one person does. This is the whole PEN leadership that worked, and is working just as much under Jennifer, to build this understanding of the kind of work that we have to do.

I was personally, particularly obsessed (being a Canadian) by Indigenous languages. Indigenous people and Indigenous languages have suffered so appallingly under the Western empires. These languages were just slashed and destroyed. We as a literary and freedom of expression organization have to fight in order to support Indigenous peoples and their languages. It didn't happen under me, but it started, I guess you could say, under a bunch of us. I'm so proud that we now have two Indigenous PEN centres. And if the other PEN centres in the Americas get their act together there will be more Indigenous PEN centres, which is exactly what we need.

For me, the big question was what to do about 140 PEN centres, so many of them isolated. Without the money. In difficult political circumstances. What could we do, what could I do, what could the executive do, to break down that isolation. A number of people said to me, "John, you've got to go see them. You've got to bring them in." And so, for six years I travelled 70% of the time. It was a fantastic privilege. Somewhat exhausting, but a fantastic privilege. I learnt so much and I tried to work hard with many others to bring what these centres represented into the core of what

PEN International stands for. That meant going to the places that are isolated, that are in trouble, that are under threat, where people are in prison, where there aren't democracies. It's the real and the hard work of PEN International. Where literature is most at danger along with freedom of expression.

Because we had this executive, I tried to travel all the time with the International Secretary and the Treasurer. I was incredibly fortunate to have the great Eugene Schoulgin and the amazing Hori Takeaki for five years. Hori and I, and Eric Lax, and then Jarkko Tonti, travelled and sat down together and carried the arguments as a group. It was very exciting. Friends for life.

I think in the process we helped reinvent what PEN delegations were like. You saw that, for example, with Jennifer, that amazing delegation, big delegation, to Turkey, which both Per and I were lucky enough to take part in. These sorts of travellings were very complicated. You had to listen. You had to figure out what you could do. Sometimes it was fun, sometimes it was frightening. I remember in Kazakhstan we started out with the vice-president of the state in a big, empty gilded palace and he sent us off to see the heads of the prisons, who were lined up at a table in their Soviet-style uniforms. We made our arguments and then eventually they said, "Why don't we have lunch?" We were a bit surprised. We had never been invited to lunch by a bunch of heads of prisons. So, off we went to this expensive Argentinian restaurant and they turned up wearing beautifully cut Italian suits and they said, "Well, we're so glad you're here. We love writers. Our families love writers." We saw an opportunity. We lept. And by the time the lunch was over we got one prisoner's term cut in half and got medications for another. Not big victories, but the hard work of literature and freedom of expression.

That night we met together with the Kazakh PEN Centres. They had never seen anyone from the leadership. The elder stood up and looked at me - generically - and said, “We’ve been waiting a long time to see you.” And then we had an amazing discussion about their situation.

Sometimes, it was very complicated. We decided - it was a very risky decision, but we were right - to hold a congress in Kyrgyzstan to show that you could bring 200 - 300 writers who would speak their minds to an area which was not democratic. And the ceiling would not fall. And we did that. But the president was extremely annoyed because we were trying to get a prisoner out of jail. So he summoned me. Of course I had to go to protect our local writers and I brought along a number of our famous international writers. We sat down at the table with the president on my left and the translator on my right and the president shouted, screamed at me for about twenty minutes in one ear while the translator was shouting in the other ear. I was sitting there, staying as calm as I could, and when he looked a little bit tired I said, “Look President, this isn’t going anywhere. Why don’t we try something else? Your Parliament is putting through an anti-LGBTQ law, Russian-style. Can you help us stop it? Because you’ve got a very frightened community.” He was so embarrassed about how he lost control that he said, “Yeah... yeah, I think I can help.” And so we did a deal and he blocked the law. You just don’t know what this kind of literary diplomacy is going to look like.

Sometimes, what you did was deeply moving. I remember being in Myanmar with Ma Thida in the back of a big old truck going out to a village where there was going to be a poetry reading - that’s a revolutionary act in a dictatorship like Myanmar. We arrived in the village and the big room was filled with the village all seated on the floor. We sat on the other side, also on the floor.

Poetry was read and then the people started getting up and speaking. They hadn't spoken for 50 years. This link between literature, freedom of expression and democracy is central to what PEN is at its very best.

Or, in Sierra Leone, maybe the most moving moment of my time. I was there of course with Mohamed Sheriff and they took me out to a rural village where there was a girls' school, a young women's school, and they put on two hours of things they had written: plays, essays, poetry and so on. I was supposed to sit in a dignified manner, in a stiff chair, being the president - of course I was trying not to cry half the time - and Mohamed was giving them instructions. It was a remarkable moment which showed how through literature you can help to build citizens and democracy.

The biggest challenge, which I swore I was going to spend a lot of time on and succeed at, was rebuilding PEN in Latin America, where it had suffered so greatly under the dictatorships. Members killed. Members in exile. And so on. It was hard work, but we made it work. With the support of Antonio Skármeta in Chile we relaunched Chilean PEN. And with the wonderful Luisa Valenzuela in Argentina we relaunched Argentinian PEN. We started relaunching everywhere. Amazing centres like the Honduran Centre with Dina Meza, where you really see what it's like to be a PEN member and to wake up every morning and wonder what this day is going to do to you.

Finally (I think it was the first of three delegations), we were in Mexico. About a dozen of us. The first meeting was with the Minister of Justice. He had a room filled with lawyers to talk us out. We sat down and he basically began with contempt, saying, "I don't understand why you're so

interested in these part-time, unprofessional journalists. I mean, they don't even have a journalist card." (These were the people being killed.) I was prepared - we had talked among ourselves - so I said: "Minister, that's all very well, but we don't care whether they have journalist cards. You hand out the journalist cards. A journalist is decided by the reader, not by a government. Second, I can promise you that we will fight as hard for the life of an endangered part-time, unpaid journalist on the border as we will fight for the life of our friend Carlos Fuentes."

That's the essence of PEN. We stand for writers of every kind all around the world. This is an amazing organization. 100 years of inventing how to defend literature. How to build freedom of expression. And we're still doing it. I give all luck to the person who's elected to be the next president because this has always been the task. From the beginning. Best of luck to you, best of luck to all of us. Thank you.