

#### HABEAS CORPUS IN INTERNATIONAL LAW

Habeas Corpus in International Law is the first comprehensive examination of this subject. It looks at the location, scope, and significance of the right to a judicial determination of the legality of one's detention as guaranteed by international and regional human rights instruments. First, it examines the history of habeas corpus and its place in human rights treaties, providing a useful resource for understanding the status and application of this internationally protected right. The book continues by identifying and analyzing the primary challenges to habeas corpus, in particular, its applicability during armed conflict, the possibility of derogation, its extraterritorial application, and procedural shortcomings. The book next addresses the significance of habeas corpus guarantees not just in protecting personal liberty, but in promoting the international rule of law by serving as a unique check on executive action. Finally, it offers suggestions on how this right might be strengthened.

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# Habeas Corpus in International Law

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# Foreword

My first book, entitled *Habeas Corpus*, was published in 1990. The book was issued by one of Quebec's leading legal publishing houses. It was part of a series of modestly priced booklets aimed at the practitioner market. It began with a short theoretical essay, but it was mainly meant as a manual on how to proceed before the local courts. There were model forms so that a lawyer without any previous experience in filing an application for a writ of habeas corpus could do the paperwork. It has been many years since I received a royalty statement from the publisher, if indeed I ever received one! The book is most certainly out of print, but I would not think that it is out of date because not much changes in terms of the law and procedure of habeas corpus.

Although the title of the book doesn't make this entirely clear, the book was written in French. The French expression for habeas corpus is habeas corpus. The same is true for many other languages. When lawyers from different parts of the world meet they do not always find it easy to communicate. But if there is one expression with which they are all familiar, from Japan to Argentina to Estonia, it would be habeas corpus.

My interest in the subject of habeas corpus had been kindled by the naive and inexperienced attempts of a novice lawyer with a bent for human rights to launch proceedings using the "great writ." One of them was stunningly successful. I had been contacted by a man who had been detained for several months in a notoriously miserable remand centre in the heart of Montreal. He was brought there from a federal penitentiary where he had served a full term of several years for importing narcotic drugs into Canada from the United States. Because the man had no legal status in the country, once his prison sentence was completed he was to be returned south of the border. But when the Canadian authorities attempted to send him home, the United States challenged whether he was in fact an American citizen. They refused to let him enter the country. The man claimed he was from New York City, that he did not know his parents, and that he had been raised by a well-



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meaning adult in some sort of makeshift housing, an abandoned tenement building, if I recall correctly. He certainly sounded and looked like an African American man from an urban ghetto. Canadian police went to New York looking for the records. They could find traces of him at public schools in Harlem, but there was no sign of a birth certificate.

The Canadian authorities said that until such time as the Americans would take him back, they would have to hold him in detention. My view was that he had done his time and was entitled to be released. And if Canada couldn't send him back to New York, then they had to release him, even if he had no lawful entitlement to live and work in Canada. After all, they had let him into the country in the first place.

The legal mechanism was a writ of habeas corpus. And what a thrill it was when, after a week-long hearing in the Montreal Courthouse, a judge of the Superior Court of Quebec named Henry Steinberg agreed with me. The government lawyers argued that his story about growing up in the slums of Harlem was implausible. But I knew New York City better than they did, and it all made sense to me, as it did to Justice Steinberg.

The government appealed, but I prevailed once again in the Court of Appeal. My client was released from custody. A few days later, he telephoned me from New York. It seemed that he was able to accomplish in little more than a heartbeat what the Canadian authorities had been unable to do over many months. I'm not sure how he crossed the border and I never asked. He continued to travel to and from Canada from time to time without apparent impediment.

I bumped into Judge Steinberg one day outside the courthouse and told him about the fate of the man he had freed. He did not seem surprised, and said something like, "I always knew that man had to have the pavement of New York under his feet."

One of the impressive features of the "great writ" was a custom – I don't believe it was ever codified – by which it took precedence over all other proceedings. I can recall filing an application for habeas corpus late one afternoon and walking into motions court the following morning to find myself at "the top of the rôle," as we said. Well-heeled lawyers for banks and insurance companies had to sit around patiently while I made my case for a person whose liberty had been deprived. I don't recall that there was any grumbling about such jumping of the queue. Everyone seemed to honour the nobility of the "great writ." They were happy for me to proceed first even if some of my fellow lawyers may have thought that the guy must have been in detention for a good reason. It was a way of paying tribute to the rule of law.

Other procedural rules were also greatly relaxed in order to facilitate habeas corpus proceedings. The time limits for filing of applications and their service on the authorities were more informal, or at least they were not strictly applied. The written application did not need to be typewritten, or on paper of regulation size. Once I was contacted by a person detained in the cells of the courthouse itself who



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thought he was being held unlawfully. I wrote out a motion on a piece of paper in the courthouse cafeteria, made a few photocopies, and found myself before a judge in a matter of an hour or two.

Presenting a motion for a writ of habeas corpus was quite exhilarating. The words themselves had a profound and fundamental ring to them. It was a reminder that, in its heart and soul, lawyering was not about settling mere disputes over land and money but about protecting the individual from arbitrary action of the state. To apply for habeas corpus was to affirm our fraternity with lawyers around the world who were using this historic remedy to do battle with regimes that were far more oppressive and brutal than our own.

Habeas corpus also provoked a strange and rather unfamiliar complicity between judges and lawyers. We filed the motion, of course, but it could go nowhere without the willingness of the judge to call the authorities to account. Most of the time, judges are merely neutral arbiters in disputes between landlords and tenants, wives and husbands, merchants and suppliers. In proceedings for habeas corpus, they become the allies of the lawyer in the battle against arbitrary detention.

The ancient roots of habeas corpus in the protection of freedom and liberty has assured its place in the modern codifications of fundamental rights at the international level. Brian Farrell's splendid study offers us a meticulous account of how this process took place. He begins with the curious absence of the expression habeas corpus in the seminal text, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Of course, this was no oversight, and the core principle can be found in Article 8 of the Declaration: "Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law." This right to a remedy has echoed through the subsequent human rights treaties, both general and specialized. It has left its mark in the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, and the United Nations Human Rights Committee. The book goes on to examine why these international guarantees are so important to personal liberty and maintenance of the rule of law

Habeas corpus remains very central to some of the great human rights issues of our time. Guantánamo is a word that recurs frequently in Brian Farrell's study. He conducted his research and wrote this book while dedicated lawyers in his own country used the great writ, enshrined in the United States Constitution, in order to challenge indefinite detention without trial. While the research on this book was underway, a President was elected who promised to close the Guantánamo detention site and with it, presumably, bring an end to the practice of arbitrary detention. But with President Obama's second term at its end, there are still scores of men being held on that stolen corner of Cuba in what amounts to a zone of international lawlessness. At the same time, to the extent that there's even minimal judicial oversight, it's been because of habeas corpus.



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It is a bit of a cliché to say that a book is timely, especially when it deals with a rather ancient procedural mechanism that is still known by its archaic Latin moniker. To be sure, Guantánamo is not the only place on our planet where human freedom is being abused. The great writ of habeas corpus, now repackaged in the instruments of modern international human rights law, has never been so important.

Professor William Schabas



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