

Rick Salutin Transcript

Interviewer: Okay, so we are now recording. The first question we ask everyone is, can you give us your name and your background?

Rick Salutin: Rick Salutin, I'm a freelance writer, and have always been since I began my adult life, really, and I've done a variety of writing. I did a lot of theater for the first phase of my writing career, which goes back, I don't know, over 50 years. And you know, a number of novels and screenplays and TV scripts and a lot of journalism, always freelance, including 20 years as Op-Ed columnist at The Globe and Mail, and about 12 or 13 at The Star since then.

Interviewer: Okay, can you take us back to the beginning of how you became aware of free trade and your entry point into some of your work opposing free trade?

Rick Salutin: I'd spent 10 years in the US. I was from Canada, but spent the '60s in the US, and by the end of it, I was pretty immersed in a kind of left, you know, the leftism, the anti-war movement. I'd been arrested there for anti-war activities, and I participated in the admiration for national liberation movements of that era, which were, you know, Vietnam, Cuba, China, in fact, and in Africa.

But when I came back to Canada, I didn't quite know what to make of Canada, and I realized there was actually a kind of nationalist, national liberation current that had arisen in Canada since I'd been gone, and it sort of slotted into my own feelings about politics and the way the world worked. So when I started writing, I engaged with people who were kind of left nationalists, people from the Waffle movement, people on a magazine at the time that was a kind of left nationalist magazine called This Magazine and I began to work for a union [Confederation of Canadian Unions] that was a small union with roots in the Toronto area, organizing immigrant workers that had been thrown out of an American union in Quebec in the early '50s, and they had created a national opposition, nationalist opposition within the labour movement to try to Canadianize the labour movement. And in fact, they have been the most successful component of the nationalism of that time, because the Canadian labour movement is largely Canadian, mostly Canadian now, and it absolutely was not, you know, forty to fifty years ago.

So then, when free trade came along, I don't know you just felt a sort of atavistic response that just [...] you didn't quite know where it came from, but that this is bad. And Laurell [Ritchie] was the one, I think, who really got the whole thing going and organized. I don't know exactly where the model of the coalition came from, but I think it was, it was ready at hand, and everybody assumed it made sense, except the NDP and the Canadian Labour Congress—could be because they could see that this would undercut NDP support. So, I got involved with that.

I was quite active in cultural politics. At the time I was around, I had been the head of the Canadian playwrights' organization and involved in other kinds of national [initiatives], especially after the Conservatives came to power in '84, I was involved in the kind of pushback against the Americanization that they represented. So, it was all already at hand, but it was interesting.

The other thing that was interesting to me was I had come up with a kind of a new left – what was, you know, in those long-ago days called the New Left and, I had shared the view that electoral politics was kind of beneath us. The real thing was to get into the streets or get into communities and organize direct action, but I'd always been terrifically intrigued by electoral politics. You know, partly in a theatrical, dramatic way. There was just something about that kind of clear delineation of which side you're on and the outcome that you finally get when you have an election.

And so, although I hadn't engaged in it much, this was a chance for me to engage in it. And for all of us, I think very few of us had had directly entered that sphere of electoral politics. It was quite exciting, and we made some real mistakes because of that, but we also had some effect. And, yeah, it was it, and it was something new. It's nice to revitalize your politics and everything else, because otherwise, [you're] just treading on old ground.

Interviewer: And why did Laurell reach out to you? Did you represent—

Rick Salutin: Laurell was part of the union. We'd been part of the same group in Toronto, and she was part of that union that I was working for, and we knew each other. I wouldn't say she reached me. She told me about it, and I got the playwrights involved, and then I just got involved. It just suited me. And these are things that... there are intangibles in everything, and certainly in something like politics. I think even if you ask the question, in a way it suggests [...] you know, like you could say to somebody who joins the Liberal Party or the Conservatives, why did you do that? And you get a fairly straightforward thing. Either I'm a, you know, a crazed idealist and believe in the cause, or I want to make a career for myself, something like that. It didn't have that quality. There was just an atmosphere at the time in politics and in the arts and in the nationalist movement that you just wanted to be in there. It all seemed connected, and it was your duty and fun.

Interviewer: So, it was an appealing political cause to dive into.

Rick Salutin: Well, it was not just appealing. It was necessary. It was on the table. You know, we didn't put it on the table, but once it was there, you had to respond to it, and that's what politics is about. It's about deciding what your program is, like socialism, and just going straight ahead and doing it. Once you are

Free trade as an existential threat that led to the formation of the Anti-Free Trade Coalition

“When free trade came along, I don't know you just felt a sort of atavistic response that just [...] you didn't quite know where it came from, but that this is bad.”

Laurell Ritchie was a prominent activist and organizer within the anti-free trade coalition, focusing on uniting different labour groups and playing a key role in organizing large events that demonstrated the coalition's strength and visibility.

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The coalition's ability to unite different groups despite resistance from traditional labor organizations, like the CLC, was crucial in building momentum: *“there was some resistance; the CLC would occasionally send somebody to threaten to destroy us.”*

in the real world, you're responding to situations you had no control over creating and trying to do so without ignoring or abandoning your basic principled motives.

Interviewer: So, can you talk a little bit about whether your activist work was through the initial Coalition Against Free Trade that started in Toronto, or did you have other connections in different parts of the free trade [movement]?

Rick Salutin: Well, first of all, I'm not comfortable with the term "activist." I'm not sure why, but it's a later term.

It's a sort of a '90s term. There's a certain kind of snobbishness to it, that some people are active and other people are passive. I just don't, [it is something] to which I don't respond.

I'd had a lot of experience. I was pretty well full-time in the labour movement for a good number of years. Once I got involved, you know, that wasn't paid. I was technically a volunteer, I basically had two lives: as a writer and as a union organizer, and that was more [...] I just wanted to do stuff. It just all seemed you know, I came back from the US and started, I got out of what I'd been involved in before I started writing.

The free trade thing, just seemed quite organic. I mean, Laurell got it going, but she [...] she's a really great organizer, and still is actually in retirement, she does more than most people who have full time jobs, and does it very effectively, the most natural organizer I ever saw. But she got everybody to this meeting. I think that's where I met Marjorie [Griffin Cohen], and then we got to be quite good friends. And I knew a number of the people who were there, and others I met there, but it was just [...] you know, it was on the agenda and you got into it. And we met once a week, I think once a week, for starting in, I don't know, '84 or '85 at least through the election, late '88.

Interviewer: So pretty frequent—

Rick Salutin: I think it was once a week, or once every two weeks, it was a lot, yeah. It was a big preoccupation. People just dove in. And eventually, we created the name of the organization. At the first, it was somebody who said it was a coalition. What if we call this the Coalition Against Free Trade? And so, let's call it the Coalition Against Free Trade. And we hired a couple of people who you maybe have run into, Scott and Ken. I don't remember the last...

Interviewer: Scott Sinclair? So, you had two staff members who were basically the main staff?

Rick Salutin: Well, they ran the office, you know. That was when you did everything by phone. There was no electronic mail then, I mean, email began around the late '80s, I think, just around the time we were finishing up. So, everything had to be done by phone, and by in person.

Interviewer: So, at these weekly meetings, did you see this organization growing over like, I guess—

Rick Salutin: You had to. You had to grow yourself. I mean, it was a really mixed organization. And we had some unions. There was some resistance; the CLC [Canadian Labour Congress] would occasionally send somebody to threaten to destroy us. It had that kind of authoritarian mentality in the labour movement, as well as the kind of thing that Laurell and others had, which was a really democratic sense.

And eventually, we found a way to work with the Canadian Labour Congress and Nancy [Riche], the Vice President from Newfoundland, Nancy. Does that ring a bell? Nancy Riche or Rich, or something like that, I can't remember. I mean, she eventually penetrated the thinking there, and brought them online, partly because we had real success.

But you're judged by what you do. It was always a matter of figuring out what we wanted to do. There wasn't a national organization. [One] was eventually formed, but I think we were kind of central in it, not because it was Toronto in this case, but because there was just a good sense of organization. We ran big events, we ran events at Massey Hall in Toronto, which is a big outlet, and we filled it twice. I mean, once before the deal, and then once after they'd made the deal, and we were on the way to the election. And it was neat. The first time I remember the [...] I mean, we had, you know, everybody from Walter Gordon, who was a liberal kind of icon, Liberal Party icon and a nationalist, to lot of musicians. And I got, I mean, we would have meetings, we'd set up an Arts Committee, and the artists would commit to filling the stage for three hours, and the unions would commit to getting the hall filled. And it worked twice.

The first time, as people poured into Massey Hall, I remember standing on the apron of the stage and the journalists who were there saying, "Jesus, people really care about this thing." It had not occurred to them at that point that they did, but it had that same kind of atavistic, you know, kind of instinctive reflexive response, this is a bad thing for this country. And then we went back again the second time after that. It looked like the deal was not going to go through, but Mulroney and Reagan pulled it out. So, then we just had to, you know, gear up for the election, and that was on a different level, but we started it with another sold-out Massey Hall rally.

And then, for me in particular, there was this comic book project with Terry Mosher -Aislin- from the Montreal Gazette. It was an old friend, and Terry had never joined any cause. It was the only time in his life he's done that. They said, "Well, are you sure? You're in journalism. You shouldn't be on one side. You should be, you know, somehow outside covering it objectively". He said,

"Well, I'll tell you what [...] I've let the anti-free trade people use my cartoons for free, so I will also let the pro-free trade people use my cartoons for free". It was a big project, and it actually turned the election around for about a week.

We put a copy in the daily paper in every city in the country, except Calgary. We didn't have enough. We were a bit short, and we decided which city could we just give up on? And it was, but it did have a real impact, and the polls shifted so that the Liberal Turner had done a good job in the debate, and the polls shifted to the Liberals and against the Conservatives. The big mistake we made was just in experience. I had not realized that it's not enough to make your case and turn people around, because the other side is going to come in and make their case, and people will tend to go with what they heard

Overcoming labour resistance through success and organization

The initially resistant labour movement eventually joined the anti-free trade coalition. Salutin notes that the coalition effectively engaged unions by demonstrating visible achievements, such as its ability to fill Toronto's Massey Hall twice. Nancy Riche played a key role in connecting the coalition with traditional labour organizations, advocating for union involvement. *"We found a way to work with the Canadian Labour Congress and Nancy [Riche], the CLC Vice President from Newfoundland eventually penetrated the thinking there, and brought them online, partly because we had real success..."*

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last. And it's understandable. There wasn't internet to fact check on, but even if there was, you would have found shit on both sides. But if we'd had the money to go another round, I think we might have been able to turn it around again, but we were tapped out. I mean, we'd had, we had a lot of money, and we raised a lot of money too for that. That was the biggest sort of fundraiser. The staffing of the office was small compared to that. And by then, the labour movement, well, all along the labour movement, and especially the auto workers under Bob White, had put money in. But nobody understood that you may have to go another round, except the business guys who did this sort of thing all the time. So, they were the pro free trade guys.

A comic as a tool for mobilization and shaping political narratives

Rick Salutin's collaboration with cartoonist Terry Mosher, known as Aislin, engaged the public and shifted opinions. Despite its initial success in influencing polls in favor of the Liberal Party, the coalition faced challenges due to limited funding and resources. *"The big mistake we made was just in experience. I had not realized that it's not enough to make your case and turn people around, because the other side is going to come in and make their case, and people will tend to go with what they heard last... But if we'd had the money to go another round, I think we might have been able to turn it around again, but we were tapped out."*

Interviewer: So, was the comic the project of the Toronto coalition?

Rick Salutin: Yeah, it was my idea. I mean, but it was simple. I mean, at some meeting, we said, "Oh, okay, the election, you know, [there] is going to be an election" and the agenda was set up. People were going to work on various things, try to get the word out to people. And I volunteered to produce a campaign pamphlet, and I would try to get it together. That was it. I called Terry, and I actually asked him: "Do you know anybody who could be the cartoonist for this. I know you don't do this stuff yourself". And he said, "Well, in this case, I might be willing to do it". Which was great, because he was the great genius of political art and cartooning of the era.

Interviewer: Why do you think he agreed to do it for you?

Rick Salutin: No, it wasn't for me. It was just for this project. He just was pissed off at it by then. He was really pissed off, I think, at what he was seeing, and he decided it was bad for the country. Now also, he was in Quebec, and he was on the Anglo side of things, although he'd been very sympathetic to the nationalism in Quebec, but they had taken a pro free trade stance, the Parti Quebecois. And I think by then he was quite suspicious of, I mean, they were nationalists, and they were pro free trade because they got to destroy Canada, and they'd be able to be independent. It's not unreasonable. So that may have had something to do with it, and I know he's pretty pissed off at the Conservatives. By then, the corruption was just appalling, as it is with anybody after a certain period in power. But they were masters of corruption, those guys.

Interviewer: How about the Massey Hall events? Were those your idea, too? Did that come out of the same kind of meetings?

Rick Salutin: I'm not sure. I mean, when I said it was mine, the cartoon book, that was my idea. I just wanted to make a contribution. I said, "I'll produce a thing". I didn't know where it would go or how large it would be. But then it became quite a big thing, and everybody got behind it. And it was a bone of contention as well.

The Massey stuff was, you know, whenever there's a strike, you would have a benefit, and we'd all been involved in doing, you know, sort of rallies and benefit concerts for various causes, often in a

strike context of some kind. I think what was unusual about it was that they always take place in churches, and so it's a limited kind of audience. But this is a much bigger issue than we've ever done before, and we don't want to go to a damn church. It's just too, it's too modest. The venue has to be a statement. And so, we said, "Let's do Massey Hall". I mean, it was the great venue for every kind of event, and it had been the venue for political events, but mostly for cultural events and concerts. And then the challenge was [...] it was a challenge too because nobody had tried anything like that in a venue as big as Massey. In the '30s, the Communist Party, I'm told, used to fill Maple Leaf Gardens, and that the leader of the Communist Party, Tim Buck, could draw a bigger crowd than Mackenzie King, who was prime minister. But that was a long time ago, but in our era, nobody had tried anything as large as Massey. And subsequently we did it. I don't know if I mean, we did it twice for that, to fill Massey, twice for the free trade thing. And then when Eaton's finally got unionized, after a century of failures to unionize, and then went on strike, we went back to Massey and did a rally for the strikers at Eaton's. It became a thing. You know, it's my place Massey. "Oh, sure, we'll go there".

Interviewer: So, in a way, it sounds like you, in part, entered the free trade issue through your union organizing work. Is that a fair description?

Rick Salutin: Oh yes and no, because I'd been involved in a lot of stuff. A lot of it was that, although the playwrights union was not, you know, what you'd call a playwrights' union, but in the late 70s there was a proliferation of artists organizations that hadn't existed with the support of the Canada Council, the funding bodies, they thought that was a necessary thing, and I've been involved in organizing that quite [...] I mean, it dovetailed with the union stuff I was doing, but it was a separate thing that everybody in the arts was in: get the creation of a writers' union at that time.

Interviewer: Were these unions part of the CCU [Confederation of Canadian Unions]?

Rick Salutin: Yeah, yeah, our union, like the one I worked with, and that Laurell worked with, and we were anathema. I mean, the Ontario Federation of Labour actually passed a motion saying no one was allowed to invite me to any OFL [Ontario Federation of Labour] event.

Interviewer: So, there was a lot of tension, by the sounds of it, between the CCU, the OFL, the CLC, like you guys are like the gadfly?

Discontent with political parties

The Parti Québécois, traditionally a nationalist party, embraced free trade, raising suspicions among those who viewed this stance as a way to further its goal of Quebec independence.

"Although he'd [Terry Mosher - Aislin-] been very sympathetic to the nationalism in Quebec, but they had taken a pro free trade stance, the Parti Quebecois. And I think by then he was quite suspicious of, I mean, they were nationalists, and they were pro free trade because they got to destroy Canada, and they'd be able to be independent."

The Conservative Party, led by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, was criticized for perceived corruption, as many Canadians felt that free trade policies favored corporate interests over local concerns. *"[Terry Mosher] he's pretty pissed off at the Conservatives. By then, the corruption was just appalling, as it is with anybody after a certain period in power. But they were masters of corruption, those guys."*

Tensions between the CCU and mainstream Labour Unions

Salutin explained that the Confederation of Canadian Unions (CCU) faced tension with larger labor organizations like the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). The CCU, led by independent-minded leaders like Kent Rowley and Madeleine Parent, opposed deals they saw as benefiting companies more than workers. *"In '53 their American union ordered them to sign what they called a Yellow Dog contract... it was just the company dictated the contract, and the union ordered its local leadership to sign it, and they refused. So, they were thrown out of their union, and that's when they set up a Canadian union."*

Rick Salutin: Yeah, exactly. I think gadfly was the term that Kent Rowley used. Him and his wife, Madeleine Parent, were the heads of the union that I was part of, and they'd been part of the mainstream movement in the '30s and '40s, and then, when they were with a big textile union headquartered in Washington. I wrote a biography of Kent after he died-, and in '53 their American union, ordered them to sign what they called a Yellow Dog contract. Everybody understood that at the time, a sellout contract. You know, it was just the company dictated the contract, and the union ordered its local leadership to sign it, and they refused. So, they were thrown out of their union, and that's when they set up a Canadian union – small Canadian union – and by then, it had grown to about 100,000 members and was a real thorn in the side of the mainstream labour movement and the coalition, the anti-free trade coalition.

I mean Laurell and Madeline. Madeleine was the head of the union [CCU], and then, when she retired in around '84, I guess, Laurell became the [head] and Madeline went back to Quebec. But like Laurell in retirement, she just organized more than anybody who was not retired. And she was also a real, a true icon in Quebec, in all the, you know, labour Hall of Fame, or museum or whatever. And they had worked in terms of coalitions in the women's movement. You've talked to Laurell, I'm sure she talked about that. And Marjorie was involved in NAC [National Action Committee on the Status of Women], in the women's movement and, that was a sort of a proto coalition kind of organization.

Interviewer: I'm interested in the political dynamics between the different union—

Rick Salutin: Oh, the union, the nationalist thing. Well, what happened as we were blacklisted. I mean, I didn't mind. I thought it was hilarious that they would bar me from, you know, talking to anyone, but I think the thing had been making more and more sense. Having American unions was ludicrous, especially once you got Reagan as the goddamn president, you know, to have American unions in Canada, it is the only country in the world with branch plant unions. And it gradually sank in.

I wrote a lot about it in the mass media, you know, the mainstream media, whenever I got a chance, and it just bugged the hell out of them. But eventually the most, the key moment was when the auto workers split from the American auto workers during their strike at, I think, GM in Oshawa, and whenever that was in the mid-80s or early '80s. And Bob White had been a loyal auto international union guy, but he was a really independent mind, and he didn't take direction well from others, and they just split, and they created what they call the Canadian Auto Workers, and they were the biggest and most impressive union in the country.

And Bob just went right over, and Bob said, you know, when he was opposing free trade, "If I had stayed in an American union, Brian Mulroney would have made me a laughingstock in the whole

country, because I'm still getting my orders from the US. I'm part of this thing". He hadn't planned it that way, but he pointed it out that it made sense. And Bob was an all-in kind of guy. Once he did something, he was all the way.

So, I worked with him a lot, and it broke the blacklist, basically the boycott of the CCU and the Canadian nationalism. And I started working quite a lot with the CAW, so that even after the election, I just did a lot of, I mean, whenever I like... In the last week of the election, we needed one final cross-country full-page ad in all the papers. It was still a time when people read actual newspapers. They were the major source, and I'd done a number of these ads. But then this, I thought, I realized we were about to lose, but I thought we've got to take one last kick at the can.

I was traveling. I was in Quebec at the time with, I don't know whose campaign, maybe Turner's, and I could tell from the news that they were going to win. And so, I called Peggy Nash at the auto workers. She was Bob's assistant then, and said, "I gotta meet with Bob, and I need the money for this thing, for one last ad". So, I flew back to Toronto and I met with Bob. I thought I was so pissed off at the NDP, I couldn't stop yet. And he had Bob Nickerson, his associate secretary, treasurer.

And I kept swiping at the NDP, and he kept looking over at Nickerson to see if he was going to tell me to just get out and never darken their doorway. And eventually he said, "Just go write your fucking ad. I'll look after the money". It was great. I mean, it was extraordinary. Personally, because I had never imagined being involved at, you know, in a significant role in electoral politics. That was for, you know, asshole sellouts, people with, you know [...] who were willing to turn themselves into tools, for, you know, party bosses, whether they were the Liberals or the Conservatives or the NDP, and here I was actually playing a role as a citizen without giving anything up. I didn't have to turn myself into a party bum. So, you know, when we lost, it was devastating, but also it was a kind of an amazing experience to have been able to have a role and a political one, and in a sphere that I thought I would never be able to get into because it was so dominated by bullshit fundraising and campaign donors and electoral politics.

Breaking away: The CAW's rejection of U.S. union influence fueled Canadian resistance to free trade

Critics saw the presence of American unions as particularly problematic under the Reagan administration, given its pro-business stance. *"Having American unions was ludicrous, especially once you got Reagan as the goddamn president, you know, to have American unions in Canada, it is the only country in the world with branch plant unions."*

The Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), under Bob White's leadership, split from their U.S. counterpart, the United Auto Workers (UAW). This move symbolized a rejection of U.S. control and fueled the Canadian labor movement's opposition to free trade. *"Bob White had been a loyal auto international union guy... they just split, and they created what they call the Canadian Auto Workers, and they were the biggest and most impressive union in the country."*

Interviewer: So, I do have some questions for what happened after the election in terms of your involvement in the formation of the Coalition in Toronto against the Free trade. You mentioned how, when the CAW broke away, that changed the blacklist—

Forging a Canadian identity: the CAW and CCU merger

Salutin highlights the merger of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CCU) with the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), emphasizing the shift towards a distinctly Canadian labor movement. This merger aimed to strengthen the labor movement's identity and autonomy from U.S. influences, allowing it to effectively oppose free trade agreements. *“Our principle was never, the CCU has to win. It was the Canadian labour movement has to be Canadianized.”*

Rick Salutin: Yeah, it changed the balance, you know, and at that point, like the steel workers were led by Leo Gerard, and Leo was a good, good guy, and he ended up being the president of the International [United Steelworkers] in Pittsburgh for a number of years. And I think Leo cursed the fact that he was a labour leader at the time Bob White was also, because Bob did outshine him, but he was a good guy, and the steel workers were an American union, but Leo was not into that bullshit about, “We won't talk to these people”. He was fine. At some point, he may have made a decision they had to have a fight. And they probably actually had a fight, because a lot of things in the labour movement were still decided by that kind of thing. But the balance, the tone had shifted, and you didn't [...] you just didn't get that anymore. And the red bit, I mean, part of the attack on us had been that Kent and Madeleine were communists. It was all, I mean, who cares if they were or not? But it was bullshit. Had nothing to do with that. They were principled labour leaders and the red baiting stopped.

Interviewer: So, it sounds like, through the course of the work opposing free trade within the various coalitions, eventually, organizers from the CCU were working with—

Rick Salutin: It just completely opened up, and it never closed after that. It was shortly after the election. [...] our principle was never, the CCU has to win. It was the Canadian labour movement has to be canadianized, and then we'd be glad to be within it. And so, the CAW and the CCU negotiated a merger. The CCU, basically [...] with some unions opting out, went into the CLC, or they went into the CAW, and therefore were in the mainstream labour movement. They had an office down at the corner of my street on College Street, where they held the sort of official, I don't know, celebration of the move. And Madeline came down from Montreal, and Buzz Hargrove was president by then. Bob was the president of the Canadian Labour Congress by then, and had moved to Ottawa, and he gave Madeleine... Bob might have been there for that. One of them gave Madeline a really terrific kind of introduction, very respectful and, you know, admiring, and she spoke, and she's always been a brilliant speaker in either language. And afterwards, I went up to her and said “Nice speech. I thought you might have just said, ‘I was right, and you were wrong’”, and she said “I thought long and hard about it”.

Interviewer: That's great, it helps me conceptualize more what happened there. So, was your work mostly located in Toronto? Did you become involved with the Pro Canada Network?

Rick Salutin: Well, sure, that's what emerged from these activities all around the country that also, it was, it always called the Pro. Was a stupid name. It was pissing on people in Quebec.

Interviewer: Well, eventually it turned into the Action Canada Network, now—

Rick Salutin: That's right, it was a terrible name. It reflected some pretty deep Anglo, anti-Quebec racism in Canadian nationalism, that had long been there. But I remember going up to Ottawa for some meeting, because the key was the name. But even more, who was going to be in charge and the CLC impulse was one of their guys, because they were just that top-down authority. It was like the labour movement is potentially the greatest democratic force in Canada, and very often actually the most anti-democratic

force. But we all went up for some kind of meeting that was going to decide this stuff. And I remember sitting at the CLC over lunch. They had kind of met among themselves, and we wanted them to name Tony Clarke. He was a church guy, and he would not have been under their thumb. It was clearly, neither symbolically nor actually, under the thumb of the labour guys.

Interviewer: And when you say “we” do you mean—

Rick Salutin: I don't know. I can't remember, Marjorie and Laurell and whoever else. I don't know. I don't quite know how those decisions got made. It wasn't very bureaucratic. In fact, we didn't [...] I don't think we had any kind of leadership for the Toronto organization, which was probably the most dynamic in the country. I mean, they were, I don't know that for a fact, it was quite dynamic at any rate, but I don't think we ever had a leader. Maybe Marjorie was a spokesperson or something. But for meetings, I remember there was a friend of mine named Susan Feldman, who'd been the administrator for the playwrights' union. And everybody said, “Oh, let Susan be the chair. She's good at that”. So, she would do it. There was no kind [...] It had a New Left quality. It was something that, I mean, I teach at the U of T, and I have for decades, ever, you know, since the late '70s, just a half course. But at a certain point, people stopped understanding that they didn't think that way, or This Magazine was run that way. We met every week for, I don't know, 20 years.

Everybody on the editorial board read every article submitted, and we discussed them all. It was just like very '60s. And then when other people became the editors, especially when Naomi Klein became the editor in the early '90s, you know, they didn't have any sense of that kind of thing. It was, “I'm the editor and it's my magazine, and I'm going to bring in my friends, and we're going to make choices.” It's perfectly fine. You know, there was something really quite inefficient about this other thing, but it was just a sign of the times. But I remember sitting there when they reconvened after lunch in Ottawa, and Nancy Riche -that was her name- from Newfoundland, was a vice president of the CLC, but she was sort of our point person in there with them. And she just turned in her chair and said, “It's okay. It's going to be Tony [Clarke]”, and then somebody at the front announced, “We are glad to announce that we agree that the chair should be Tony Clarke”. And Marjorie said to me, “that was easy”, because we'd expected a bloodbath. That's why we'd gone up a big fight over this. And Nancy Riche was one row ahead of us, and she turned and leaned over her seat and said, “It didn't just happen”, but that's the kind of politics, that's real politics. That's the way things get done.

Interviewer: So, Tony Clarke then became the chair or the head, and then, how was your involvement with the Action Canada Network – did that feel a lot different from your work in Toronto?

Rick Salutin: No, it was all the same people. And you know, I mean, Tony was a completely good guy to get involved with. And the people who were tricky to work with were the NDP, because, basically, they hated the free trade issue because they thought it would shift votes to the Liberals and [Ed] Broadbent avoided it. I wrote about this in the book [Waiting for Democracy], but [Broadbent] avoided in every way that he could. He was just an utter traitor. He's a despicable person in that, and he did everything he could to swing the election to Mulroney, effectively, not maybe quite consciously, [Broadbent] had been leading before the election was called. It looked like he'd form the government, he'd be the first

NDP Prime Minister, and then he totally botched the free trade issue because they didn't want to talk about free trade. I mean, Robin Sears told me all this stuff that just confirmed it. I said, "are you opposed to the coalition because you think it'll undermine the party" and he said "Of course!!"

The NDP's calculated silence: sidestepping free trade to protect electoral gains

The NDP, led by Ed Broadbent, avoided emphasizing the Free Trade issue due to electoral concerns. They feared that focusing on Free Trade would shift votes to the Liberals, who were also opposed to the agreement. *"The people who were tricky to work with were the NDP, because, basically, they hated the free trade issue because they thought it would shift votes to the Liberals and [Ed] Broadbent avoided it... he did everything he could to swing the election to Mulroney, effectively, not maybe quite consciously."*

Interviewer: So, was that mostly just [Ed] Broadbent avoiding the free trade issue?

Rick Salutin: It was electoral politics. It was opportunistic politics. It was unprincipled, opportunistic politics. The free trade issue. The problem from the NDP point of view was that the free trade issue could as easily cut for the Liberals as for the NDP. And all in all, if voters were trying to make it... if there was a choice between voting NDP and Liberal, and the key issue was free trade, and you were kind of a moderate, middle of the road voter, why not go with the Liberals? Because they were a known quantity. And the NDP, there was still this thing that, you know, maybe they'd nationalize the wives and children and, do all kinds of socialist crap, so you could get your anti-free trade by voting Liberal, without any of the risk that that sort of middle of the road people felt with the NDP.

And instead of working on that, finding a way to communicate about that to people who were hesitant, they just didn't talk about it. When I got on Broadbent's plane for a few days, we had quite a clash. And then at some point he was trying to be nice, because at this point, we were a factor.

The extra parliamentary Coalitions Against Free Trade. And I said, "Do you think you might consider mentioning free trade at your rally tonight?" And then I found out that this final full-page ad that I mentioned to you had been vetoed by the CLC. They had initially said they would pay for it. And then they had vetoed it because the NDP did not want more emphasis [on the free trade issue], and they were under the thumb of the NDP, the CLC leadership was, and they did not want more emphasis on free trade in the final closing round of the election.

And I was on Broadbent's plane at the time, when I found that out, I did have a cell phone. You know, we had cell phones at that point. And somebody, maybe Tony, told me that that was the case. So, I found that out, I guess, in my hotel room that night, that they'd vetoed the final, last gasp, national newspaper ad. And I was so furious, I steamed out into the corridor and went looking for the people from The Star and The Globe, and I was going to say, "This is what the NDP just did. They are so such hypocrites on the issue of free trade that they've actually vetoed a major campaign move".

I was just steamed, and I ran into on my way to the bar where I thought I would find those people, I ran into one of the people from the NDP [...] And I said to him, "I am on my way to talk to these people from the press and tell them what your fucking party just did". And he said, "If I get the ad reinstated, will you not talk to them?" I said, "Yeah, sure". So, he got on the phone. I don't know who he talked to [...] I can't remember the names. Might be in the book. I know Robin Sears was involved.

He might have been running the campaign at that point, and he got off the phone. He said, “Okay, that's canceled, the ad will run”. So, I didn't go to the bar to talk to the media people.

The Council of Canadians represented a complicated coalition with some troubling nationalist components, such as anti-Quebec sentiments

The complexity at the Council of Canadians reflects the broader nature of coalition-building in political movements, where diverse and sometimes conflicting groups come together under a common cause. *“There was an English-Canadian nationalist movement, but there was some disturbing components in it. There was a kind of strong, anti-Quebec racist element to some extent, including in some unions.”*

“This is the nature of coalitions. It's an issue of all politics, really. If you want to actually build a movement that can – either inside electoral politics and outside of it– actually have an effect, you gotta have an umbrella and you're gonna end up with some kind of people that you don't like very much, but, you know, it's good for the country, or something like that.”

Interviewer: Did the ad run?

Rick Salutin: Yeah, it did run. It didn't change the result. But you know, you wanted your one last kick, and Tony talked to me sometime a few days later, and he said, “The best thing you did through all that whole thing was you didn't tell anybody what you were doing”. If I had, they would have had to say, “Oh, no, we need Tony's job to keep things calm between the NDP and the labour movement and the independent people in the coalition.” So, he would have had to try to, you know, stop me. I don't know, it would have been a whole different thing if I'd had to get into a fight with Tony about it.

Interviewer: Yeah, hadn't heard that.

Rick Salutin: Maude Barlow was somewhat involved. I think Maude may aggrandize her role to some extent. I mean, the Council of Canadians was okay. They were not a kind of fully active participant. They did raise money, they were okay. They've been very active since.

Interviewer: We spoke with Maude Barlow not too long ago. And I'm trying to better understand the role of the Council of Canadians in terms of...

Rick Salutin: Well, good luck. I never quite understood it either. I mean, Maude was – that's where that old nationalist movement went. There was an English-Canadian nationalist movement, but there was some disturbing components in it. There was a kind of strong, anti-Quebec racist element to some extent, including in some unions. And in the CCU we had to deal with that to some extent, whereas one or two unions, small kind of crafts unions, skilled workers who basically were anti-French racists.

Interviewer: Okay, so a kind of nationalism that did not include Quebec in the imagination.

Rick Salutin: Not just that. I mean, they were [...] this is the nature of coalitions. It's an issue of all politics, really. If you want to actually build a movement that can – either inside electoral politics and outside of it– actually have an effect, you gotta have an umbrella and you're gonna end up with some kind of people that you don't like very much, but, you know, it's good for the country, or something like that.

Interviewer: Okay, talk to me a little bit about the night of the election and the period afterwards; you mentioned that you knew that you weren't going to win the free trade issue, that the Conservatives were going to form the next government—

Rick Salutin: Yeah, that only became clear in the last week, around the last week, and that happened to be when I was traveling with the campaigns. I had given up this sort of populist agenda I had for writing the election book I had contract for; I'd used that approach for the first five, or however many weeks it was, and just went around the country talking to people [about] what they thought about politics and democracy. And then I, since it was an election book, I thought I should get on board with the leaders. So, I got on their planes for the last week.

And it became evident to me. I was in Quebec City at the time, I think, and watching it on TV at that point. I have never been as tuned into any public events as I was to that election, because I'd been living it for a number of years and I had actually contributed to it. Things that I'd written for the cartoon booklet, I ended up hearing people repeat on both, on all sides, without knowing where it came from. You got a sort of insight into how a political culture is formed, or at least some sense of it. I mean, how it actually filters through is hard to know but, but I could tell from the way they were reporting it, and from Mulroney's tone, that they had it.

They had polls basically telling them that they had won. So, I knew that, and that we [...] I would have bet we were going to lose, and I was in Toronto for that and I went down to start the evening when the results came in to where Bob [White] and the auto workers had taken a suite at the Hilton, or the Four Seasons. And I was in there with them when the returns started coming in. And it was really depressing, and Bob was energized by it. It was a kind of great sight. I mean, everybody else was going to, "Oh god, poor us" and Bob was kind of bouncing off the walls. He said: "I knew it was going to be bad, but I had no idea to be this bad". But I think it was, I don't know what it was exactly, but you can get that way too.

I mean, if you're realistic, you know, you're going to lose a lot of the time. If you wanted to be on the side that wins all the time, then you go into business with Mulroney or something, but we put up a fight, and we scared them, and maybe next time we would do it. And Bob was just energized by the whole situation. Then I wandered around. I must have gone to some of the campaign headquarters. And then there was a meeting of our group at Marjorie's house, or somebody's house. I got there late. And all the people that I'd been working with for about, I don't know, five, four or five years in Toronto were there and they were drinking to oblivion.

And I drove Laurell home, I dropped her off at her place on Spadina. And she was so gloomy and as she was about to get out, she said, "We deserved to win. Yeah, we really did". And I remembered a line that Clint Eastwood said in the Western Unforgiven when the Gene Hackman character was dying on the floor having been shot by Clint Eastwood, and he said, "I don't deserve to die like this". And Clint Eastwood said, "Deserves got nothing to do with it". I don't know if I said that or just thought it. And then I had a book to write, so that at least gave me something to do, and I started keeping track of what happened to the country after they won. And for the next month, two, three months afterwards, it was amazing. There was just an avalanche of stuff. I think it was the epilogue in the book where I sort of list a number of the immediate takeover actions by the US in Canada.

Interviewer: So, you had a good distraction then.

Rick Salutin: In a way, it was also depressing to keep going back into it. But...

Canada was the first step in a broader strategy to reshape global trade on terms favorable to U.S. corporate interests

According to Salutin, the Free Trade Agreement with Canada served as a "pilot" project for larger global trade plans led by the U.S. corporate elite: *"NAFTA came along, and NAFTA was just ensconcing. It was the same issues developing in Mexico. The blueprint was what the US would start with. Well, it wasn't the US. It was the American corporate elite, telling the government, telling the president what to do, and they decided Canada would be the pilot. You set up one of these free trade agreements with it. Then you draw in Mexico with NAFTA, and then you get rid of the GATT, and you set up the World Trade Organization, and you just globalize this whole process. But we were the beginning of it. I think we were the model. Had they lost, they would have found another way around it. There's no doubt we would have been screwed anyway. But you'd rather put it off, and there was also the matter of, I mean, the Meech Lake issue came up after that, which really tore the country apart, and it's now gone into the memory hole. Nobody knows what was in the Charlottetown Accord, but it was massive at the time. You probably don't remember anything about it."*

Interviewer: So afterwards, did you continue working around the issue of free trade? You mentioned how it was a really rich experience of the work in the years leading up into the '88 election, did that carry on in any kind of way?

Rick Salutin: Yeah, it did, sure. I mean, for one thing, NAFTA came along, and NAFTA was just ensconcing. It was the same issues developing in Mexico. The blueprint was what the US would start with. Well, it wasn't the US. It was the American corporate elite, telling the government, telling the president what to do, and they decided Canada would be the pilot. You set up one of these free trade agreements with it. Then you draw in Mexico with NAFTA, and then you get rid of the GATT, and you set up the World Trade Organization, and you just globalize this whole process. But we were the beginning of it. I think we were the model. Had they lost, they would have found another way around it. There's no doubt we would have been screwed anyway. But you'd rather put it off, and there was also the matter of, I mean, the Meech Lake issue came up after that, which really tore the country apart, and it's now gone into the memory hole. Nobody knows what was in the Charlottetown Accord, but it was massive at the time. You probably don't remember anything about it.

Interviewer: I was a young boy at the time.

Rick Salutin: No, no, but, I mean, free trade still exists in your sense of what happened, but not the Meech Lake issue in Charlottetown, and I think the Tories were so severely defeated, they were shattered. We had something to do with that. I mean, I continued to put out these kind of booklets, not with Terry [Mosher], but I did a whole series of other ones for different elections, or for the Meech Lake thing, mostly whenever there was an election.

And I worked with a guy named Geoff Heinrichs who worked with Frank magazine, and he did sort of TV personalities with bubbles. So, we wrote a number of those for the Meech Lake thing and also, I got hired by The Globe in '91, actually, because of something I wrote about Meech Lake and the Charlottetown thing. There had been a blacklist on me in the mainstream media. I mean, I could appear occasionally, but they would never give me a regular spot. Though in fact, The Globe had given me a kind of a bi-monthly column in their TV Magazine, and then they fired me from that right after the free trade election. And so, I, you know, attacked them for a couple of years in obscure places, and then they offered me a weekly column in the entertainment section and then Op-Ed. And that's, that's been true for 20 years.

Interviewer: Would you write on free trade in that column?

Defeating the Meech Lake Accord: a victory for democratic resistance, demonstrating the power of the people's will against the establishment

The Meech Lake Accord aimed to make Quebec feel more included in Canada, but it faced opposition, especially from people who felt it gave too much power to Quebec and weakened the central government: “The only opposition was kind of grassroots-level coalitions... and the other major force was the women’s movement NAC... and everybody else, every political party, every government, every newspaper, everybody who was anybody was in favor of this stupid constitutional thing that they were going to do, and they lost massively in the referendum.”

Rick Salutin: Sure, although, if only in retrospect, but I wrote a hell of a lot on Meech Lake and the Charlottetown Accord. And I remember somebody from Bob Rae... he was the premier in Ontario for the NDP then. And I remember somebody very close to him saying to me, “Could you just let us have this one? It would mean a lot to us,” because Bob was pro-Meech Lake, pro-Charlottetown Accord, and there was almost no institutional opposition. The only opposition was kind of grassroots-level coalitions, and the Reform Party -Preston Manning was one leader of that, and he was not in Parliament at the time-. They had nobody, they had one member in Parliament. And the other major force was the women's movement NAC, that Judy Rebick was the president of at the time, and everybody else, every political party, every government, every newspaper, every everybody who was anybody was in favor of this stupid constitutional thing that they were going to do, and they lost massively in the referendum.

They were just wiped out, the Conservatives got only two seats nationally. And that was a major kind of populist uprising, which I think was fueled by the free trade thing. But that vote was not split between the NDP and the Liberals, so that the Conservatives could get through with a big majority, the way it had been at the free trade election. So, that was an aftermath of it. And I think it was a glorious moment in Canadian democracy, in fact. And I think the proof of that is that it has been so buried that nobody has any sense of it. But it was massive at the time. It was a referendum. Was the only referendum that we've had post-Second World War, and of people streamed to vote on it. I had put out an anti-Meech Lake booklet, and people told me that they went into the voting booth still looking through the thing I'd written, and then the literature from the other side and they would, they would be crying as they didn't know what to do. No, it was a very agonizing thing.

And what's most amazing is that it's just been lost because it was such a defeat for the establishment and it foreshadowed the rise of populism, I think. Unfortunately, the left didn't draw the lesson that populism is the way to go in the aftermath of free trade, but the right did.

Interviewer: Yeah, okay. It's an interesting connection between free trade and Meech Lake. I'm running out of questions here for you....

Rick Salutin: We've covered a lot of ground.

Interviewer: I think one question I meant to ask a bit earlier, before we got into, the actual election day was you're the first person we've spoken to who comes from the cultural community. Can you just describe for us, what was the motivation for your community around free trade, and how heavily was your community dialed into the free trade issue? Can you speak to that a little bit?

Protecting Canadian culture: the arts community's resistance to Free Trade

The Canadian arts community opposed free trade out of concern for their ability to create and promote Canadian culture. They valued the existing support infrastructure and feared that free trade would increase American cultural dominance, threatening their identity and creative expression. *"They sensed... that their ability to be artists as who they really were, which was Canadian... was being threatened by this thing." "They just knew this would be a severe threat, and it has been... I mean, there are no Canadian publishers left... the biggest theaters... have created this commercial, Broadway-oriented theater."*

Rick Salutin: Very, very, very and instinctively, because, if you're a sort of creative person, or you're in the arts, you will try to find a way to create, whatever is available. I mean, in some cases, when I lived in the US -I lived in New York for six years- and I knew a lot of people in advertising, and they all had a novel in the bottom drawer of their desk. I mean, they never finished it, and they never had anything to write about, but, but they wanted to. They did creative ads. I knew people who did some of the most famous ads, and they treated it always as art, basically.

And then, there were all those Canadians who went to the US and Americanized themselves in order to create and... but there was, starting in the '60s, a generation of Canadian artists who found that they could create as Canadians, because there was an infrastructure created in the Canada Council and in the tax breaks for film and in the CanCon regulations and music and that was consciously and deliberately set up, both by people from the outside, like Walter Gordon and by artists and artists' organizations.

So, what they sensed was not that they wouldn't be able to be... like Atwood said, Margaret Atwood said, when she was... I remember a panel when she did an appearance with an American novelist named Marge Piercy. And Piercy said, "When I was a kid, I was told I couldn't be a writer because I'm a woman". And Atwood said, "When I was a kid, I was told I couldn't be a writer because I'm Canadian". And then by the late '80s, you had a generation or two of artists who were able to write as Canadians about Canada, and many of them had done well globally, as well, like Atwood.

I remember taking a plane to Ottawa for some free trade thing, and Michael Ondaatje was on the plane, and he was very concerned about this thing. He'd heard about free trade, didn't know much about it, but he knew he didn't like it, and we talked a lot about that. So, I think they had an instinctive sense that their ability to be artists as who they really were, which was Canadian, and which they'd counted on, and they developed their skills in that direction, was being threatened by this thing, and the government knew it, and they carved out a cultural exemption, supposedly though it was a pile of shit, really, but to understand what it said, you know, I had to draw on- I used to be in a rabbinical seminary, and I studied Talmud and I had to draw on all my legalistic, you know, sort of experience in deciphering Talmudic debates to understand what the hell this stupid cultural exemption clause was.

Interviewer: Yeah, so it was really about, for your community, being able to create art as artists, as Canadians.

Rick Salutin: Yeah, they did. They just knew this would be a severe threat, and it has been. I mean, there are no Canadian publishers left and the biggest theaters... you know, our fight at the time, when I started in theater in the '70s, we wanted to bury Stratford and Shaw because they were huge theater institutions dedicated to British playwrights. And now it's kind of worse. I mean, you've got the Mirvish theaters. I

mean, the Mirvishes are lovely people and all that, but they've created this commercial, Broadway-oriented theater.

And there's a certain amount of kind of native Canadian that has gone in a different direction. And you do have real Canadian writing, but it is dubious. And film... I mean, there's a Sarah Polley who lives up the street. And Sarah made her first couple of films as a Canadian, and then the one that she got the Oscar for was a Hollywood studio thing. She fought like hell to have it done here and to have Canadian crew and cast members and she succeeded. And it was a big fight to win, but at the same time, we don't have... the infrastructure has not been created and most of the work has gravitated towards the US.

Interviewer: That's all I have on my end terms of questions. Is there anything we haven't covered?

Rick Salutin: Probably a few things, but I think that's probably a good place to stop.