



## Commissioner's Book Club:

# Universal: Renewing Human Rights in a Fractured World

## Discussion guide

### Introduction

The prompts and questions that follow are meant to encourage discussion and support reflection. Human rights-related books highlight challenging issues and topics—take care of yourself in the ways that you need while you dig in.

For more suggestions, including different ways to reflect and share, check out [the Book Club How-to resource](#).

### Author Bio

[Alex Neve](#) is a Canada-based international human rights lawyer. He is the former Secretary General for Amnesty International Canada, is a former member of Canada's Immigration and Refugee Board and worked at the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University in Toronto.

Alex is presently an adjunct professor teaching international human rights law at the University of Ottawa and Dalhousie University, a Senior Fellow at the University of Ottawa's Graduate School of Public and International Affairs and a Fellow with the Atlantic Human Rights Centre at St. Thomas University. Since June 2022, he has been serving as a Commissioner with the Ottawa People's Commission on the Convoy Occupation.

Alex has honorary Doctorate of Laws degrees from the University of New Brunswick, University of Waterloo and St. Thomas University in Canada. He has served as a

Trudeau Foundation Mentor and has been awarded the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal. Alex is an Officer of the Order of Canada.<sup>1</sup>

## Summary

In *Universal*, Alex Neve explores how rights are often applied unevenly, overlooked during conflicts and compromised by inequality. Drawing from his extensive experience as a human rights lawyer and his former role as Secretary General for Amnesty International Canada, Neve traces where systems failed, where progress has been made and how communities worldwide are reclaiming the core idea that rights belong to everyone.

*Universality of human rights—the idea that human rights belong to all of us, regardless of who we are or what we’ve done—is an important ideal. Unfortunately, it often remains just that; an ideal rather than a reality. However, Neve’s book uses the power of stories—stories from people raising their children in refugee camps, from those facing torture when wrongfully imprisoned, from those trailblazing for solutions at the UN—to bring home the vital concept that we do not have the privilege to give up on realizing the ideal of human rights for all.*

—Commissioner Govender

## Linking the book to human rights in B.C.

The **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**<sup>2</sup> is the foundation for countless international treaties and Canadian protections, including the **Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms**<sup>3</sup> and the **B.C. Human Rights Code**.<sup>4</sup>

Although Canada and British Columbia have strong rights protections on paper, Neve points out how challenges test these laws in practice. B.C.’s *Human Rights Code* protects against discrimination in areas like employment and housing, but are

---

<sup>1</sup> “Background,” Alex Neve: Moving Rights Along, accessed 2025, <https://www.alexneve.ca/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” United Nations, accessed 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

<sup>3</sup> “The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*,” Government of Canada, 2025, <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csj-sjc/rfc-dlc/ccrf-ccdl/>.

<sup>4</sup> “*Human Rights Code*,” Government of British Columbia, 2025, [https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/00\\_96210\\_01](https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/00_96210_01).



these laws being enforced equally? Is everyone truly included? Linking the global and local helps highlight where implementation falls short—and where real work is needed.

## Discussion guide questions and prompts

Here are some questions to ignite discussion or thought on the connections between the book and human rights. The provided prompts are not the only or complete answers, but some ideas you might want to incorporate into your conversation:

1. **What does “universality” mean in human rights? Do you think that human rights are universal?**
  - It is the idea that all human beings inherently belong to all rights, regardless of race, nationality, gender or status. This principle, rooted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), underpins global human rights law.
  - Answers will vary.
2. **How does Neve explain the failure of universal rights today?**
  - Universality fails when those in power pick rights to uphold and ignore others or reinterpret them to serve particular ends.
3. **Can universal rights clash with local culture or tradition?**
  - Yes. Neve acknowledges tensions when universal standards seem at odds with local beliefs. But he stresses that rights are tools to protect individuals even within cultural contexts, not tools to erase traditions.
4. **Why is solidarity important in human rights?**
  - Solidarity helps protect rights when institutions fail. Neve highlights community networks and global movements that safeguard rights where governments falter.
5. **Where do you see Canada fall short in implementing universal rights?**
  - Answers may vary.
6. **What story moved you the most in Neve’s book? Why?**
  - Answers will vary.



**7. What examples do you remember from the book where rights are not being universally implemented? What were some of his examples of resistance from around the world?**

- Answers will vary.

**8. How can you help strengthen rights locally?**

- You can support advocacy groups, join solidarity campaigns, hold leaders accountable, educate others and use legal avenues to challenge injustices.

