



*Shining a Light: Inter Pares' thirty-five years of social justice action*  
**Address to Inter Pares 2010 Annual General Meeting**  
**By Peter Gillespie, Inter Pares**  
Ottawa, April 26, 2010

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*Peter Gillespie has been with Inter Pares for much of its 35 years, and has contributed greatly to the institution, and to its programs. At Inter Pares' 2010 Annual General Meeting, Peter shared some of this rich history, reflecting on his work and telling some of the stories of the many relationships he has nurtured on behalf of Inter Pares with people around the world.*



Good Evening. It's great to see you all here this evening. I have often felt that Inter Pares, in addition to meaning among equals, also means among friends. There are many friends and colleagues here tonight with whom I have had the pleasure of working with over the years. There are former Inter Pares staff as well as colleagues from other social justice organizations. And of course our Board members and all of you who have supported us over the years. So this meeting is very much a gathering of friends and colleagues, old and new.

What I thought I would do tonight is tell a few stories as a way of demonstrating what it is that Inter Pares does. Of course, after so many years, Inter Pares has an archive of stories so it's been difficult to decide what stories to tell.

When I arrived at Inter Pares we were housed in that old fire trap on Arthur Street. It was hot in the summer and cold in the winter. We had gathered some old broken furniture from the Salvation Army I think. For a number of years we skirted on the edge of insolvency. This was the pre-computer age (what our younger staff would term the pre-historic era). We had a fleet of old typewriters. Our idea of technological progress was when we got two IBM *self-correcting* type-writers. That was progress. And look at



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us today. We twitter, we flicker, we facebook, we skype. Most importantly, we have survived – as Rita noted earlier this evening, this is our 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

I have been at Inter Pares for 25 of those years – it doesn't feel that long. I have had the privilege of working with some of the most extraordinary people in the world..... with anti-poverty workers, with women's rights and human rights activists, with people in the anti-apartheid movement, in anti-dictatorship struggles in Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines and in Burma. All of these people had the idea that democracy, human rights and social justice were values that were worth devoting their lives to – and in some cases risking their lives for.

What is remarkable is that they didn't back down, even in the face of danger. Rather they organized, they developed farmers cooperatives, women's organizations, underground media, health and education programs for the displaced, and services for the survivors of torture and violence. For me it has been an honour to accompany some of these struggles, although I am still haunted by the loss of friends and colleagues along the way

I have also had the privilege of working with some of the most marginalized people in the world

- with rickshaw pullers in Bangladesh, whose generosity despite their poverty always humbled me;
- with landless people defending themselves from being forcibly evicted from their communal lands;
- with sugarworkers in the Philippines, trying to dismantle a feudal system that had trapped them and their families for generations;
- – with refugees on the borders of Burma who, despite mortal danger, organized mobile backpack teams to trek back into the war zones to deliver health services to displaced communities.

So it has been quite a journey and I am richer for it.



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I think one thing that has made Inter Pares unique is that we have always considered Canada as part of the terrain in which we work. As a social justice organization, it would be absurd for us not to engage on Canadian human rights and social justice issues. So we support and are members of Canadian groups working on women's rights, with organizations working with undocumented refugees in Canada, on Canadian food policy, on environmental issues, and with those who are defending universal public health care in Canada.

We have also worked to challenge the dichotomy of First World and Third World – between the “developed” world and the so-called “under-developed” world - by bringing Canadian and overseas activists together, as equals, to learn from each other and to share strategies for social change.

When I joined Inter Pares in 1985 we were involved in the development of a play, “Side Effects” which toured towns and cities across the country addressing the medicalization of women's health and the targeting of women by the pharmaceutical industry. The play aimed to engage Canadian women's health activists but also incorporated parallel experiences of women in Bangladesh with whom we were working. This process helped lay the groundwork for the Canadian Women's Health Network as well as a women's rights organization in Bangladesh, both of which are still operating today.

Throughout the 1990s, both in Canada and overseas, we worked on reproductive rights issues, challenging top down, coercive and often forcible sterilization programs that targeted poor women in places like Bangladesh and Indonesia, as well as aboriginal and disabled women in Canada. We challenged CIDA for its support of these kinds of programs internationally.

Another example of breaking down this 1<sup>st</sup> World – 3<sup>rd</sup> World dichotomy is when in the mid-1990s we invited a small group of *adavasis* -- aboriginal people --from Bangladesh to Canada. Aboriginal people in Bangladesh are among the most marginalized – they



have lost their customary land rights, especially their forest lands. We wanted them to see how the Assembly of First Nations worked on behalf of First Nations in Canada - - as a coordinated national advocacy mechanism for First Nations people. As part of their orientation to Canada, they spent a day on a reserve several hours north of Ottawa.

They were stunned by what they saw. When they came back to Ottawa they told us that First Nations people in Canada are living in conditions worse than their own in Bangladesh. When they returned home they asked for a meeting with Canada's High Commissioner to Bangladesh. Essentially they said to him: "How can you say that you are concerned about poverty in Bangladesh after what we have seen in Canada." They did try to develop a model based on the Assembly of First Nations which foundered with the resumption of armed conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

We also play a role in raising debates about Canada's role in the world, almost always in coalition with others. We have been involved in the debate about regulatory frameworks for Canadian mining companies operating overseas. We have participated in raising concerns about biofuels and implications for Canada as well as Southern countries. Over the last several years we have engaged the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board about the lack of an ethical framework for how they invest the pension contributions of Canadians.

If you weren't aware, your Canada pension contributions are being invested in the manufacture of tactical nuclear weapons, in landmine components, in cluster munitions, in tobacco, and in Canadian mining companies involved in irresponsible activities overseas.

Of course, we engage the Canadian government, on Canadian foreign policy, on aid and trade issues. Such activities are not always appreciated and it is increasingly dangerous to advocate positions that are at odds with those of the Canadian government as we have seen recently with Kairos and Rights and Democracy. They are part of a much



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longer line of advocacy groups – mainly but not only women’s rights organizations -- that have lost federal funding. All of us in the human rights and social justice movement are worried about what these trends say about the direction of democracy in Canada.

I want to talk a bit about our work on Burma because in many ways it is typical of how Inter Pares connects our work on the ground with advocacy in Canada. I first visited the Thailand-Burma border in 1991. Thousands of Burma’s democracy activists had fled to this remote border region following the violent repression against them. They were living in terrible circumstances in jungle camps. Many were sick and dying of malaria, cholera, and dysentery.

It was here I met Dr. Cynthia Maung, a medical doctor and refugee herself who was trying to deal with this situation. She had been given an old barn where she set up her clinic. It was pretty rudimentary – she was using a rice cooker to sterilize her medical instruments and medicine was in short supply. I was quite impressed with what she and her colleagues were doing and committed Inter Pares to try and raise funds for her work. On the way out of Thailand I stopped in at the Canadian embassy. “Look”, I said to the embassy people, “there is a major humanitarian crisis on the border – what is Canada doing to help?” The embassy people basically told me to kiss off. “We don’t do Burma”, they said.

So back in Canada we organized a small coalition with Canadian Friends of Burma and Rights and Democracy and began to knock on doors on parliament hill. We were astonished that no one knew anything about Burma; it was simply not on the agenda, on no ones radar. We told anyone would listen that Canada indeed had a role to play, both in terms of supporting the tens of thousands of refugees fleeing Burma, as well as working within the U.N. to challenge one the world’s most vicious regimes. So we knocked on a lot of doors



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In 1999, we nominated Dr. Cynthia for Canada's John Humphrey Freedom Award and she came to Canada to accept. In 2003, on a visit to Canada, Dr. Cynthia was introduced in the House of Commons, and received a standing ovation from assembled MPs.

Over the years we managed to get enough political attention on Burma that CIDA began to support a consolidated program of our work. In 2005, Parliament passed a motion requesting a variety of Canadian actions, including sanctions, against the Burmese regime. In 2007, the Canadian government awarded Aung San Suu Kyi, the detained leader of Burma's National League for Democracy, with Honourary Canadian citizenship, an honour she shares with Nelson Mandela and the Dali Lama.

The point of all this is that it took more than 10 years of unrelenting efforts to get Canada fully engaged on Burma. The lesson, I suppose, is that persistence eventually wins the day.

Our Burma work includes supporting underground journalists, human rights groups, and health organizations such as Dr. Cynthia's and the backpack health teams that work in the conflict zones with displaced communities. These health programs, which had a total case load of over 1 million during the last 5 years, are likely the only ones in the world that are entirely operated by refugees themselves.

One of the most inspiring aspects has been working with women's organizations such as the Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN) involved in documenting rape as a military strategy, training and supporting displaced women in refugee camps and in their communities, and bringing forward women's rights issues internationally. The women's movement has done more than anyone else in exposing the nature of the Burmese junta through documenting the systematic abuse of the human rights of women.

By the way, the women's movement came up with a very creative international campaign called Panties for Peace. The Burmese junta is led by a group of aging



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generals. Apparently Burmese men, especially elderly men, have a superstitious fear that contact with women's undergarments will rob them of their power. Women around the world are asked to mail their old panties to local Burmese embassies in a bid to symbolically strip the regime of its power and bring an end to its violations of human rights, especially against Burma's women. The campaign has been a huge success and we invite anyone here to join it – we can provide the Ottawa address of the Burmese embassy.

So, one last story. In recent years we have been working with Burmese refugees in Malaysia, supporting their efforts to organize for their own protection. To be a refugee in Malaysia is to be criminalized. Malaysia is not a signatory to the UN Convention on refugees and views refugees as illegal migrants. The situation for these people is horrific. They are subject to arrest, extortion, detention, obligatory flogging and deportation.

Malaysian immigration officials frequently sell refugees to traffickers who in turn sell them as slave labour to the plantations and fishing fleets. Women refugees picked up by the trafficking syndicates often simply disappear. The Malaysian government has even organized vigilante squads comprised of under-employed Malaysians to go out and hunt down refugees -- these vigilantes are paid a bounty for every refugee they bring in. You can imagine what happens.

Several years ago I visited one of the jungle camps in Malaysia where a group of about 40 refugees was living. The camp was set up in a jungle ravine full of mosquitoes and snakes – people slept on little bamboo platforms set into the steep hillside with sheets of plastic overhead. In the only level place in the ravine they had built a little chapel.

The people gathered at the chapel and I sat down and they told me their stories. Every few months, they told me, the police would sweep through the area on horseback; they would run away into the jungle while the police burned everything. After a few days



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they would return and re-build. When someone died in the camp they would take the body to the city dump and leave it there to be retrieved by municipal workers. Some of them had lived in the camp for more than ten years. Their stories were appalling and heart-breaking.

When it came time for me to leave, an older man stood up and he was crying. And he said, "That someone from so far away cares enough to visit us in the jungle makes my heart weep."

I think that's a pretty good description of what Inter Pares does. We try to shine a light on what is happening to the most marginalized people in the world. And we try to support their own efforts in seeking safety, security and justice.

Thank you.

