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# Making the Inter-Parliamentary Forum of the Americas Matter

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by John Godfrey, MP

*At a time when civil society groups are forcing their way on to the international stage through massive demonstrations such as Seattle and Quebec City or through parallel, unofficial "people's summits", how can the legitimate interests of democratically elected representatives, coming together in inter-parliamentary organizations, be accommodated and appropriately expressed to summits of heads of government or international meetings of ministers? This article looks at the work of the Inter-Parliamentary Forum of the Americas and its role in helping parliamentarians and civil society build greater public understanding and consensus around international trade agreements.*



One of the objectives of the Inter-Parliamentary Forum of the Americas (FIPA), is to play a useful role in the negotiations of heads of government and ministers that are supposed to lead to the creation of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) in 2005. FIPA has only been in existence for three years. Its inaugural meeting was in Ottawa, its first Chair was Bill Graham, now Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs, and his successor is another Canadian, Senator Céline Hervieux-Payette. Its small and under-resourced secretariat is based in Ottawa. At the Summit of the Americas, held in Quebec City in April 2001, heads of government officially recognized FIPA's role in representing parliamentarians

from North, Central, and South America and the Caribbean.

As with any new, underfunded organization, FIPA is struggling to define its role and to overcome the barriers of distance, language, and cultural difference to find its proper place and purpose in inter-American politics. In its inaugural meeting in Ottawa in 2001 and subsequent annual meetings in Mexico and Panama, FIPA has not lacked for vitally important topics of discussion and debate: the collective security of the Americas after 11 September 2001; the desperate struggle of Colombian legislators to fight terrorism; the financial and economic crises in Argentina and elsewhere; and the challenges to democracy in Haiti and Venezuela, to name but a few.

One subject, however, has dominated the first three annual meetings of FIPA: the state of the negotiations for the Free Trade Area of the Americas. In the working groups that constitute the main work of FIPA's annual meeting, the FTAA has been the only constant theme.

As Chair of the Canadian section of FIPA and a member of the Executive Committee, I was asked for the 2003 meeting in Panama to preside over the most recent Working Group on FTAA negotiations. In reviewing the deliberations of that meeting as well as those of previous working groups in Ottawa and Mexico City, I was struck

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by the consistency and repetition of concerns expressed year over year by parliamentarians: agricultural export subsidies; the need for a rules-based tracking system; issues of intellectual property relating to access to genetic resources, indigenous knowledge, and medicines for all; and the differences in the level of development and size of the economies of the hemisphere. In Canadian terms, we were spinning our tires!

How were we to break the pattern of annually complaining to ourselves, then sending generalized recommendations out to no one in particular? It seemed to me that FIPA's continuing interest in the FTAA offered our organization the opportunity to establish a core line of business for ourselves, a unique brand that would distinguish us from other inter-parliamentary organizations of the Americas. Because of our special recognition by the Summit of the Americas leaders, FIPA could claim the right to be consulted regularly on FTAA negotiations and, indeed, future Summit meetings as the voice of democratically elected representatives from all parts of the Americas.

I was inspired by the model of the relationship between the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), and the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Geneva.

*As elected parliamentarians, we have an obligation to be engaged in important policy issues and as much right to be consulted as civil society organizations.*

Furthermore, we have unique resources to apply to the task of being informed and well connected about the state of FTAA negotiations. Alone (to my knowledge) among inter-parliamentary organizations, FIPA had created a Virtual Parliament of the Americas web site ([www.e-fipa.org](http://www.e-fipa.org)) as one of the first projects drawing on the Connectivity Fund created by the leaders at the Quebec City Summit.

The first recommendation of the FTAA Working Group in Panama was to ask the FIPA executive committee to "Establish a section in the Virtual Parliament of the Americas web site to facilitate the exchange of information regarding the negotiation and implications of trade agreements. This web site should provide parliamentarians with information, documents and links to Internet sites on the FTAA negotiations and to conduct discussions or informative sessions on issues relevant to the negotiations." A new, more comprehensive web site containing such resources and discussion forums will be launched in September.

Since work on the Virtual Parliament has been chiefly undertaken in Ottawa by people housed at the Parliamentary Centre and the International Development Research Centre, a small working group in Canada has been following through on this ambitious project. The challenges of insufficient human and financial resources, four official languages, and widely varying levels of connectivity across the Americas are daunting, but we are off to a promising start.

Our second recommendation to the Executive Committee was to "Prepare and distribute in advance of the next Plenary meeting of the FIPA a document to follow up on each of the previous recommendations on the FTAA and keep track of the results or any progress achieved on the issues agreed by Parliamentarians." This was intended to deal with the "tire spinning" problem, or the lack of institutional memory that seems to plague each annual meeting of the FTAA Working Groups, particularly as there are frequently new participants every year.

Our third recommendation urged the Executive Committee to explore mechanisms to take advantage of the fact that there are many current or former parliamentarians with experience in negotiating previous trade agreements like NAFTA, parliamentarians in Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, and Mexico who might be able to advise and share their expertise with parliamentarians in other countries in the Americas.

Fourth, we noted that the Brazilian Parliament had established a mechanism for monitoring and actively participating in FTAA negotiations. Were there similar mechanisms in other countries? How could we use the Virtual Parliament web site to track and share lessons learnt from such activities?

Fifth, we asked the Executive Committee to study the IPU/WTO model in order to "Establish a mechanism for FIPA to interact formally with the Trade Ministers in the context of the FTAA process and keep track of the negotiations." To this end, the Chair of FIPA, Senator Hervieux-Payette, has sent letters to the Brazilian and American co-chairs of the next FTAA meeting of trade ministers in Miami in November, requesting a formalized presence and role for FIPA. As of mid-August, no answer to the request has been received from either co-chair, but we shall keep prodding.

Sixth, we are also preparing a formal communication on behalf of FIPA directed to the FTAA co-chairs detailing the more specific concerns raised (and repeated) by parliamentarians of the Americas at the three annual meetings of successful FTAA Working Groups.

Finally, we want representatives from FIPA to discuss with the FTAA co-chairs how we may be appropriately

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involved in the "negotiations on the implementation and further development of the Hemispheric Cooperation Program (HCP) under the FTAA, in particular with respect to social adjustment funds for the agricultural and manufacturing sectors."

FIPA's hopes and aspirations for more formal involvement in the FTAA process are clearly ambitious, a real "stretch target". It has been a challenge even to communicate and consult among ourselves, let alone to find the resources, particularly for the Virtual Parliament web site, to do the job properly. Nor has it been easy to receive official acknowledgment, let alone agreement, from the FTAA co-chairs on our role in future negotiations.

But our goals, though ambitious, are clear. Our aspirations, though thus far unacknowledged by governments,

are every bit as legitimate as those of civil society groups, whether they are businesses or NGOs. Our resources, both human and technical, though inadequate, are sufficient at least to begin the task of implementing our seven recommendations.

Our challenge is to be determined, dogged, steadfast, and consistent in working together to achieve our aims. Sheer hard work and persistence when linked to the genuine heartfelt concerns, hopes, and fears of parliamentarians of the Americas and the people they represent about the FTAA process should prove a powerful force in democratizing and making more transparent and accountable these crucial trade negotiations.