

Our Former Chairperson – Dr Ian Prior

Ian Prior has played a key role in IPPNW since the organisation began in 1982. A tribute to Ian's work was recently provided by George Salmond of IPPNW (NZ):

A Celebration of the Life and Work of Ian Prior

A tribute by George Salmond (IPPNW (NZ) member and former Director General of Health) Wellington School of Medicine, 25 February 2000

It is with an enormous sense of pleasure and appreciation that I offer my personal tribute this afternoon in celebration of the life and work of Ian Prior.

I was invited to speak mainly about Ian's involvement in and contribution to the work of IPPNW and to the antinuclear weapons movement and the peace movement more generally, and I will do this. But, I also want to speak about Ian's contribution to the ongoing organisation and development of health services in New Zealand and his broader societal contribution to social democracy and civic life in Wellington and further afield.

Already this afternoon we have heard about Ian's involvement and contributions to Maori health, the health of Pacific people both in the Pacific and in New Zealand, and to epidemiology more generally. Without doubt Ian is the founding father of epidemiology in New Zealand. We have also been told of his championing of many environmental causes to protect and secure New Zealand's natural environment. And later we will hear about Ian's contribution to the arts, particularly to painting, sculpture and poetry. All of this is quite apart from his contribution to the antinuclear and peace movements and to health services and health sector development.

I first met Ian in 1969 when I responded to his invitation to come to Wellington to take part in a meeting with Ken Newell, Al Wesson, Leonard Syme and other World Health Organization and epidemiology heavy weights, who were at the time planning the Tokelau Project. Al has already spoken about this. Being an epidemiological neophyte at the time, I remember being impressed and overawed by the occasion. But, the contact with Ian was made so when a few months later I was invited by Doug Kennedy to come to Wellington to work in the Department of Health, I felt that I had at least one interesting and friendly point of contact in the city. The upshot of this was that Clare got on the phone to Ian to inquire whether or not there was a vacancy in the Epidemiology Unit for a biostatistician. This was the beginning of a long and productive working relationship.

From my first association with Ian I recognised that he was unusual and special. Ian was different. While interested in clinical medicine and the care of individual patients he was also interested in the health of communities, Maori communities, Pacific communities and rural communities. He was interested in health protection, health promotion, public health, health services and

health delivery systems and not just the natural history of disease. All of this was really exciting for a young physician who had decided to abandon the relative security of a career in clinical medicine for uncertainties of public health and health services research.

During my early years in the Department of Health I did not work directly with Ian but through Clare I became part of the circle of interesting and like minded colleagues and friends which existed around Ian and Elespie and the Epidemiology Unit. Many an evening Clare and I, often with our family, spent time over the dining room table talking about the Unit, the work it was doing, what the technical research issues were and what the various players and personalities were up to. Ian Prior and the Epidemiology Unit have been an abiding source of interest and stimulation in our household now for the best part thirty years.

When IPPNW was launched in New Zealand in 1982, it was no surprise that Ian immediately became actively involved. The international control and eventual abolition of nuclear weapons is after all a population health issue of global proportions.

Ian was the founding secretary of IPPNW in New Zealand. He was actively involved in the early very active phase of the organisation leading up to the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985. During that time Ian developed and greatly expanded his networks of politicians, diplomats, bureaucrats, scientists, arts people and community leaders both in New Zealand and internationally. To this day, and with great skill and sensitivity, Ian uses his networks to advance the cause of nuclear weapons abolition.

Over the years public and professional interest in and energy for the antinuclear weapons cause has waxed and waned. In more recent years it has generally waned. Others associated with IPPNW have come and gone but, like the brook, Ian carries on.

He played a key role in establishing and maintaining the IPPNW Education and Research Trust which in a whole variety of ways has funded and otherwise supported the cause.

Ian provides the continuity which has kept IPPNW New Zealand going. When others have flagged Ian has gingered people along. The Wellington Core Group revolves around Ian. He is the current national Chair of IPPNW, a position for which he is uniquely well equipped. Indeed, it is almost impossible to imagine IPPNW New Zealand with out him. This is reflected in the message sent by Jim Methven, the immediate Past President of IPPNW New Zealand, to mark this occasion.

From its inception I was interested in and a member of IPPNW. But, until I left the Department of Health in 1990 I was largely a covert and passive supporter. But with encouragement from Erich Geiringer and Ian I did become

actively involved with the World Court project. It was during that exciting time that I experienced at first hand the fierce intelligence and driving energy of Erich, who was at times very difficult to work with, and got much of the credit, and the patient, persistent, persuasive approach of Ian who oiled the wheels, found the resources and kept things on the rails and moving along. Together they were an amazing combination and a great privilege to work with. What was accomplished is, I believe, profoundly important.

In this context I want to mention another of Ian's unique contributions with which I was associated. This was the formation, in May 1991, of the Wellington Health Action Group to examine and critically comment upon the 1991 so called "health reforms". Meeting under Ian's convenorship this group of health professionals, past health administrators, academics and members of the public met on many occasions to share information, discuss and debate issues, to produce working papers and commentaries and generally to promote informed debate on the health sector changes.

The Group provided a focal point for a wide and varied group of people who were, for various reasons, discomfited by the market-led changes. The activities of the Group contributed significantly to the work of the New Zealand Coalition for Public Health, which was recently disbanded. This prompted Wyatt Creech to claim that the Coalition and its associates were politically motivated to oppose the policies of the previous National Government. As far as the Wellington Health Action Group was concerned this was certainly not so. What held the group together was a strong belief in fair access by all citizens to good quality publicly funded health services.

To the IPPNW and the Wellington Health Action Group Ian brought a strong moral commitment, a real sense of the 'public good', and motivation and leadership skills of the highest order. Without Ian's social skills and commitment many of us who took part in IPPNW and the Health Action Group activities simply would not have been there. I remember my old friend and colleague John Martin saying "I go to meetings because Ian wants me to be there and I cannot disappoint him."

In this context Ian demonstrates better than anyone I know what good citizenship in a social democracy is all about. It is about getting informed and taking part. Be it Maori health, Pacific health, epidemiology, the environment, nuclear weapons or health sector reform, Ian has the capacity to bring together and engage people in the public affairs of the community, the society, the country and the planet, in the case of nuclear weapons.

In modern parlance, Ian has a great facility for mobilising, reinvesting and growing social capital - the human glue which gives communities solidarity and the capacity for concerted action. I suspect that Ian and his family have paid a price for this gift when at times he took on projects, expectations and responsibilities, which sorely tested the personal resources, he could muster. Leadership in these terms is never easy, is often taken for granted, and is rarely adequately recognised and rewarded. However, today, in this

celebration of Ian's life and work, there is an opportunity to give that recognition and to say thank you Ian for your friendship, your support, your inspiration and your leadership and for the many and varied contributions you have made to our personal and professional lives and to the ongoing life of our communities.
