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NEWS RELEASE

IRPP Study Examines the Role Academics Can Play in the Policy-Making Process

Influence is indirect, political context is critical and there is a strong need for advocacy coalitions, says author Daniel Cohn

Montreal – The question of the role of academics in the policy-making process continues to generate debate in both the academic and policy-making communities. On this subject, the IRPP is today releasing a study by Daniel Cohn (Simon Fraser University).

Through an examination of the impact academics have had on areas such as environmental, social and economic policy Cohn reaches several conclusions: He argues that academics have substantial opportunities to influence public policy but that this influence is usually indirect, and it is achieved by convincing those with power to advocate for and/or act on their ideas. He then examines how such opportunities arise and can be generated by academics. Finally the study looks at the ways in which state actors can best make use of scholarly advice.

Among other things, Cohn says that:

- ◆ The bridging role between the ultimate decision-makers in state organizations and academics is played by “third community” actors (also called “policy advisers”) such as think tanks; the research staffs of government ministries; and political parties, commissions of inquiry and consultants. Research shows that when academics make the findings of their research accessible to policy advisers, either in the publications of third community organizations or by playing a more active role in the third community, they improve their chances of influencing public policy.
- ◆ One major barrier to academics’ effective participation in the policy process and state actors’ ability to use their advice is the importance of context for state actors. Says Cohn, “Academics tend to minimize the importance of context: the answer is *the* answer regardless of how difficult it is to implement and regardless of the other demands of the state. For policy-makers, on the other hand, context will always be a key concern, so they are not looking so much for *the* answer as for *an* answer.”
- ◆ Advocacy coalitions of individuals and organizations who share beliefs and seek to work in concert with one another are an essential element of Canadian policy making process.
- ◆ The advantage of these coalitions is that academics can play a crucial role in their development “while leaving the leading partisan and oppositional roles to third

community actors, who are better able to fulfill them," says Cohn.

Jumping into the Political Fray: Academics and Policy-Making, by Daniel Cohn, is part of IRPP's Strengthening Canadian Democracy research program. It is now available on-line in Adobe (.pdf) format on the Institute's Web site (www.irpp.org)

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