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For immediate distribution
June 13, 2006

NEWS RELEASE

IRPP Releases Two Studies on the Importance of Political Parties to Canadian Democracy

The decline of party membership and citizens' engagement does not bode well for Canada

Montreal – Political parties serve as bellwethers for the state of democracy. When citizens are actively engaged in parties, democracy flourishes. When they lose interest in participating, the system is imperilled. As a part of its Strengthening Canadian Democracy series, the IRPP is today releasing two studies on the role of political parties in Canada. The first, by Kenneth Carty (University of British Columbia), outlines the function parties have historically served in Canada and their place on the political landscape today. The second, by William Cross (Carleton University) and Lisa Young (University of Calgary), focuses on the critical role played by individual party members and looks at ways to reinvigorate citizens' membership in Canada's parties.

Both studies start with the same basic assumptions: an engaged citizenry is a cornerstone of democracy, and political parties are vehicles for public participation in governance. Given these assumptions, the authors see worrying trends on the horizon:

- ◆ Cross and Young point out that membership rates appear to be dropping, the average member is nearing retirement age and not being replaced, and activism in parties is relatively low.
- ◆ The authors' survey research also shows that party members are not satisfied with their ability to shape policy. In particular, members resent the extent to which political professionals have usurped their traditional role.
- ◆ To address this problem, Cross and Young propose the creation of policy foundations within the parties, as exist in Germany. According to the authors, these groups would serve as "a vehicle for both a party's grassroots supporters and its substantive policy experts to participate in the study and development of policy options within each party's broad ideological framework."
- ◆ Carty argues that Canada's traditional brokerage parties, rather than advancing and articulating specific interests, accommodate and stifle them. This has led to the disengagement of voters.
- ◆ Furthermore, says Carty, the first-past-the-post electoral system "has rendered large swaths of the country politically uncompetitive for long periods of time."
- ◆ Moreover, Carty shows that the Liberal Party currently only represents the centre of the country, and no longer plays even its traditional brokerage role.

- ◆ Now we face a choice, concludes Carty. Either we go back to the old style national parties, or we implement electoral reform, which “offers a way to usher in the new party organizations that will reshape the competitive alignments necessary to allow Canadians to participate in a new democratic national public life.”

Are Canadian Political Parties Empty Vessels? Membership, Engagement and Policy Capacity, by William Cross and Lisa Young, and *The Shifting Place of Political Parties in Canadian Public Life*, by Kenneth Carty, can be downloaded for free from www.irpp.org.

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Founded in 1972, the Institute for Research in Public Policy (IRPP.org) is an independent, national, nonprofit organization based in Montreal.

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