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NEWS RELEASE

Longer Terms for Parliamentary Secretaries Would Make the House of Commons More Efficient and Productive

The biennial rotation of Parliamentary Secretaries (PS's) took place last Thursday, September 13, as anticipated. However, Peter Dobell, the Founding Director of the Parliamentary Centre, says a return to the practice of reappointing competent PS's for multiple terms, instead of rotating them every two years, would improve the House of Commons' efficiency and provide more continuity for committee chairs.

The Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP) announces the release of a new paper entitled *Parliamentary Secretaries: The Consequences of Constant Rotation*. In this 30-page study, Dobell analyses how appointments have been made since the office was first established and assesses the consequences of biennial rotation, a practice that was initiated by Prime Minister Trudeau and taken up by Prime Minister Chrétien.

"Under the present practice, PS's know that after two years in the post their appointment will not be renewed regardless of how well they perform," says Dobell. The rotation thus creates a natural sense of disappointment at the end of the two-year term. And, since it takes time for PS's to learn the substance of a department's business, the rotation hinders their effectiveness. "Consequently, ministers have little incentive to assign them significant responsibility."

The author adds that the frequent rotation of PS's is not an isolated phenomenon since it has repercussions for other elements of the parliamentary system, in particular parliamentary committees. Indeed, those rotated out of the position of PS usually press their party whip to find them another office. The chair of a committee is the preferred prize and frequently several openings exist, since a number of chairpersons have usually been appointed to the vacant PS positions. And so another round of musical chairs takes place, weakening the continuity that could strengthen committee work.

The IRPP study concludes that a decision by government to revert to the practice of reappointing competent PS's for multiple terms, instead of rotating them every two years, would bring several benefits:

- Incumbents would have time to gain skills and expertise and so strengthen their department;

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- Stability in the PS position would remove a principal cause for the regular replacement of committee chairpersons, a process that has seriously limited the latter's effectiveness;
- Together these steps would offer private members more predictable, satisfying and constructive career paths – and would make the House of Commons a more effective and productive institution.

The author notes that “for these changes to happen, political parties would have to decide that they were prepared to extend the term of committee appointments. In addition, the government would have to be prepared to recognize seniority and competence as criteria for the election of chairs, as well as looking for ways to enhance the significance and value of committee work.”

Parliamentary Secretaries: The Consequences of Constant Rotation, the latest *Policy Matters* paper in IRPP's *Strengthening Canadian Democracy* series, is now available on the IRPP Website at www.irpp.org – simply click on the “What's New” icon on the homepage.

For more information, or to schedule an interview with Peter Dobell, please contact IRPP.

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Founded in 1972, IRPP is an independent, national, nonprofit organization whose mission is to improve public policy in Canada by generating research, providing insight and sparking debate that will contribute to the public policy decision-making process and strengthen the quality of the public policy decisions made by Canadian governments, citizens, institutions and organizations.

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Quotes from the Study

"The net result is that a practice, introduced by Mr. Trudeau to share among members of the government caucus the material rewards and the responsibilities that come with the office of PS, has become an important constraint on the effectiveness of committees." Page 3

"When the two years come to an end and (PS's) are replaced by a colleague, the natural reaction is disappointment, even a sense of rejection." Page 9

"The consequences of the regular rotation of PS's are much more serious nowadays than they were in 1970 when Prime Minister Trudeau initiated the practice." Page 10

"From the perspective of ministers, if they knew that their PS might be assigned to the department for several years, they would normally be inclined to allocate greater responsibility to incumbents, perhaps even to make them responsible for evaluating advice on a segment of the department's mandate." Page 17

"In a world of increasing specialization, a member who has had sustained involvement in one field of activity is more likely at the end of his or her time in Parliament to be able to point to personal achievements. Parliament too would be better served if members attained a reasonable level of expertise in specific policy areas." Page 17

"Continuous service on a committee could thus become a career path for government members, and indeed for members of all parties." Page 18

Strengthening Canadian Democracy

Research Directors: André Blais (University of Montreal),
Paul Howe (University of New Brunswick) and Richard Johnston (University of British Columbia)

Since the 1960s, increased levels of education and changing social values have prompted calls for increased democratic participation, both in Canada and internationally. Some modest reforms have been implemented in this country, but for the most part the avenues provided for public participation lag behind the demand. The Strengthening Canadian Democracy research program explores some of the democratic lacunae in Canada's political system. In proposing reforms, the focus is on how the legitimacy of our system of government can be strengthened before disengagement from politics and public alienation accelerate unduly.

Publications that have appeared under this thematic include (all available free of charge on the IRPP Website at www.irpp.org):

- Henry Milner, "Civic Literacy in Comparative Context: Why Canadians Should Be Concerned," *Policy Matters* (July 2001).
- Matthew Mendelsohn and Andrew Parkin, "Introducing Direct Democracy in Canada," *Choices* (June 2001).
- Don Blake, "Electoral Democracy in the Provinces," *Choices* (March 2001).
- Louis Massicotte, "Changing the Canadian Electoral System," *Choices* (February 2001).
- Jerome Black, "The National Register of Electors: Raising Questions About the New Approach to Voter Registration in Canada," *Policy Matters* (December 2000).
- Peter Dobell, "Reforming Parliamentary Practice: The Views of MPs," *Policy Matters* (December 2000).
- Peter Dobell, "What Could Canadians Expect From a Minority Government," *Policy Matters* (November 2000).
- Richard Johnston, "Canadians Elections at the Millennium," *Choices* (September 2000).
- Paul Howe and David Northrup, "Strengthening Canadian Democracy: The Views of Canadians," *Policy Matters* (July 2000).
- Jennifer Smith and Herman Bakvis, "Changing Dynamics in Election Campaign Finance: Critical Issues in Canada and the United States," *Policy Matters* (July 2000).

Research on the following topics is currently underway:

- The impact of the media on attitudes towards democracy in Canada.
- Generational patterns in political opinions and behaviour of Canadians.
- Evaluating the national register of electors.