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NEWS RELEASE

Can Citizens Become a "Third Force" in Canadian Federalism?

Study Says Both Levels of Government Have "Failed Miserably" to Meet Their Promises of Citizen Engagement under SUFA

Montreal - The federal and provincial governments are sharply criticized in a study released today for failing to act on commitments made when the Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFA) was signed three years ago to involve Canadians in the social policy-making process.

The study by Susan D. Phillips, Associate Professor in the School of Social Policy and Administration at Carleton University, is released by the Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP) and titled "SUFA and Citizen Engagement: Fake or Genuine Masterpiece?" She writes that citizen involvement held out promise of a new model for intergovernmental relations, which she calls "instrumental federalism." A key component of the new model is that citizens would become the third force of federalism – not so much as a means of truly reducing the democratic deficit, but as an indirect vehicle for governments to hold each other accountable, something they cannot do directly in our federal system.

But the pledge of a fresh approach has largely gone unrealized. The provinces have no incentive to tie their citizen engagement activities to SUFA. Having jurisdiction over social policy, they have many opportunities to interact with and create partnerships with the voluntary organizations which deliver services and the citizens who use them. They do not need SUFA to do this.

As Phillips points out, it is the federal government that has the greater need for the type of citizen involvement promoted in SUFA. Indeed, one of its goals in promoting a renewed social union was to build stronger and more direct relationships with citizens — relationships that bypass provincial governments. Yet, the federal government has made little progress in this regard, impeded by a lack of commitment and imagination and a resistance to institutional change.

According to the author, the only real impact of SUFA so far has been on accountability regimes. For instance, the requirement that governments report on policy outcomes has been embedded in new federal-provincial-territorial agreements, such as the Early Childhood Development Initiative and the 2000 Health Accord. The eventual ability to compare outcomes across jurisdictions will be of some benefit in facilitating a public

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dialogue around social policy investment and in holding governments accountable for their program commitments.

Susan D. Phillips concludes that since Canadian governments will not be able to meet their citizen engagement commitments in any serious way before SUFA expires in February 2002, perhaps the best hope for institutionalizing meaningful, deliberative citizen engagement in intergovernmental relations is that existing provisions survive a renewal of SUFA, giving governments a second chance to put some real effort into the process.

“SUFA and Citizen Engagement: Fake or Genuine Masterpiece?” the latest *Policy Matters* paper in IRPP’s research program on the social union, is now available on the IRPP website at <http://www.irpp.org> – To access the document, simply click on the “What’s New” icon on the homepage.

For more information, or to schedule an interview with the author, please contact IRPP. To receive IRPP media advisories and news releases via e-mail, please subscribe to the IRPP e-distribution service by visiting the newsroom on the IRPP website.

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