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For immediate distribution – November 6, 2008

NEWS RELEASE

There needs to be a public dialogue over Senate reform

Study says election would alter legitimacy and representation of Senate

Montreal – The Senate reform legislation proposed by the Harper government in the previous session of Parliament may be defensible in light of other countries' experience, but the changes advocated would structurally alter Parliament and the relationship between the upper and the lower legislative chambers. The changes therefore need to be identified and debated as such, according to a study released by the Institute for Research on Public Policy.

The study, "Restructuring the Canadian Senate through Elections," by Bruce M. Hicks (Concordia University) and André Blais (Université de Montréal), examines the implications of the Harper government's Senate tenure and Senate consultative elections bills, which are expected to be reintroduced early in the new Parliament. These are significant pieces of legislation, since they propose changing the Senate from an appointed body to an elected body without holding federal-provincial negotiations and obtaining provincial legislative concurrence.

While the introduction of one or two elected senators might not alter the Canadian Parliament fundamentally or irreversibly, a critical mass of elected senators would eventually be reached, perhaps in only a few years (one-quarter of the Senate is vacant by 2009 and more than half could be elected by 2014), and this would fundamentally transform the chamber, according to the authors.

"This proposal deserves great attention by Canadians," says Blais, who urges the public to consider what role they want the Senate to play in Parliament, and what electoral system best represents their values.

"A chamber elected by the citizens, even through consultative elections, would have a different representational role than the one the Canadian Senate is currently predicated upon," says Hicks. The Senate was designed to represent regional or sectional interests, such as the Anglophone minority in Quebec, and while the electoral system proposed by the government is designed to ensure diversity within the legislature, it will be political, not cultural, minority representation, he notes. "An elected Senate would dramatically alter the nature of representation. It would also put the red chamber at odds with the Commons in terms of composition and mandate."

"Restructuring the Canadian Senate through Elections" by Bruce M. Hicks and André Blais can be downloaded free of charge from www.irpp.org.

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Media Contact: Kate Shingler Office: (514)787-0737 Cell: (514) 235-8308