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NEWS RELEASE

Security watchdog needed to keep Canadians safe and informed

IRPP study calls for the integration of accountability systems in agencies

Montreal – As national security operations within government and between governments become increasingly integrated, accountability mechanisms must also be unified across institutional boundaries and the role of Parliament in the accountability process enhanced, according to a new study from the Institute for Research on Public Policy.

The study, “Accountability in and for National Security,” found that accountability in national security has arisen in Canada mainly in answer to specific concerns, often voiced in a context of public controversy. In the post-9/11 environment, a familiar rhythm has returned to national security accountability: a security scandal leads to a specific inquiry, followed by a proposed reform agenda for an existing accountability regime that has been found wanting. The Maher Arar case is one recent example.

Unfortunately, responses to scandals have resulted in an ad hoc, piecemeal and uncoordinated set of reforms. This has left a patchwork of accountability in which some agencies like CSIS work under close watch, some like the RCMP are under ineffective scrutiny, while other parts of the security and intelligence community like Foreign Affairs and Canada Border Services routinely go largely unexamined. A more integrated approach to accountability is imperative.

If accountability in national security is to be effective, and perceived to be effective by the public, the government should adopt a broader interpretation of what may be publicly disclosed. In order to protect the security of Canadians, genuine national security confidentiality must be strictly observed. But, if improved accountability and public assurance are to be achieved, more flexibility in disclosure is essential.

Whitaker and his co-author Stuart Farson argue that installing an integrated review agency would enhance Canada’s system of accountability without jeopardizing its national security. Greater accountability could also enhance the effectiveness of security and police agencies. “One only has to look at the public relations difficulties that have befallen the RCMP in recent years, on both the national security and the law enforcement sides, to realize the potential value to the force itself of effective external review,” notes Whitaker.

“Accountability in and for National Security,” by Reg Whitaker and Stuart Farson, can be downloaded free of charge on the Institute’s Web site, www.irpp.org.

-30-

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