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Further Progress on Social Union Initiatives Will Require Regular First Ministers' Meetings

Ottawa – Canadians are witnessing a fundamental shift in the evolution of social policy in Canada. Federal and provincial governments are engaged in discussions that are creating new ways to work together to address major social policy issues in an integrated and coordinated way, according to a CPRN *REFLEXION*, *Securing the Social Union: Next Steps* released today. "Much progress has been made in the past two years. But the time has come to expand the scope of these discussions, and create mechanisms to make the process work better, be more accountable and transparent to citizens, and involve Canadians," says Judith Maxwell, President of CPRN.

As First Ministers prepare for their meeting on December 11 and 12, 1997 to discuss social policy renewal, they should be commended for what has been accomplished since their last meeting in June 1996:

"The National Child Benefit has been created through a collaborative effort that will improve the lives, and futures, of Canadian children, and governments are now broadening their efforts through the development of a comprehensive national children's agenda," says Kathy O'Hara, author of this *REFLEXION* and a Research Fellow at CPRN. "In addition, joint work is underway to improve and harmonize supports and services for persons with disabilities, and new intergovernmental institutions, such as the Federal-Provincial-Territorial Council on Social Policy Renewal, have been created to help manage all of this joint activity."

Ms. O'Hara urges First Ministers to build on these initiatives by taking further steps to secure the social union. These include:

- expand the scope of the current social union discussions by including other sectors in the discussions, and identify "Canadian projects" to pursue through the social union;
- create a regular schedule of meetings for First Ministers to review progress on social union initiatives;

- clarify the mandate of the Federal-Provincial-Territorial Council on Social Policy Renewal to coordinate sectoral work across the social union, begin work on framework issues, and to report regularly to First Ministers on progress; and
- open up the social union discussions by making them more transparent, reporting results, and beginning to engage citizens and citizen groups on the key issues.

"The current spirit of cooperation and consensus among governments is encouraging. But without building more structure for the discussions, there is a risk that we will lose this breakthrough and revert to the mistrust and bickering that characterized discussions about social policy in the past," said Ms. O'Hara. "This new paradigm is fragile and vulnerable. Provinces are worried about how long the federal government will continue to collaborate once it achieves its fiscal dividend. The Quebec government has only been an observer to these new processes, resisting processes that reflect a federal role in social policy."

Judith Maxwell, President of CPRN, points out that without new practices, such as regular meetings and reporting on results, "Canada is missing a key piece of governance. The federation requires mechanisms to manage interdependence between governments. First Ministers, in particular, need to continuously review progress, adjust what is not working, and give momentum and support to what is working."

The paper recognizes the Quebec government's discomfort with the concept of the social union, but argues that one of the fundamental values or principles underlying the social union is federalism and its dual capacity for collective action (which enables Canadians to achieve collective goals), and for flexible and autonomous action (to respond to the diversity of priorities and needs across Canada.)

This means that while Canadians value the flexibility, diversity, autonomy, and asymmetry inherent in the social union, they also recognize that the social union has enabled Canadians, including Quebecers, to undertake many collective social policy initiatives that reflected their shared values and achieved their common goals. This has allowed Quebecers to benefit from pan-Canadian initiatives, such as universal health insurance, while leading the rest of the country in innovation and progress in many social policies and programs.

"The key to the success of the social union is our ability to find ways to maximize the capacity of federalism to respect both our commonality and our diversity in the interests of all Canadians," says Ms. O'Hara.

O'Hara's *REFLEXION* is the culmination of a year-long project involving research and four Roundtable discussions held in March, May, June, and September 1997. The project explored five dimensions of the social union: its definition; its purpose and underlying values and principles; new ways to measure its performance; the need for new institutions; and how to engage citizens in the social union. It built on a new framework for conceptualizing the social union outlined in an earlier CPRN paper entitled *Building Blocks for Canada's New Social Union*, written by Margaret Biggs, a previous Research Fellow. Biggs' paper suggested that "the social union embodies our sense of collective responsibility (among citizens), our federalism

pact (between and across regions), and our governance contract (between citizens and governments)."

Judith Maxwell says that, "our objective in this project was to explore concrete proposals for constructing the social union using Margaret's framework, Kathy's research on specific models which could be adapted to the social union, and the insights we gleaned from the 'shared learning' process of the Roundtable discussions."

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