

GRADE NINE

CANADA'S FEDERAL POLITICAL SYSTEM



CANADA PASSPORT



CHAPTER ONE

How effectively does Canada's federal political system govern Canada for all Canadians?

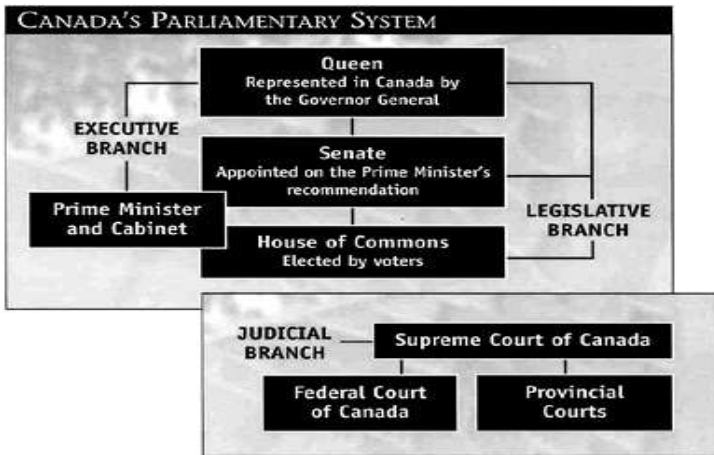


Photo: Library of Parliament

LEGISLATIVE BRANCH

The Queen

Canada is a constitutional monarchy. This means that the laws governing Canada recognize the Queen as the formal Head of State. All federal laws are made in the Queen's name. She also performs many important ceremonial duties when visiting Canada.

The Governor General



The Governor General's Standard is a symbol of the Crown's sovereignty in Canada

The Governor General is the Queen's representative in Canada. The Queen appoints the Governor General on the advice of the Prime Minister. The Governor General usually serves for five years. One of the most important roles of the Governor General is to ensure that Canada always has a Prime Minister. For example, if no party had a clear majority after an election, or if the Prime Minister were to die in office, the Governor General would have to choose a successor.

The Governor General acts on the advice of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. The duties of the Governor General include the following: summoning, opening and ending sessions of Parliament; reading the Speech from the Throne; giving Royal Assent to bills; signing state documents; and dissolving Parliament for an election.

The Senate

DISTRIBUTION OF SENATE SEATS

AREA	SEATS
Ontario	24
Quebec	24
Maritimes	24
Nova Scotia	10
New Brunswick	10
Prince Edward Island	4
Western Provinces	24
Manitoba	6
British Columbia	6
Saskatchewan	6
Alberta	6
Additional representation	9
Newfoundland and Labrador	6
Northwest Territories	1
Yukon Territory	1
Nunavut	1
TOTAL	105

The Senate studies, amends and either rejects or approves bills passed by the House of Commons. It can also introduce its own bills, except those to spend public money or impose taxes, which must be introduced in the House of Commons. No bill can become law until it has been passed by the Senate. Senators also study major social, legal and economic issues through their committee work.

One of the duties of the Senate is to represent the interests of Canada's regions, provinces, territories and minority groups. Seats in the Senate are distributed to give each major region of the country equal representation.

The Senate has 105 members. Senators are appointed by the Governor General on the recommendation of the Prime Minister and hold office until age 75.

The House of Commons

DISTRIBUTION OF HOUSE OF COMMONS SEATS

AREA	SEATS
Ontario	106
Quebec	75
Nova Scotia	11
New Brunswick	10
Manitoba	14
British Columbia	36
Prince Edward Island	4
Saskatchewan	14
Alberta	28
Newfoundland and Labrador	7
Northwest Territories	1
Yukon Territory	1
Nunavut	1
TOTAL	308

The House of Commons is the major law-making body in Parliament. In the Commons Chamber, Members devote most of their time to debating and voting on bills. The Chamber is also a place where Members represent constituents' views, discuss national issues and call on the government to explain its actions.

How do you become a Member of Parliament (MP)? By running in a federal election, which is held about every four years. In each of the country's 308 constituencies, or ridings, the candidate who gets the most votes is elected to the House of Commons, even if he or she gets less than half of the total votes.

Seats in the House of Commons are distributed roughly in proportion to the population of each province and territory. In general, the more people in a province or territory, the more Members it has in the House of Commons. Every province or territory must have at least as many Members in the Commons as it has in the Senate.

The distribution of House of Commons seats in the 2006 general election was as follows:

Province/Territory	Seats					Total
	Con.	Lib.	B.Q.	NDP	Ind.	
Newfoundland and Labrador	3	4				7
Prince Edward Island		4				4
Nova Scotia	3	6		2		11
New Brunswick	3	6		1		10
Quebec	10	13	51		1	75
Ontario	40	54		12		106
Manitoba	8	3		3		14
Saskatchewan	12	2				14
Alberta	28					28
British Columbia	17	9		10		36
Yukon		1				1
Northwest Territories				1		1
Nunavut		1				1
Total	124	103	51	29	1	308

EXECUTIVE



BRANCH



The Prime Minister

The Prime Minister is the leader of the party in power and is the Head of Government. A Prime Minister's duties include presiding over Cabinet meetings, meeting official foreign delegations to Ottawa and answering questions in the House of Commons. Since the Prime Minister is usually a Member of Parliament (two Prime Ministers who held office in the 1890s were Senators), he or she also spends time helping constituents.

The Cabinet

The Prime Minister chooses the Cabinet Ministers, and the Governor General formally appoints them. Most are MPs, and there is always at least one representative from the Senate. The Prime Minister and Cabinet meet regularly to discuss and decide on important issues affecting Canada. These issues concern government spending, ideas for bills, and new policies, programs and services. Most Cabinet Ministers are in charge of a government department and they report on their department's activities to Parliament.

A key feature of Cabinet is the concept of collective responsibility, which means that all Ministers share responsibility for the administration of government and for the government's policies. They must all support a Cabinet decision. They may not agree with it, but they have to support it in public. If a Minister cannot support a decision, he or she must resign from Cabinet.

Another important feature of our parliamentary system is responsible government. This means that the government must have the support of the majority of Members in the House of Commons to stay in power. In the British tradition, if the government loses a vote on a major measure, or on any motion of non-confidence, it is expected to resign or to ask the Governor General to call a general election.



The Judiciary as a Branch of Government

When the Fathers of Confederation created the new "Dominion of Canada" in 1867, they adopted a political system which created three branches of government: the executive branch or Cabinet; the legislative branch or Parliament; and the judiciary, the judges who preside over cases before the courts. Our constitution defines the powers, and the limits of the powers, that can be exercised by each of the three branches. This system of government and of law established by the founders of our country respects the important, but different, roles of the executive, the legislatures and the courts.

The role of the judiciary is to interpret and apply the law and the Constitution, and to provide impartial adjudication of disputes between individuals; between the state and the individual; and, between different levels of government within the state.

Unlike the other two branches, the judiciary is not accountable to any electorate or government for its decisions. Instead, the primary obligation of judges is to the law which is designed to protect all citizens. It is for this reason that judges occupy a uniquely protected place within our system of government, one which is designed to guarantee their independence from political or other influences. Indeed, judicial independence from both government influence and from other sources, including public opinion, is a constitutional right of every individual in Canada. It is the right to know that all legal questions which are brought before the courts will be resolved impartially and according to the law, without extraneous influence and intervention.