

The Canadian Government

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Introduction

This module gives an overview of Canadian government as well as attempts to draw parallels and differences between the political systems of the two countries.

Before beginning have the students locate the capital of both countries — Ottawa, Ontario and Washington, D.C. Have them measure the distance between the two sites as well as the distance between Ottawa and the town or city where they live. This will give them some sense of where the Parliament Buildings are located in Canada, where all federal legislation is passed, and the Prime Minister's city of residence.

The Queen of England and the President of the United States

The Queen of England and the President of the United States are both heads of state in North America: the President, of course, is the Head of State for the U.S. and the Queen is the Head of State in Canada. The Head of State is the person who represents all of the people of the country, not just those in a particular area. If there were ever a need to go against the wishes of the government, to override a particular vote, or to act in the case of an extreme emergency, this person — the Head of State — could do so. Today the Queen's role in Canada is mostly symbolic — she would never seize control of the government — but nonetheless she holds that important title.

Since the Queen doesn't live in Canada and can't be at all of the functions or daily running of the government, she has a representative. The Governor General is the Queen's representative in the federal government. The provincial governments also have a royal representative called a Lieutenant Governor. The Governor General, like the President of the United States, has the final say in any legislation; performs ceremonial roles such as greeting foreign dignitaries; and presents medals of honour to outstanding citizens. Again, the role of the Governor General is mainly symbolic and ceremonial. The Governor General serves as the Queen's representative for five years. Prior to 1952 the Governor General was a British subject, however since that time s/he has been Canadian alternating between a francophone and an anglophone. The Governor General must also be bilingual.

Did you know that the Queen of England can never visit Canada? This is a trick question. The Queen of England cannot visit Canada because the minute she lands on Canadian soil she becomes the Queen of Canada!

The Head of State is the most celebrated position in the two countries. For example, all coinage in both countries celebrates the Head of State: former presidents appear on one side of American coinage while Queen Elizabeth is featured on all Canadian coins. Prime Ministers do appear on several of the paper money denominations, but not on the coinage. Both countries also have civic holidays to celebrate their Heads of State: Presidents' Day is a national holiday in the U.S. while the Queen's Birthday (Queen Victoria) is a May holiday in Canada. Former Prime Ministers do not have a holiday in their honor.

The Queen is Head of State – who is head of government?

The Head of Government is just that — the man or woman who is the leader of the government voted in by the people. In Canada, like the U.S., the political system is a

democratic one. The word, democratic, originated in ancient Greece. It means that the people (demos) rule (kratia). And, in ancient Greece, the people did rule directly. That is, each person voted on whatever issue was of concern at a particular time. Canada and the U.S. are far too large for each and every person to vote on every issue. Instead, in either country, all those of voting age may vote for someone to represent them in government. The Head of Government in the U.S. is the President; in Canada it is the Prime Minister. This means that should there be any reason to override what the representatives vote for on our behalf, the President or the Prime Minister can do so. Because the President of the United States is both Head of State and Head of Government, s/he can exercise more powers than can the Prime Minister of Canada.

Canadians do not vote for their Prime Minister

The U.S. President and the Canadian Prime Minister are voted into office in very different ways. In fact, in Canada, the Prime Minister is not directly elected by the people of Canada. In both countries the party leaders are first elected at a leadership convention. In the U.S. the electorate then votes on which of the leaders it would like as President and Vice-President. There is one President/Vice-President choice for each of the two major parties. Canadians do not vote on the Prime Minister. Instead, the people in each area or "riding" (the Canadian equivalent of a "constituency") vote for whom they want as a representative in federal government. After all of the representatives for the ridings across the country are voted for, the numbers are added up and the party with the most representatives becomes the next government. The leader of that party, formerly chosen at the party convention, takes the role as Head of Government or Prime Minister. But it is important to remember that the Prime Minister is also just another elected representative and must win in his or her riding before taking the leadership role. In other words, let's say a party votes in a particular person as leader and that person does not win the majority of votes in her or his electorate, s/he would not be able to take the position as leader of the party. Only in a rare case would this ever happen as each party makes sure that their leader is very popular in her or his riding. But the point is that the Prime Minister is elected in the same way as the rest of the Members of Parliament.

The President of the United States holds an extremely powerful role and is given much respect by the American people. The Prime Minister of Canada is perceived as much more of a regular person, highly respected, but an equal among equals.

In the U.S. a new election must be called every four years and no one person can be President for more than 2 terms. In Canada an election must be called every five years but the Prime Minister doesn't have to wait five years to call an election. And, so long as the Prime Minister is leader of the majority party she or he can stay in power indefinitely. So far one Prime Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, has been in power the longest — over 20 years!

Canada has no Vice-President

Canada has no such thing as a Vice-President. At the party conventions a leader for the party is chosen but no vice-leader or vice-prime-minister is chosen. There is just one party leader. In the States, if anything happens to the President, the Vice-President takes over. Who takes over in Canada? If anything happens to the Prime Minister the Speaker asks the government (the party with the most votes) to select the member of government they think would best handle the leadership position until a new Prime Minister is chosen. This person will take the role of Prime Minister temporarily or until another leader is chosen at the next party convention.

What is in a "house?"

In both the U.S. and Canada federal politicians sit in the "House". The "House" is a large room where all elected members of the various parties conduct business called legislation — the various parties or party members propose changes to laws or policies that affect all citizens of the country. In Canada this is called the House of Commons; in the U.S., the House of Representatives or Congress.

In Canada all of the elected officials from the various ridings make up the House of Commons. There are over 300 members in the House of Commons today. The party with the most votes will become the government; the party with the second largest number of votes becomes the "Official Opposition"; and the remaining parties are also part of the opposition but do not have the same status or ability to challenge the government as does the Official Opposition.

In the U.S. the President and Congress are voted in separately and Congress is split into the House of Representatives and the Senate. Each district in the country votes a representative to the House of Representatives and each state votes in two representatives to the Senate. Canada has a Senate too, but it in no way compares to the U.S. Senate. Canada's Senate is not voted in — the members are appointed by the Prime Minister. The Senate acts primarily as a rubber stamp for legislation passed in the House of Commons. Because the President and the Congress are voted in separately, the President can represent one party while the Congress is dominated by the other. In Canada the government and the Prime Minister are from the same party. In the U.S. it is often more difficult for a President to pass legislation particularly if Congress has a majority of members from the opposition party. In Canada all legislation proposed by the Prime Minister is expected to pass as the majority of members of the House of Commons are from the same political party and, in almost all cases, would support their leader.

Cabinet and cabinet secretaries

In Canada the Prime Minister has sole responsibility for creating his cabinet from Members of Parliament who have been voted in by the public. Most members of the Cabinet are responsible for a particular portfolio. For example, there is a Defense Minister and a Minister of Education etc. In the U.S. similar departments have heads as well but these people are not part of Congress. They are not elected but appointed from the public by the President. Because of this difference in Canada the Prime Minister and Cabinet make up the Executive branch of government and belong to the House of Commons. In the U.S. the President and Cabinet form the Executive but are separate from the legislative body or Congress.

In selecting a Cabinet the Prime Minister usually attempts to represent each of the regions and the two language groups. Almost every member of the cabinet heads a department of government (a cabinet member without a department is called a "minister without a portfolio") and together the ministers shape government policy. Each minister is responsible and answerable for her/his department. The cabinet declares war or makes peace; all members must speak as one body on any questions dealing with government policy (if a minister cannot support a policy s/he must resign); and if Cabinet is defeated on legislation in the House, the government must resign.

The structure of the judicial system is similar in the two countries. Both have a Supreme Court, Court of Appeals, and District Courts. All members are appointed by the Executive branch of government. The main role of the judiciary is to ensure that all laws approved by the House of Commons and the Senate conform to the Constitution.

Legislation

The Prime Minister and Cabinet are the main source of legislation: they introduce bills which the House of Commons must pass. The opposition will debate the legislation but the government counts on passing all bills by virtue of having a majority government. (All members of the ruling party must vote with their party unless the Prime Minister allows a free vote which has happened with moral issues such as abortion.) If a government does not have a majority it will depend on winning the favor of one of the minority parties in order to pass a bill. If a bill does not pass the government must step down: the Governor General will either hand the power to the opposition or call an election.

In the House of Commons the government sits to the right of the speaker with the Cabinet and Prime Minister sitting in centre front. The Official Opposition sits directly across from the government. The House is set up to be adversarial with the parties focusing on one another rather than on the speaker. Because all members sit with their party, this structure also tends to put more emphasis on the party rather than on the individual. The reverse is true in Congress. The House of Representatives in the U.S. is a half oval where all members face the speaker and do not necessarily sit with their party affiliates acting more as individuals than party members.

Canadian political parties

In the U.S. there are really just two major political parties — the Republicans and the Democrats. In Canada today there are five major or official federal parties. For a party to be able to register as official in an election, it must have had at least 12 seats in the previous parliament. Until recently there were only three major parties in Canada: The Liberals, the Conservatives, and the New Democratic Party or the N.D.P. The Liberals and Conservatives are somewhat similar to the Democratic and Republican parties in the U.S. the major difference being that even the more Republican-like party, the Conservatives, still support many of Canada's national social programs. Both the Liberal and Conservative Parties are Canada's oldest parties. Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, was a member of the Conservative Party. The New Democratic Party, a very significant party in Canada though it has never won a majority vote, supports increased spending on social welfare and the protection of Canadian industries. This party was started in the 1930s in the West as part of a social democratic movement.

In the last decade two more federal parties have emerged both playing a major role in the House of Commons today. In the early 1990s a Cabinet Minister, Lucien Bouchard, resigned to form a new party, the Parti Québécois. Bouchard was frustrated with the federal government's unwillingness to stand behind Québec's demands for more recognition in the Constitution of Canada. His party, though really a separatist party, appealed to many Québécois and won the status of Official Opposition in the federal elections just two years after its founding. In the 1997 elections the Bloc Québécois lost its role as Official Opposition to another region-interest party, the Reform Party.

The Reform Party, started in the late 1980s, is Canada's most conservative or right-wing party. It is a grassroots party that started in the Alberta to address regional concerns. The Reform Party wants to decrease government spending and size by cutting back on social welfare and cultural programs. In just 10 years as a federal party, the Reform Party won the status of Official Opposition in the 1997 federal elections. Its sudden popularity is attributed to the frustration of the electorate particularly in Western Canada where many feel that the federal government does not respond to their needs and gives too much time to Québec's concerns.

Confederation and Canada's Constitution

Prior to 1867 Canada was made up of a group of separate colonies of Great Britain. In the 1860s politicians met on Prince Edward Island to draw up plans for a confederation of four of these colonies: Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Upper Canada (Ontario), and Lower Canada (Québec). These politicians were called, "The Fathers of Confederation" and the document they put together was named the "British North America Act" or the BNA Act. At that time these men had to come up with a name for Canada. Their first choice was the Kingdom of Canada. However, they were afraid that such a name would antagonize the Americans as "kingdom" has a rather powerful ring. Instead they came up with a name from the Bible. If there is a Bible in the classroom have the students look up Psalm 72. It reads, "He shall have dominion also from sea to sea" The Fathers of Confederation liked this psalm and felt that one day Canada would also stretch from sea to sea — from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific — so they called it the Dominion of Canada after this psalm. July 1st used to be called Dominion Day but the name was later changed to Canada Day. This is Canada's largest national celebration, but it has nothing to do with independence. Rather, it has to do with the formation of Canada as a country though, at the time, a colonial one.

If Canada had an Independence Day it would be December 11th, but no one celebrates this date and few Canadians know its significance. On 11 December 1931 the British government passed a law granting Canada full freedoms. This law is called the Statute of Westminster. At this point, Canada was given the choice to excerpt its freedoms or remain under British jurisdiction. In other words, Canada was given the right to be an independent country. Becoming independent from Britain has been a slow and evolving process for Canada. In fact, it wasn't until years later that Canada chose to bring home its own Constitution.

On 17 April 1982 that the British North America Act or Canada's constitution, was brought home to Canada from Britain and renamed the Constitution Act, 1982. From that point forward any amendments to the Constitution were within the powers of the Canadian government. No longer did changes or amendments have to go through the British government. At this time a Charter of Rights was included, similar to the American Bill of Rights, enshrining extensive freedoms in the Constitution. Up until 1982 individual rights were part of the common laws protected by the courts but able to be limited by acts of Parliament or the provinces. With the entrenchment of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in the Constitution it became much more difficult to veto or limit individual rights.

Canada is the first country in North America to have a woman Prime Minister

Did you know that Canada has had a woman Prime Minister? Kim Campbell wasn't Prime Minister for long — just a few short months in 1993 — but nonetheless she is the first woman to be Head of Government in North America. The Right Honourable Kim Campbell was Canada's 19th Prime Minister. In her maiden speech she said, "I am honoured to have been entrusted with its leadership and to be able again to make history for women and for our party." Today Campbell is a Canadian consul in Los Angeles.

In 1916 Manitoba was the first province to allow women to vote. Several women worked hard for this right, a few of them very creatively. In a play presented a couple of years before the women got the vote, Nellie McClung, part of the Famous Five who pushed for equal rights for women, did a skit in which the roles were reversed — men were begging for the vote. Nellie McClung pushed a wheel-barrow full of petitions to the centre stage. The petitions were from men asking that they be allowed to vote. Amidst gales of laughter McClung announced that she was very sorry but had to reject their application. Two years later, women won the vote in Canada; in 1920 they won the vote in the U.S The first woman elected to the House of Commons in Canada was Agnes Macphail in 1922. In 1929 women were finally declared "persons" by law and consequently allowed to be appointed to

the Senate. Certain groups weren't allowed to vote until even later in the century — all Asians groups were finally allowed to vote in 1948 and First Nations not until 1960.

Conclusion

Canada, like the U.S., is a democracy. In both countries there are provincial or state governments that take care of local concerns and federal governments that take care of national business. At the national or federal level, the governments in the two countries differ substantially. Canada's parliamentary system is based on the British parliamentary system which includes three fundamental elements — the Monarch, the upper house which reviews legislation (the Senate), and the House of Commons. To this system Canada added elements of the U.S. federal system wherein different levels of government (federal and provincial/state) are given differing powers and responsibilities. Given how the parliamentary system operates, the government has a fair amount of power in Canada whereas the head of state has less than her/his American counterpart. This difference is best summed up by comparing the *raison d'être* of the two countries. In Canada "Peace, Order and Good Government" is the motto, whereas the U.S. Constitution reads, "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness". The Canadian system is more oriented towards collective rights while the U.S. system emphasizes individual rights.