

The Prime Minister is the leader of the political party requested by the Governor General to form the government, which almost always means that he is the leader of the party with the strongest representation in the House of Commons. His position is one of exceptional authority stemming in part from the success of the party at an election. The Prime Minister chooses his Cabinet. When a member of Cabinet resigns, the remainder of the Cabinet is undisturbed; when the Prime Minister vacates his office, this act normally carries with it the resignation of all those in the Cabinet.

One source of the authority of the Prime Minister lies in his prerogative to recommend the dissolution of Parliament. This prerogative, which in most circumstances permits him to precipitate an election, is a source of considerable power both in his dealings with his colleagues and with the opposition parties in the House of Commons. The Prime Minister is also responsible for the organization of the Cabinet and its committees; for the organization and functions of his own, the Privy Council, and Federal-Provincial Relations offices; and for the allocation of responsibilities between Ministers.

Another source of the Prime Minister's authority derives from the appointments which he recommends including Privy Councillors, Cabinet Ministers, Lieutenant Governors of the provinces, provincial administrators, Speakers of the Senate, Chief Justices of all courts, Senators and certain senior executives of the Public Service. The Prime Minister also recommends the appointment of a new Governor General to the Sovereign, although this normally follows consultation with his Cabinet.

Following are the Prime Ministers since Confederation, with dates of administrations:

- Rt. Hon. Sir John Alexander Macdonald, July 1, 1867 — November 5, 1873
- Hon. Alexander Mackenzie, November 7, 1873 — October 16, 1878
- Rt. Hon. Sir John Alexander Macdonald, October 17, 1878 — June 6, 1891
- Hon. Sir John Joseph Caldwell Abbott, June 16, 1891 — November 24, 1892
- Rt. Hon. Sir John Sparrow David Thompson, December 5, 1892 — December 12, 1894
- Hon. Sir Mackenzie Bowell, December 21, 1894 — April 27, 1896
- Rt. Hon. Sir Charles Tupper, May 1, 1896 — July 8, 1896
- Rt. Hon. Sir Wilfrid Laurier, July 11, 1896 — October 6, 1911
- Rt. Hon. Sir Robert Laird Borden, October 10, 1911 — October 12, 1917 (Conservative Administration)
- Rt. Hon. Sir Robert Laird Borden, October 12, 1917 — July 10, 1920 (Unionist Administration)
- Rt. Hon. Arthur Meighen, July 10, 1920 — December 29, 1921 (Unionist — National Liberal and Conservative Party)
- Rt. Hon. William Lyon Mackenzie King, December 29, 1921 — June 28, 1926
- Rt. Hon. Arthur Meighen, June 29, 1926 — September 25, 1926
- Rt. Hon. William Lyon Mackenzie King, September 25, 1926 — August 6, 1930
- Rt. Hon. Richard Bedford Bennett, August 7, 1930 — October 23, 1935
- Rt. Hon. William Lyon Mackenzie King, October 23, 1935 — November 15, 1948
- Rt. Hon. Louis Stephen St-Laurent, November 15, 1948 — June 21, 1957
- Rt. Hon. John George Diefenbaker, June 21, 1957 — April 22, 1963
- Rt. Hon. Lester Bowles Pearson, April 22, 1963 — April 20, 1968
- Rt. Hon. Pierre Elliott Trudeau, April 20, 1968 —

The Cabinet. The Cabinet's primary responsibility in the Canadian political system is to determine priorities among the demands expressed by the people and to define policies to meet those demands. The Cabinet is a committee of Ministers chosen by the Prime Minister, generally from among members of the House of Commons, although one or two Cabinet Ministers are usually chosen from the Senate including the Leader of the Government in the Senate. It is unusual for a senator to head a department of government because the Constitution provides that measures for appropriating public funds or imposing taxes must originate in the House of Commons. If a senator headed a department another Minister in the House of Commons would have to speak on his behalf in respect of its affairs.

As of January 1976, the following were members of the 20th Ministry:

- Prime Minister, Rt. Hon. Pierre Elliott Trudeau
- President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada, Hon. Mitchell Sharp
- Secretary of State for External Affairs, Hon. Allan Joseph MacEachen
- Minister of State for Science and Technology and Minister of Public Works, Hon. Charles Mills Drury
- Minister of the Environment, Hon. Jean Marchand
- President of the Treasury Board, Hon. Jean Chrétien
- Postmaster General, Hon. Bryce Stuart Mackasey
- Minister of Finance, Hon. Donald Stovel Macdonald