

Organization of the federal government

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In Canada the legal framework within which political processes take place is provided through a written constitution embodied in the British North America acts. The first of these acts, passed by the British Parliament in 1867, not only established the institutions through which legislative, executive and judicial powers are exercised in Canada but also established a federal form of government. A central government — the federal government — has legislative jurisdiction primarily over matters of national concern and over those matters not assigned to the provinces. The 10 provincial governments are assigned specific areas of legislative jurisdiction, including municipal institutions.

In Canada there is a fusion of executive and legislative powers. Formal executive power is vested in the Queen, whose authority is delegated to the Governor General, her representative. Legislative power is vested in the Parliament of Canada which consists of the Queen, an appointed upper house called the Senate and a lower house called the House of Commons, elected by universal adult suffrage. The independence of the judiciary is safeguarded through the constitutional provision that superior court judges are appointed by the Governor-in-Council, that is, by the Governor General on advice of the Cabinet, and that they hold office during good behaviour and cannot be removed unless both houses of Parliament, the Cabinet and the Governor General agree.

In the Canadian system, where the executive is part of Parliament, democratic principles could not be adhered to without the constitutional convention that the government is responsible to the House of Commons. When the government loses the confidence of the House of Commons, it must resign or the prime minister must ask the Governor General to dissolve Parliament and call a general election. Although there are conventions that help in deciding when the government has lost the confidence of the House, all doubt is removed when the government is defeated on a motion on which it had explicitly staked its life or when a motion of non-confidence in the government is passed. If the government resigns, the Governor General can call on the leader of the opposition (who is usually the leader of the political party that has the second largest number of seats in the House of Commons) to form a new government. If a government that has lost the confidence of the House of Commons and has been granted a dissolution is defeated in the ensuing general election and if no clear majority is elected, the government has two choices — it can remain in office and seek the confidence of the Commons when it meets or it can resign at once. If it resigns, the Governor General will normally ask the leader of another party, usually the one that has won the most seats, to form a new government. The primary responsibility of the Governor General in either circumstance is to provide the nation with a government capable of carrying on with the support of the House of Commons.

The prime minister and his Cabinet, who with one or two exceptions are members of the House of Commons, are, formally speaking, the Queen's advisers. In fact virtually no significant actions can be taken by the Queen or her representative in Canada, the Governor General, without Cabinet advice. The prime minister and his Cabinet determine executive policies and are responsible for them to the House of Commons. The Queen and the Governor General have the traditional rights to be consulted, to encourage and to warn the government.

The demands of citizens are conveyed primarily to members of Parliament, directly to Cabinet ministers or indirectly to Cabinet ministers through the public service. Demands may originate from individuals, political parties or pressure groups; members of Parliament, Cabinet ministers and public servants may take the initiative in suggesting the adoption of policies and programs in the public interest. Although the roles of Parliament, the public service and the Cabinet cannot be defined precisely, the following description deals with the obvious and primary roles of each.