How Canadians Govern Themselves

There are three key facts about Canada's system of government: our country is a federal state, a parliamentary democracy and a constitutional monarchy.

Malak of Ottawa

(From Left to Right)

Queen Elizabeth II opening the 23rd Parliament (1957)

Parliament Hill, Ottawa

FEDERAL STATE

There are federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments in Canada. The responsibilities of the federal and provincial governments were defined in 1867 in the *British North America Act*, now known as the *Constitution Act*, 1867.

In our *federal state*, the federal government takes responsibility for matters of national and international concern. These include defence, foreign policy, interprovincial trade and communications, currency, navigation, criminal law and citizenship. The provinces are responsible for municipal government, education, health, natural resources, property and civil rights, and highways. The federal government and the provinces share jurisdiction over agriculture and immigration. Federalism allows different provinces to adopt policies tailored to their own populations, and gives provinces the flexibility to experiment with new ideas and policies.

Every province has its own elected Legislative Assembly, like the House of Commons in Ottawa. The three northern territories, which have small populations, do not have the status of provinces, but their governments and assemblies carry out many of the same functions.

PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY

In Canada's *parliamentary democracy*, the people elect members to the House of Commons in Ottawa and to the provincial and territorial legislatures. These representatives are responsible for passing laws, approving and monitoring expenditures, and keeping the government accountable. Cabinet ministers are responsible to the elected representatives, which means they must retain the "confidence of the House" and have to resign if they are defeated in a non-confidence vote.

Parliament has three parts: the **Sovereign** (Queen or King), the **Senate** and the **House of Commons**. Provincial legislatures comprise the Lieutenant Governor and the elected Assembly.

In the federal government, the **Prime Minister** selects the Cabinet ministers and is responsible for the operations and policy of the government. The **House of Commons** is the representative chamber, made up of members of Parliament elected by the people, traditionally every four years. **Senators** are appointed by the Governor General on the advice of the Prime Minister and serve until age 75. Both the House of Commons and the Senate consider and review **bills** (proposals for new laws). No bill can become law in Canada until it has been passed by both chambers and has received royal assent, granted by the Governor General on behalf of the Sovereign.

MAKING LAWS

HOW A BILL BECOMES LAW — THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS	
STEP 1	**First Reading** – The bill is considered read for the first time and is printed.
STEP 2	**Second Reading** – Members debate the bill's principle.
STEP 3	**Committee Stage** – Committee members study the bill clause by clause.
STEP 4	**Report Stage** – Members can make other amendments.
STEP 5	**Third Reading** – Members debate and vote on the bill.
STEP 6	**Senate** – The bill follows a similar process in the Senate.
STEP 7	**Royal Assent** – The bill receives royal assent after being passed by both Houses.

Living in a democracy, Canadian citizens have the right and the responsibility to participate in making decisions that affect them. It is important for Canadians aged 18 or more to participate in their democracy by voting in federal, provincial or territorial and municipal elections.

CONSTITUTIONAL MONARCHY

As a *constitutional monarchy*, Canada's **Head of State** is a hereditary Sovereign (Queen or King), who reigns in accordance with the Constitution: the rule of law. The Sovereign is a part of Parliament, playing an important, non-partisan role as the focus of citizenship and allegiance, most visibly during royal visits to Canada. Her Majesty is a symbol of Canadian sovereignty, a guardian of constitutional freedoms, and a reflection of our history. The Royal Family's example of lifelong service to the community is an encouragement for citizens to give their best to their country. As Head of the Commonwealth, the Sovereign links Canada to 53 other nations that cooperate to advance social, economic and cultural progress. Other constitutional monarchies include Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Australia, New Zealand, The Netherlands, Spain, Thailand, Japan, Jordan and Morocco.

There is a clear distinction in Canada between the **head of state**—the Sovereign—and the **head of government**—the Prime Minister, who actually directs the governing of the country.

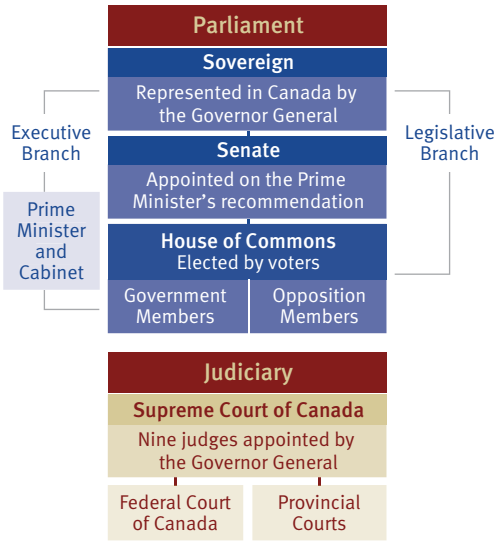
The Sovereign is represented in Canada by the **Governor General**, who is appointed by the Sovereign on the advice of the Prime Minister, usually for five years. In each of the ten provinces, the Sovereign is represented by the **Lieutenant Governor**, who is appointed by the Governor General on the advice of the Prime Minister, also normally for five years.

The interplay between the three branches of government—the Executive, Legislative and Judicial—which work together but also sometimes in creative tension, helps to secure the rights and freedoms of Canadians.

Each provincial and territorial government has an elected legislature where provincial and territorial laws are passed. The members of the legislature are called members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), members of the National Assembly (MNAs), members of the Provincial Parliament (MPPs) or members of the House of Assembly (MHAs), depending on the province or territory.

In each province, the **Premier** has a role similar to that of the Prime Minister in the federal government, just as the Lieutenant Governor has a role similar to that of the Governor General. In the three territories, the **Commissioner** represents the federal government and plays a ceremonial role.

CANADA'S SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT



David Johnston, 28th Governor General since Confederation, with grandchildren