



Introduction

Governments in democracies are elected by the passengers to steer the ship of the nation. They are expected to hold it on course, to arrange for a prosperous voyage, and to be prepared to be thrown overboard if they fail in either duty.

This, in fact, reflects the original sense of the word “government,” as its roots in both Greek and Latin mean “to steer.”

Canada is a democracy, a constitutional monarchy. Our head of state is the Queen of Canada, who is also Queen of the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, and a host of other countries scattered around the world from the Bahamas and Grenada to Papua New Guinea and Tuvalu. Every act of government is done in the name of the Queen, but the authority for every act flows from the Canadian people.

When the men who framed the basis of our present written Constitution, the Fathers of Confederation, were drafting it in 1864–67, they freely, deliberately and unanimously chose to vest the formal executive authority in the Queen, “to be administered according to the well understood principles of the British Constitution by the Sovereign personally or by the Representative of the Queen.” That meant responsible government, with a cabinet responsible to the House of Commons, and the House of Commons answerable to the people. All of the powers of the Queen are now exercised by her representative, the Governor General.

The Governor General, who is now always a Canadian, is appointed by the Queen on the advice of the Canadian prime minister and, except in very extraordinary circumstances, exercises all powers of the office on the advice of the cabinet (a council of ministers), which has the support of a majority of the members of the popularly elected House of Commons.

Canada is not only an independent sovereign democracy, but is also a federal state, with 10 largely self-governing provinces and three territories with a lesser degree of self-government.

What does it all mean? How does it work?

The answer is important to every citizen. We cannot work or eat or drink; we cannot buy or sell or own anything; we cannot go to a ball game or a hockey game or watch TV without feeling the effects of government. We cannot marry or educate our children, cannot be sick, born or buried without the hand of government somewhere intervening. Government gives us railways, roads and airlines; sets the conditions that affect farms and industries; manages or mismanages the life and growth of the cities. Government is held responsible for social problems, and for pollution and sick environments.

Government is our creature. We make it, we are ultimately responsible for it, and, taking the broad view, in Canada we have considerable

reason to be proud of it. Pride, however, like patriotism, can never be a static thing; there are always new problems posing new challenges. The closer we are to government, and the more we know about it, the more we can do to help meet these challenges.

This publication takes a look at our system of government and how it operates.