



Our Country, Our Parliament

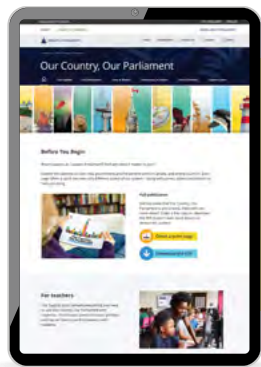
An Introduction to Democracy and Government in Canada

Photos in this publication are from the Library of Parliament unless otherwise indicated.

Parliament collage on the cover:

Mountain: jdwooly / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images
Métis sash: Michael Connor Photo/stock.adobe.com
Forest: bluejayphoto / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images
Currency: Hemera Technologies / PhotoObjects.net / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images
Person in Kayak: 6okean / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images
Northern lights: La_Corivo / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images
Moose: 3quarks / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images
Wheat: Yevgeniy Sambulov / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images
Tractor: Elenathewise / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images
Totem pole: Jamesvancouver / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images
Quebec City: Eric Santin / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images

Clock: MichelGuenette / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images
Beaver: vladone / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images
Muskoka Chair: Cavan Images / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images
Drum: Valmedia / stock.adobe.com
Inukshuk: PaulAnthonyWilson / E+ via Getty Images
Urban view: Yelena Rodríguez Mena / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images
Orca: bbevren / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images
Lighthouse: David Boutin photography / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images
Lobster: kunst-mp / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images
Canadian flag: Derek Brumby / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images



An online version of this publication, including videos, games, glossaries and a teacher's guide, is available at learn.parl.ca/OCOP.

Our Country, Our Parliament: An Introduction to Democracy and Government in Canada

© Library of Parliament, 2025

Issued in French under the title Notre pays, notre Parlement : une introduction à la démocratie et au gouvernement au Canada.

ISBN 978-0-660-75530-4

Cat. no.: YM41-12/2025E

All rights reserved. The content of this publication is covered by the provisions of the *Copyright Act*. Written permission to reproduce the content of this publication in whole or in part or to otherwise use the content of this publication must be obtained from the Library of Parliament prior to use except in accordance with the provisions of the *Copyright Act*.

The Library of Parliament is not responsible for any loss or damage which may be attributable to the use of or the reliance on the content found in this publication, or result from any failure of performance, error, omission, interruption, deletion, defect, delay in operation or transmission, computer virus, theft or destruction, or unauthorized access to or alteration or use of information under any cause of action.

Every reasonable effort has been made to ensure that the information presented in this publication is current and accurate. All content is provided for general information purposes only and does not constitute legal or other professional advice, or an opinion of any kind, political or otherwise. Before relying or acting on the information provided in this publication, the services of a competent professional should be sought.

Inside This Book

Introduction: Parliament and You 2

1 Our System of Government

Government Explained	3
The Big Picture	3
The Division of Powers	5
Indigenous Self-Government	8
Branches of Government	8

2 What is Parliament?

The Three Parts of Parliament	10
The Monarch and the Governor General	11
The Senate	12
The House of Commons	15

3 How Parliament Works

Making Canada's Laws	17
Parliamentarians on the Job	20
Staying Connected	24

4 Democracy in Action

How Elections Work	25
Government and Opposition	28

5 Parliament Past, Present and Future

A Changing Parliament	31
The Parliament Buildings	37

Conclusion: Sharing Your Voice 39

Pgiam / E+ via Getty Images



Parliament and You

Have you ever wondered what Parliament has to do with you?

Sometimes Parliament can feel far away from our everyday lives. You may even feel like politics and government have nothing to do with you. But whether or not it's something you follow closely, it is important to understand how Parliament works – because the debates and decisions that take place there impact you, your family, your community and the world around you.

Understanding Parliament is only the beginning. Our system of government depends on people like you getting involved and sharing your views. Even if you're too young to vote, there are lots of ways to be heard and make a difference. In this book, you'll learn how an idea becomes a law, who's involved, where it all happens – and how you can participate.

Did You Know?



You can also find *Our Country, Our Parliament* online! Visit learn.parl.ca/OCOP for the full text of this book, plus videos, games and activities for each chapter.

As you read this book, keep an eye out for these icons:



Vocab Builder

Tips on words and phrases used in the book



Fun Fact

Interesting information about Parliament and more



Did You Know?

More detail on the topics explored



Our System of Government

1

What do we mean when we talk about government? The answer is more complicated than you might think! In this chapter, we'll explore what government means and learn how it works across the country.

Government Explained

There are at least three meanings of the word “government” in Canada:

- The systems and rules that determine how our country is run (also called **governance**)
- A group of people selected as leaders (of the country, a province or territory, an Indigenous community or Nation, or a town or city)
- The departments and offices that put the leaders' ideas into action

Although that may sound confusing, all these definitions are related. They are all part of our system of government.



The Big Picture

The first meaning of government we'll look at is the systems and rules in place across Canada, which determine how our country is run. Many of these come from one place – the **Constitution**.

The Constitution is the highest law in Canada. It's like a rulebook for the country. It lays out the basic principles of our system of government, the rights and freedoms of Canadians and the unique rights of Indigenous peoples.

But what are the principles of our system of government? Keep reading to find out.

Library and Archives Canada / e008125379
BNA Act (red cover): Library and Archives Canada / MIKAN 122169

Chillim / iStock /
Getty Images Plus
via Getty Images

Did You Know?

Although we call it a “rulebook,” Canada's Constitution isn't a single document. It's made up of many different parts. Some are written down – like laws, decisions by judges, and agreements between the provinces and the federal government. Other parts are unwritten and passed on through tradition.



DEMOCRACY

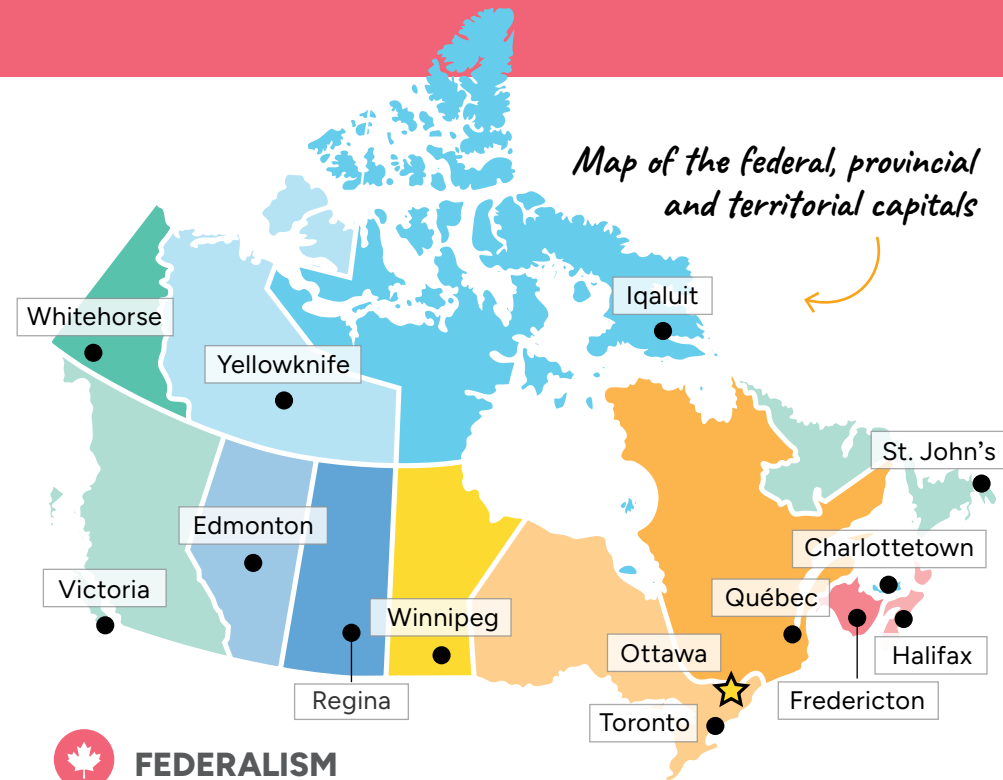
Canada is a democracy: a country where citizens have the right to participate in making decisions that affect them. Since the country is so big, we usually do this indirectly, by electing people to represent us in **legislatures** (law-making institutions). These people then make decisions on our behalf. This is known as **representative democracy**.

In Canada, we elect representatives to Parliament, to provincial and territorial legislatures, to Indigenous governments and to municipal councils.

CONSTITUTIONAL MONARCHY

Canada is what's called a constitutional monarchy. That means that the **Monarch** (King or Queen) is the Head of State, but their powers are defined and limited by the Constitution. In other words, the Monarch is the head of the country, but they're not involved in political decision-making.

The Monarch is represented in Canada by the **Governor General**.



FEDERALISM

Canada is a **federation**: a group of provinces and territories that each have their own governments, but that also share a central, or **federal**, government. Their different powers and responsibilities are explained on the next page.

TREATIES

Historic treaties are agreements that were signed by First Nations and the British and Canadian governments. The two sides understood them differently. First Nations saw the treaties as creating long-term relationships that would benefit both groups. The British and Canadians saw them as a way to gain access to First Nations lands for settlement and development. The treaties' spirit and intent have not always been honoured by the Canadian government.

Today, treaty-making continues with Indigenous governments across the country.

Vocab Builder

Is the Monarch the King of England or the King of Canada? Both! He is the King of the United Kingdom, as well as other countries, but his title here is the **King of Canada**.

There's even a set of royal symbols that represent the Canadian throne, including the Coat of Arms, Crown, Sovereign's Flag and Royal Cypher.



Coat of Arms of Canada

His Majesty the King in Right of Canada, represented by the Canadian Heraldic Authority, 2025.

The Division of Powers

In Canada, law-making powers are divided between four orders, or levels, of government: **federal, provincial and territorial, Indigenous and municipal**. Each one makes laws (or bylaws) in its own areas of responsibility.

Federal

The federal Parliament is responsible for issues that affect the whole country. Here are a few examples:

National defence

Citizenship

Telecommunications

Postal service

Criminal law



Vergani_Fotografia / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images



mediaphotos / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images

Provincial and Territorial

The provinces and territories are responsible for their parts of the country only. Each one passes its own laws, in areas like these:

Education

Health care

Property and civil rights

Hospitals

Natural resources (with some exceptions)

Did You Know?



When the territories were first created, they didn't have any law-making powers. The federal Parliament was put in charge of governing them. This has changed over the years, and the territories now have responsibilities similar to those of the provinces. This transfer of powers is called **devolution**. The process is complete in Yukon and the Northwest Territories, and still ongoing in Nunavut.



Mikaela MacKenzie / Winnipeg Free Press

Indigenous

There are many different types of Indigenous governments. Their powers and responsibilities can vary widely, and they can include areas like the following:

Child and family services

Economic development

Education

Health care

Lands

Language and culture

Some of these powers are similar to those of other orders of government.



Susan Perry / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images

Municipal

Municipal governments are responsible for an individual city, town or other community. Their powers are assigned to them by the province or territory where they're located. In general, they focus on local issues and services like these:

Parks and playgrounds

Fire and paramedic services

Public transportation

Libraries

Garbage, recycling and compost



ImagineGolf / E+ via Getty Images

Shared Powers

Sometimes the division of powers isn't straightforward. In some cases – like immigration and agriculture – the Constitution specifies that law-making powers are **shared**. Parliament passes laws on some issues and the provinces and territories on others. The two orders of government may also work together in these areas.

In other cases, the Constitution isn't clear about who's responsible for what. This is partly because of how much society and technology have changed since 1867, when the Constitution became law. In these situations, the **judicial branch** (courts and judges) may be asked to make a decision.

Who's Who in the Orders of Government

There are different names for legislatures, representatives and political leaders in the four orders of government. Which of these terms are used where you live?

ORDER	LEGISLATURE	REPRESENTATIVES	LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT
<i>Federal</i>	✓ Parliament	✓ Senators and Members of Parliament (MPs)	✓ Prime Minister
<i>Provincial/territorial</i>	✓ Legislative Assembly ✓ House of Assembly NL NS ✓ National Assembly QC	✓ Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) ✓ Members of the House of Assembly (MHAs) NL ✓ Members of Provincial Parliament (MPPs) ON ✓ Members of the National Assembly (MNAs) QC	✓ Premier
<i>Indigenous</i>	The terms used in Indigenous governments vary widely and can include Chief, Hereditary Chief, Headman, Band Councillor and President, among others.		
<i>Municipal</i>	✓ Council	✓ Councillors ✓ Alderpersons	✓ Mayor ✓ Reeve ✓ Warden

NL Newfoundland and Labrador **NS** Nova Scotia **ON** Ontario **QC** Quebec

Indigenous Self-Government

Indigenous peoples have had diverse forms of government for thousands of years. Colonization disrupted many of these systems, as Canada replaced or banned traditional forms of governance.

Indigenous peoples exercise the right to **self-government** (making one's own decisions about issues affecting a community or Nation) in many ways. Some have negotiated self-government agreements with Canada, giving them the power to make laws in specific areas such as lands, child and family services, language, culture and more.



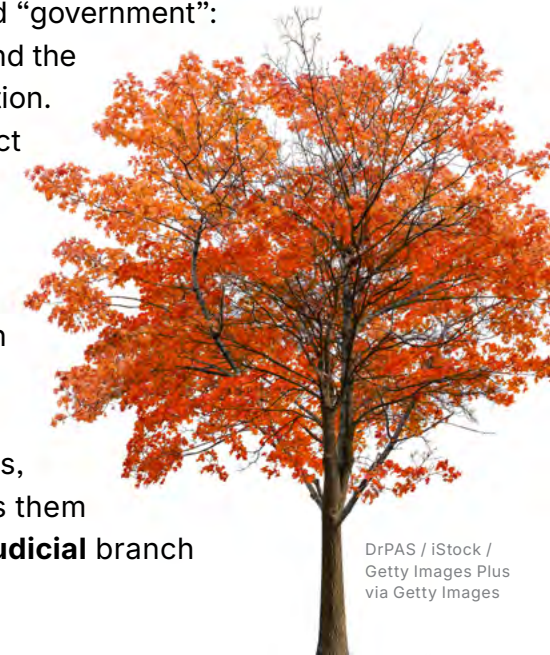
The Assembly Building of Nunatsiavut, a self-governing Inuit region in Northern Labrador

Nunatsiavut Government

Branches of Government

Now that we know about some of the main rules and structures in Canada, let's shift our focus to the other meanings of the word "government": the people in charge of a place, and the offices that put their ideas into action. These are related to another aspect of our system, called the **branches of government**.

There are three branches of government in Canada, and each one does different things. The simplest way to explain it is that the **legislative** branch makes laws, the **executive** branch implements them (puts them into action), and the **judicial** branch interprets them in court.



DrPAS / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images

Vocab Builder

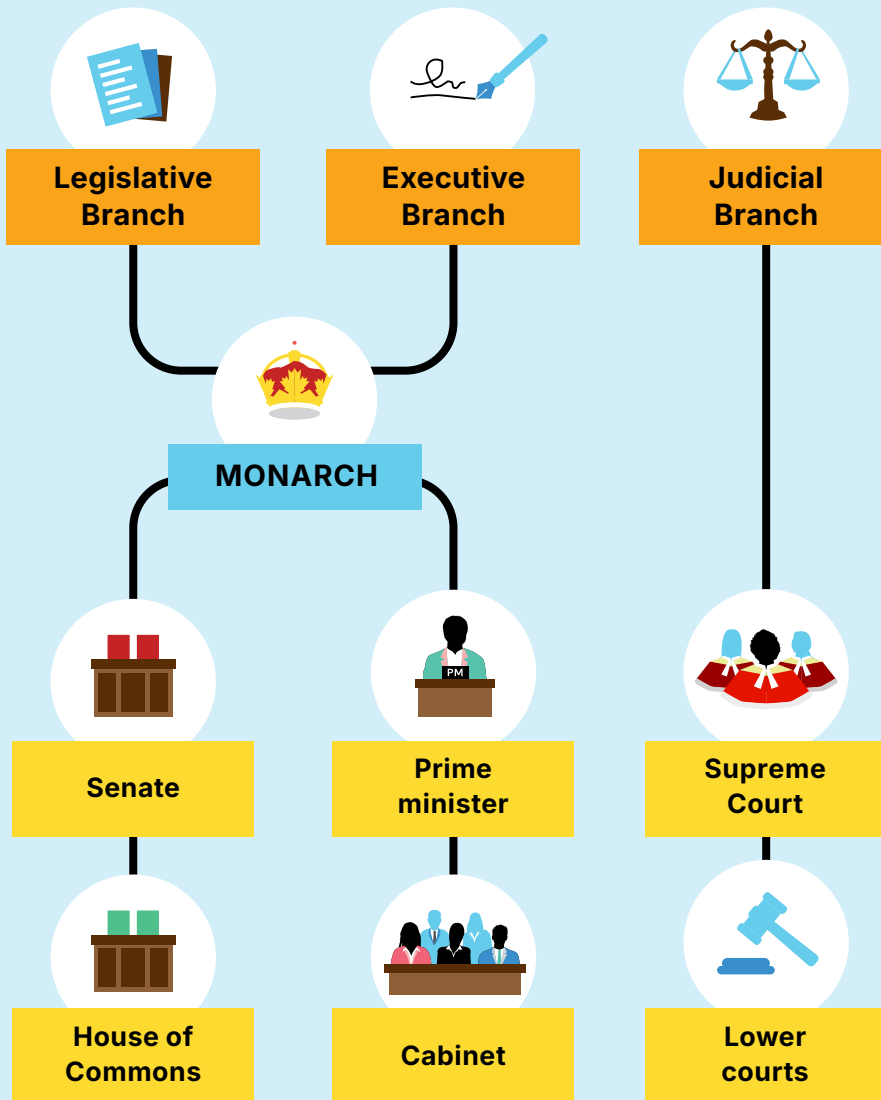


Does "Parliament" mean the same thing as "government"? People sometimes use it that way, but it's actually very different.

- **Parliament** includes people from many political parties and groups, as well as parliamentarians who don't belong to any party.
- The **government** is made up of leaders of the political party that's currently in charge.

georgejurasek / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images

Who's Who in the Branches of Government



Legislative Branch

Parliament is the federal legislature. It is made up of the Monarch, the Senate and the House of Commons. Its role is to pass laws for the whole country. You'll learn how this works in Chapters 2 and 3.

Executive Branch

The executive branch includes the Monarch, the prime minister and Cabinet. The **prime minister** is Canada's Head of Government. **Cabinet** is made up of other members of their political party, called **ministers**. Most ministers lead a **department** – an office that implements government policies. You'll learn more about the executive branch in Chapter 4.

Judicial Branch

The judicial branch is a system of courts and other legal bodies called boards and tribunals. The **Supreme Court** is the highest court in the country, meaning that it has the final say on important legal questions.

The judicial branch is a key part of our system of government, and it's independent from the other two branches.



The Supreme Court of Canada

BalkansCat / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images

What is Parliament?

2

In Chapter 1, we learned that Parliament is the **legislative** (law-making) branch of our federal government. In this chapter, we'll take a closer look at what Parliament does and who's involved.

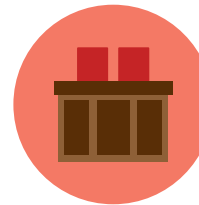
The Three Parts of Parliament

Canada's Parliament is **bicameral**, meaning that it has two legislative chambers: the Senate and the House of Commons. Parliament also has a third part – the Monarch. Each part plays a key role in making Canada's laws.



THE MONARCH

- Head of State
- Represented by the Governor General
- Signs bills into law



THE SENATE

- Upper legislative chamber
- 105 seats
- Members appointed
- Proposes, debates and votes on bills



THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

- Lower legislative chamber
- 343 seats
- Members elected
- Proposes, debates and votes on bills



The Monarch and the Governor General

The Monarch is Canada's Head of State and an important part of our parliamentary system. They're also the Monarch of several other countries and don't live in Canada, so they appoint someone to represent them here and carry out their duties. This person is called the Governor General.

A new Governor General is usually appointed every five years.

Did You Know?



Before the 1950s, the role of Governor General was given to members of the British aristocracy. Vincent Massey became the first Canadian-born Governor General in 1952, and the practice of appointing Canadian citizens has continued ever since. Today, appointments reflect the diversity of Canadian society.

Adrienne Clarkson, appointed in 1999, was the second woman appointed Governor General and the first of Asian heritage

Bryan Adams / Library and Archives Canada / e008406026



Constitutional Duties

The Governor General has many responsibilities, including:

- Calling elections
- **Swearing in** the prime minister and Cabinet (officially installing them in their roles)
- Opening new sessions of Parliament and reading the **Speech from the Throne** (a formal speech that outlines the government's goals for that session)
- Appointing senators
- Giving **Royal Assent** to bills (the final step in the legislative process, when a bill becomes a law)
- **Proroguing** Parliament (ending a session)

The Governor General is guided by the Constitution and the advice of the prime minister.

Vocab Builder

Calling an election can mean two very different things. For the Governor General, it means deciding that a federal election is going to happen. In the media, it usually means announcing who has won on election night.



mrgao / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images

Other Responsibilities

The Governor General also has a lot of duties outside Parliament. As Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, they support members of the military and their families and recognize outstanding service. They also represent Canada internationally, present honours and awards to Canadians, meet with people across the country and much more.



The Order of Military Merit

Sgt Johanie Maheu, Rideau Hall

The Senate

The Senate is the upper chamber of Parliament. Its members are called **senators**.

The Work of the Senate

One of the Senate's main roles is to pass **bills** (proposed laws). Senators introduce, debate and vote on bills, and they review ones that have been passed by the House of Commons. You'll learn more about how this works in Chapter 3.

The Senate also has many other roles. These are explained below.

REPRESENTING CANADA'S REGIONS

Most senators are appointed to represent a whole province or territory. (The only exception is Quebec, where senators represent smaller areas called **districts**.) This is different from the House of Commons, where each member represents a specific area called a **constituency**. The size of the constituency is based on its population.

This is a key part of Canada's parliamentary system: the Senate represents the country by region, and the House of Commons represents it by population. That way, the areas of Canada with the most people have the most representatives, but parts of the country with smaller populations still have an important voice at Parliament.

Did You Know?



General Georges Vanier became Canada's first francophone Governor General in 1959. Since then, the role has usually alternated between anglophones and francophones. Mary Simon, appointed in 2021, is Inuk and the first fluent speaker of an Indigenous language (Inuktitut).

Fun Fact



Many of Canada's famous sports trophies were originally created by Governors General! That includes the Stanley Cup for hockey and the Grey Cup for football.



The Stanley Cup

The Canadian Press

The Grey Cup

Canadian Football Hall of Fame

How many Senate seats are there for your region?

Total
105



Wondering why the numbers are so different?

The Senate has changed over time, with seats added and rearranged as the country has grown. In 1867, Canada was made up of Ontario, Quebec and two Maritime provinces: New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. The three regions were given 24 seats each.

As more provinces and territories joined Canada, the number of Senate seats was adjusted (six seats for each of the Western provinces, also totalling 24, and another six for Newfoundland and Labrador). The territories have fewer seats because of their smaller populations.

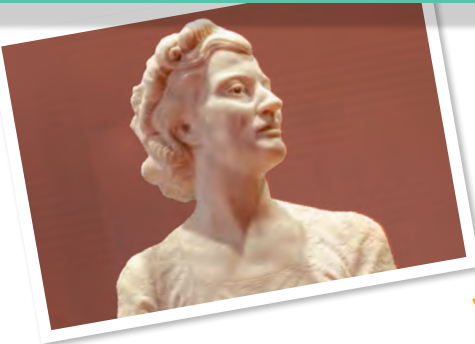
HIGHLIGHTING DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

The Senate has a long history of speaking up for underrepresented groups of Canadians. Senators carefully consider how bills would affect communities, and their work often calls attention to people whose rights and interests may otherwise be overlooked.

Did You Know?



Women gained the right to be appointed to the Senate in 1929, after a long legal battle known as the **Persons Case**. The argument was over whether the term “persons” in the Constitution applied to both men and women. A court in London eventually ruled that it did, and Cairine Wilson became the first woman senator in 1930.



Bust of Senator Cairine Wilson outside the Senate Chamber in Ottawa

INVESTIGATING ISSUES

Senate **committees** study important legal, social and economic issues. They meet with Canadians, study evidence and write reports with their recommendations. These reports can lead to changes in federal laws and policies.

The People of the Senate

Senators are appointed rather than elected. They come from many fields, such as science, education, art, Indigenous affairs, sports and much more. Their diverse areas of expertise give them a range of perspectives on the bills and issues being discussed at Parliament.

WHO CAN BE A SENATOR?

Senators are appointed by the Governor General, on the advice of the prime minister. They need to meet the following criteria:

- Be a Canadian citizen
- Be between the ages of 30 and 75
- Live in the province or territory they represent
- Own property worth at least \$4,000 in the province or territory they represent
- Have at least \$4,000 in net worth (total money minus any debts)

Senators must retire by the age of 75.

Fun Fact



Why \$4,000? That number was set in the Constitution in 1867 – when it was worth much more than it is today – and it has never changed.



CAD \$50: maogg / iStock / Getty Image Plus via Getty Images
CAD \$100: LongHa2006 / E+ via Getty Images

The House of Commons

The House of Commons is the lower legislative chamber. Its members are usually called **members of Parliament**, or **MPs** for short.

The Work of the House of Commons

Like the Senate, the House of Commons is a place where bills are introduced, debated and voted on – in fact, most bills begin in the House. The House also does much more, including studying issues in committee and reviewing bills passed by the Senate.



REPRESENTING CANADA'S POPULATION

Each MP is elected to represent a specific part of Canada, called a **constituency** or **riding**. Constituencies are based on population: on average, they have around 120,000 residents each. This system means that the number of seats in the House of Commons changes as the country grows. In 1867, there were 181 MPs. Today, there are 343!

Vocab Builder



Why does Canada call its electoral districts **ridings**?
Hint: it has nothing to do with horses! It's another parliamentary tradition that we've borrowed from the United Kingdom. "Riding" comes from an Old English word meaning one third, because some British counties were divided into three parts and elected three representatives.

How many MPs are there from your province or territory?



Alberta

37



British Columbia

43



Manitoba

14



New Brunswick

10



Newfoundland and Labrador

7



Northwest Territories

1



Nova Scotia

11



Nunavut

1



Ontario

122



Prince Edward Island

4



Quebec

78



Saskatchewan

14



Yukon

1

Total

343

KEEPING THE GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABLE

The House of Commons is where the **government** meets the **opposition** (MPs from other political parties, as well as independent members). It's a place for them to debate their views and ideas.

Question Period gives opposition MPs a chance to challenge the government on its actions and policies. This 45-minute period is usually a lively exchange, full of ideas about how the country should be run.

To stay in power, the government needs the support of a majority of MPs. If it loses that support at any time (decided through what's called a **confidence vote**), it needs to resign. An election usually follows. This is called **responsible government**, and it's a key part of Canada's democratic system.



The government side of the House of Commons

STUDYING THE ISSUES OF THE DAY

MPs work in committees, where they look closely at issues affecting Canadians. Committees conduct important studies and make recommendations to Parliament.

Did You Know?



Although the Senate and the House of Commons usually work separately, some committees have representatives from both chambers. These are called **joint committees**.

The People of the House of Commons

Canada's MPs come from many different backgrounds and have diverse perspectives on the issues discussed at Parliament.

WHO CAN BE AN MP?

Canadian citizens who are 18 or older can choose to run in a federal election. You'll learn more about elections in Chapter 4.

Fun Fact



There's no limit to how long someone can serve in the House of Commons. Canada's longest-serving MP was Sir Wilfrid Laurier, who represented the same Quebec riding for almost 45 years! He was also Canada's first francophone prime minister, serving from 1896 to 1911.

45

How Parliament Works

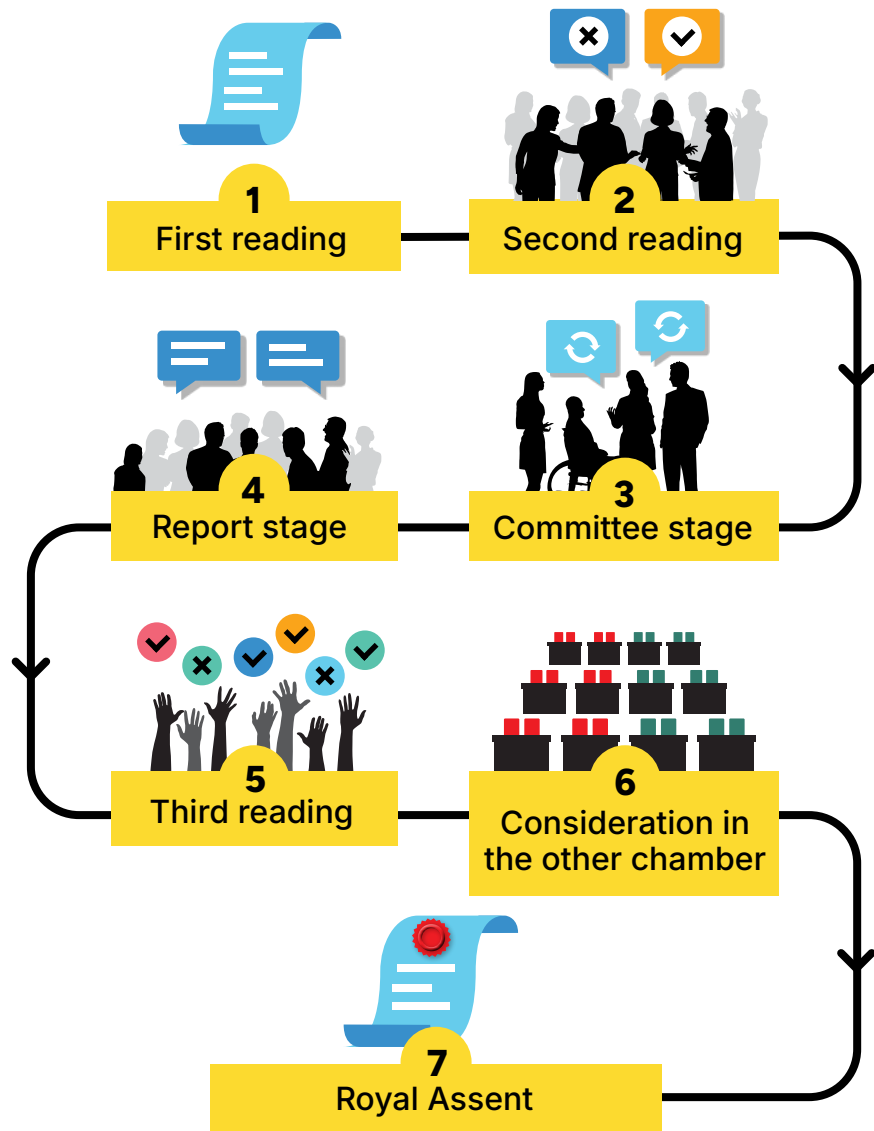
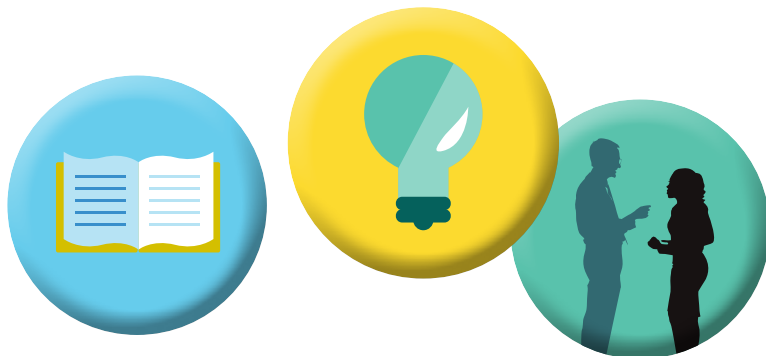
3

In Chapter 2, we learned about the three parts of Parliament: the Monarch (represented by the Governor General), the Senate and the House of Commons. In this section, we'll explore how they work together to create laws, support Canadians and more.

Making Canada's Laws

Every law begins as an idea. That idea can come from many different places: from a political party's **platform** (list of goals), from a government policy, from an individual parliamentarian's research or from a suggestion by a Canadian like you.

No matter where it begins, the first step is to transform the idea into a **bill**, or proposed law. There are lots of other steps it has to go through on its way to becoming a law. This is known as the **legislative process**, and the diagram on the right shows you how it works.



What does that all mean?

Here's what's involved in each step of the legislative process.

1 FIRST READING

The bill is introduced in either the Senate or the House of Commons. Most bills begin in the House, but senators can also introduce bills, as long as they don't involve taxes or spending money.

Vocab Builder



There are a few words on this page that mean something different at Parliament than they do in everyday life. "Reading," for example, involves much more than reading a bill. It also refers to debating and voting, which are key parts of the legislative process.

How are these terms used in and outside Parliament?

- Platform
- Bill
- Witness
- Sit
- Table

Can you find any other words in this chapter that mean something different from what you might expect?



Magnifying Glass: Katerina Sisperova / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images

Binder: Michael Burrell / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images

2 SECOND READING

Parliamentarians debate the idea behind the bill. They discuss its overall strengths and weaknesses, then vote to decide whether it should move on to the next step in the legislative process. If it receives more than 50% of the votes, the bill is normally sent to a committee for closer review.

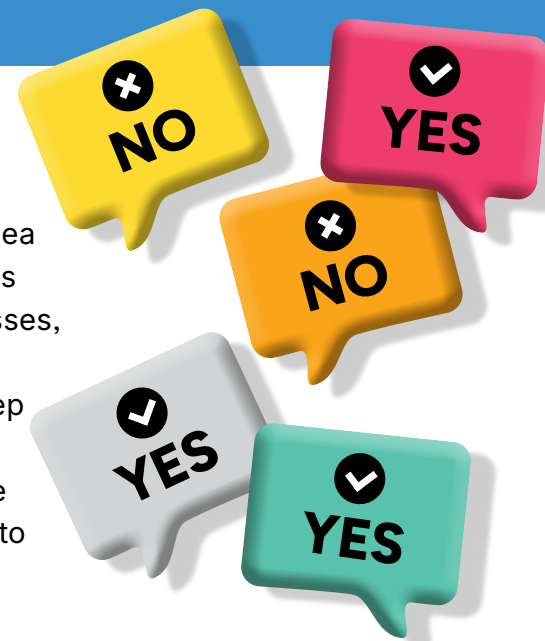
3 COMMITTEE STAGE

A smaller group of parliamentarians, called a **committee**, studies the bill closely. First, they meet with **witnesses** – people who have special knowledge of the bill's subject or who may be affected by it if it becomes law.

After hearing the witnesses' views, the committee carefully studies each **clause** (section) of the bill. They may suggest **amendments** (changes).

4 REPORT STAGE

After the committee has completed its review, the bill goes back to the chamber for a debate on the proposed amendments. Parliamentarians who were not part of the committee can also suggest other changes. Finally, the chamber votes to decide whether or not they agree with the amendments.



5 THIRD READING

There is a final debate and vote on the bill.
If it passes, the bill moves on to the other chamber.

6 CONSIDERATION IN THE OTHER CHAMBER

If a bill began in the House of Commons, it is sent to the Senate – and vice versa. The bill must go through all the same steps in the other chamber.

The other chamber may choose to approve the bill as it is, suggest further amendments or even reject it completely (although this is rare). If additional amendments are suggested, the two chambers send messages back and forth until they agree on the final form of the bill.

7 ROYAL ASSENT

Once the Senate and the House of Commons have passed the bill in identical form, it is sent to the Governor General for **Royal Assent** – the final step in the legislative process, when a bill becomes a law.

Royal Assent is usually given in writing, but at least twice a year, there is a formal ceremony in the Senate Chamber. The Governor General or Monarch gives their approval with a nod of the head.



Fun Fact



When they're at Parliament, senators avoid calling the House of Commons by its name. MPs do the same for the Senate. Instead, they use the unusual term "the other place." It's a tradition that goes back to the British Parliament.

Did You Know?



No Monarch or Governor General of Canada has ever refused to give Royal Assent to a bill. Although there is no written rule saying they must approve, it is a key **convention** (tradition) in our system of government.



King George VI granting Royal Assent in the Senate Chamber (1939)

National Film Board of Canada. Photothèque / Library and Archives Canada / C-033278

Parliamentarians on the Job

Passing laws is one of the most important parts of a parliamentarian's job. But what do they do when they're not debating and voting on bills?

At Work with a Senator

IN THE CHAMBER

When Parliament is in session, senators spend most of their time in the national capital, Ottawa. The Senate usually **sits** (meets) for three days a week, from Tuesday to Thursday. During busy legislative periods, Monday and Friday may be added to the schedule as well.

Senators' time in the chamber is mostly spent debating and voting, but they also **table** (introduce) reports, make speeches on special topics and more.

The Senate 



IN COMMITTEE

A lot of senators' work is done outside the chamber, especially in committees. Some committee work is dedicated to studying bills, but senators also investigate major issues such as human rights, Indigenous affairs and Official Languages. They report on what's happening in Canada and make recommendations.

IN THEIR GROUP OR CAUCUS

Although some senators are independent, many belong to a political party or a **parliamentary group** (at least nine senators who agree to work together for parliamentary purposes, like sharing resources and coordinating logistics). Group members may or may not have the same political views and opinions. If a senator belongs to one of these organizations, they meet regularly with the other members of their parliamentary group or political party (this is called **caucus**).

Did You Know?



Parliamentary groups are unique to the Senate. In the House of Commons, all members belong to a political party or are independent.

IN THEIR REGION

Outside Parliament, senators meet with and support the people who live in their region, as well as other Canadians. They attend special events, give speeches and media interviews and do work in their fields of expertise.


Fun Fact

When there is about to be a vote in either the **Senate** or the **House of Commons**, bells ring and lights blink on and off in the Parliament Buildings. These are signals to parliamentarians to come to the Chamber and vote.

Example of a senator's schedule

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
8:00-10:00	Write emails, return calls	Committee meeting	Meeting with people from their region visiting Ottawa	Committee meeting	Research to prepare for the second reading of a bill
10:00-12:00	Review research projects and current legislation	Prepare a speech for the third reading of a bill	Meeting with other members of Senate group	Staff meeting	Visit to a local school
12:00-2:00	Lunch meeting at an embassy	Staff meeting	Parliamentary association meeting	Replace another senator at a committee meeting	Write emails, return calls
2:00-4:00	Prepare for committee meeting	Senate sitting	Senate sitting	Senate sitting	Review research projects and current legislation
4:00-6:00	Committee meeting	Senate sitting	Senate sitting	Senate sitting	Appear as a panel member on a news program
6:00-8:00	Charitable dinner	Meeting with Senate colleagues	Write emails, return calls	Senate sitting	Travel to home region

At Work with a Member of Parliament

IN THE CHAMBER

MPs also spend a lot of time in Ottawa. The House of Commons normally sits five days a week, often for very long hours.

In the chamber, MPs debate, vote and advocate for their **constituents** (the people who live in the area they represent). Depending on their role, they may also have other responsibilities, such as introducing bills or asking and answering questions.

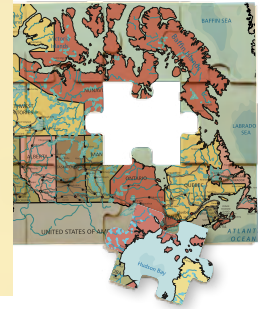


The House of Commons

Vocab Builder



Outside Parliament, **constituent** means “one of the parts that combine to make a whole.”



BardoczPeter / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images

IN COMMITTEE

Like Senators, MPs work on committees to review bills and investigate issues. They also hear from witnesses and report back to the House with their findings and recommendations.

Some committees are permanent and do not change from one Parliament to another. These are called **standing** committees. They consider ongoing issues like the environment, immigration and gender equality. Other committees are formed to study more temporary subjects, like international events.

IN CAUCUS

All MPs who belong to a political party have caucus meetings every Wednesday morning. They discuss strategies and ideas for new laws with the other members of their party.

IN THEIR CONSTITUENCY

While in their home ridings, MPs attend events and meet with people and organizations to hear their concerns. They usually have at least one office in the area, where constituents can get help with issues like their pensions, employment insurance or immigration needs.



Example of an MP's schedule

CALENDAR

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
8:00 – 10:00	Travel from constituency	Prepare a speech for the second reading of a bill	Caucus	Interview with a local radio show	Write emails, return calls
10:00 – 12:00	Staff meeting	House of Commons sitting	Caucus	Meet with school group from constituency	House of Commons sitting
12:00 – 2:00	Lunch with constituents	Write emails, return calls, review research	House of Commons sitting	Finalize keynote speech	Introduce Private Member's Bill
2:00 – 4:00	House of Commons sitting	House of Commons sitting	House of Commons sitting	House of Commons sitting	Parliamentary association meeting
4:00 – 6:00	Committee meeting	Stakeholder meetings	Committee meeting	Review research for a Private Member's Bill	Travel to constituency
6:00 – 8:00	Charitable dinner	Advocacy evening	Political fundraising event	Write emails, return calls	Event with group in constituency

Staying Connected

Curious to know what’s happening these days at Parliament? You can watch debates and committee meetings at parl.ca or on the Cable Public Affairs Channel (CPAC). You can also read updates and opinions in the news – just make sure they’re coming from a source you can trust.

Did You Know?



Canada was the first country in the world to start broadcasting Parliament live. House of Commons debates have been shown on TV since 1977.



gallofoto / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images
Bettmann / Collection via Getty Images

The Senate and the House of Commons also publish daily records of everything that’s said in the chambers. These records (officially called the Debates, but also known as **Hansard**) are available online and in print.

Finally, you can always follow parliamentarians on social media and their websites. It’s a good way to see what they’re working on and find out what’s happening with the issues you care about.

Vocab Builder



Does “Hansard” seem like a strange name for an official parliamentary record? It comes from the Hansard family, who were in charge of printing parliamentary debates in the United Kingdom from 1812 to 1892. Canada kept using the British name after Confederation.

Visit Parliament

If you’re ever in Ottawa, you can also visit Parliament in person – for free! Take a guided tour, watch the Senate and House of Commons in action and more. Go to visit.parl.ca for details.



Democracy in Action

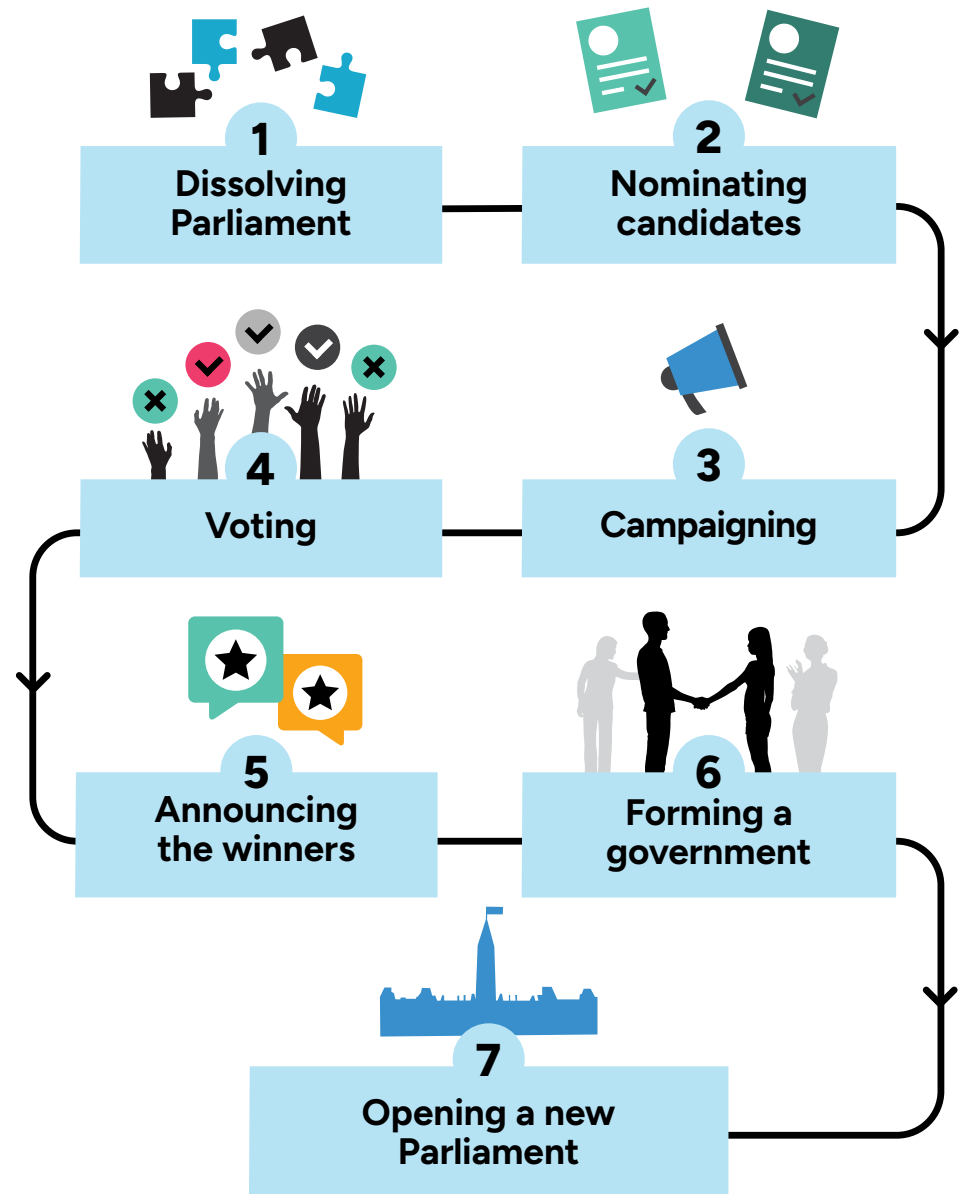
4

In Chapter 1, we learned that Canada is a **representative democracy**, where we elect people to Parliament to make decisions on our behalf. In this chapter, we'll learn more about how members of Parliament (MPs) are chosen, as well as their roles in either the government or the opposition.

How Elections Work

During a federal election, the people in Canada's 343 **ridings**, or **constituencies**, vote to decide who will represent them in the House of Commons. (Unlike some countries, we don't vote directly for the prime minister – only for our local MP.) Any Canadian citizen who is 18 or older can vote.

There are a few steps involved in an election. Collectively, these actions are known as the **electoral process**. The diagram on the right shows you how it works.



What does that all mean?

Here's what's involved in each step.

1 DISSOLVING PARLIAMENT

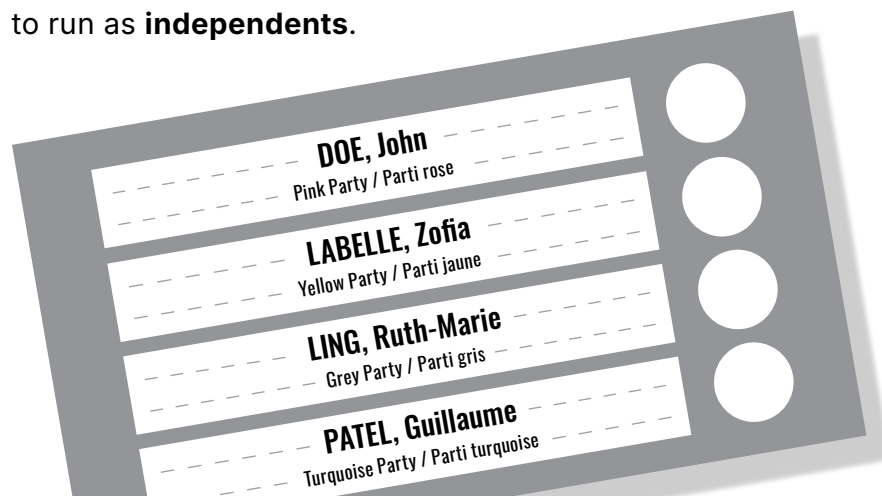
The electoral process begins when the prime minister asks the Governor General to **dissolve** (end) Parliament. This can happen for one of three reasons:

- It's been about four years since the last election (the maximum term for governments today)
- The government has lost the confidence of the House of Commons (see [page 16](#))
- The prime minister wants an election to take place

The Governor General dissolves Parliament and **calls** (announces) an election.

2 NOMINATING CANDIDATES

After an election is called, political parties **nominate** (choose) their candidates. (**Parties** are organized groups of people with similar ideas about how the country should be run.) Some people may also choose to run as **independents**.



3 CAMPAIGNING

Once candidates have been nominated, they begin **campaigning** (trying to convince people to vote for them). They may put up signs, give speeches and interviews, go door-to-door to meet voters and participate in debates with other candidates.

During the campaign, political parties also publish their **platforms** (lists of goals and ideas for what they would do if elected). These are an important way for voters to find out what each party stands for.

4 VOTING

At the end of the campaign period, it's time for Canadians to vote. There are a few different ways to cast a ballot:

BEFORE ELECTION DAY

- In person, on a special advance **polling** (voting) day
- At an Elections Canada office
- By mail

ON ELECTION DAY

- In person, at a polling station

5 ANNOUNCING THE WINNERS

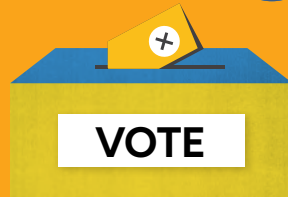
After the polls close, election officers count the votes in each riding. Numbers are published on the Elections Canada website and shared by the media and other sources. The candidates who receive the most votes in each riding are elected as MPs.

6 FORMING A GOVERNMENT

Normally, the party that wins the most seats on Election Day forms the **government**, with their leader becoming prime minister. All other parties – as well as any independents elected – form the **opposition**.

Fun Fact

Even though thousands of people usually vote in each riding, there have been a few ties in Canada – and dozens of times when the difference was 50 votes or less. Every vote matters!



MCpl Vincent Carboneau, Rideau Hall

The Governor General's residence, where the electoral process begins

7 OPENING A NEW PARLIAMENT

A new Parliament can now begin! First, the House of Commons meets to elect a **Speaker** (a member who oversees the work of the chamber). Next, all parliamentarians gather in the Senate to hear the Governor General read the **Speech from the Throne**, which outlines the government's goals for the upcoming session. Then the regular work of Parliament gets started.



Former Governor General Michaëlle Jean reading the Speech from the Throne

THE CANADIAN PRESS/Sean Kilpatrick

Elections and You

Once you're 18 years old, you can vote in elections across Canada (or even be a candidate). Before then, you can help out by volunteering for a candidate or a political party. Most parties have youth wings, where younger members share information and support their candidates.

mediaphotos / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images



Government and Opposition

Now that we know how government and opposition MPs are elected, we'll take a closer look at what they do.

Key Roles in the Government

PRIME MINISTER

The prime minister is Canada's Head of Government. They have many roles and responsibilities, including:

- Guiding the government's policies and deciding on the bills it presents to Parliament
- Selecting the other members of **Cabinet** (read more on the next page)
- Recommending people for appointments to the Senate, the Supreme Court and more
- Meeting with other world leaders and managing international relations
- Answering questions about their government's actions during Question Period (see page 16), in interviews and in meetings with the public
- Supporting the people in their riding and representing them in the House (since the prime minister is almost always an MP)



The Office of the Prime Minister and Privy Council

Gilles Y. Hamel

Fun Fact

Even though it's standard, there's no rule saying that the prime minister must be an MP. There have been two prime ministers who were senators (Sir John Abbott and Sir Mackenzie Bowell).



Portraits of past prime ministers outside the House of Commons

CABINET

Cabinet is a group of **ministers**, people who have been chosen by the prime minister to offer advice and, usually, to lead a government department. Ministers are normally MPs from the prime minister’s party. They meet regularly to discuss their departments’ work, their ideas for policies and bills, and other government business.

Ministers’ other jobs include introducing and speaking about bills, appearing at committee hearings and answering questions about their departments during Question Period.



The historic Privy Council Chamber, where Cabinet met for almost 100 years

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES

Parliamentary secretaries are MPs who act as a link between Cabinet and the House of Commons. When ministers are not available, they carry out many of their responsibilities, including answering questions from the opposition, introducing bills and appearing at committee.

WHIP

The whip is an MP whose job is to ensure party **discipline** (following rules and expectations). They also make sure there are enough government MPs in the Chamber when a vote is about to be held. This is especially important for **minority governments**, whose bills are less certain to be passed.

Majority and Minority Governments

A **majority government** is one that has more than 50% of the seats in the House of Commons. Since it controls over half the votes, it can usually pass bills easily. In a **minority** situation, the government is the largest party in the House but has less than half the seats. This means it needs the support of at least one opposition party to pass legislation and stay in power.

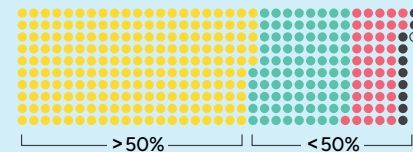
Vocab Builder

Wondering why a group of government leaders has the same name as a type of furniture? The term **Cabinet** has been around for hundreds of years, and originally it meant a small room – like the ones where British monarchs would meet with their advisors. Over time, the meaning has changed to refer to government ministries (and cupboards, too!)



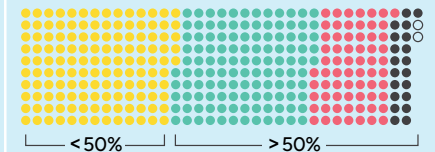
beautygut / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Image

MAJORITY YELLOW GOVERNMENT



● Yellow Party	205 Seats
● Turquoise Party	84 Seats
● Pink Party	43 Seats
● Grey Party	10 Seats
○ Independent	1 Seat

MINORITY YELLOW GOVERNMENT



● Yellow Party	135 Seats
● Turquoise Party	120 Seats
● Pink Party	66 Seats
● Grey Party	20 Seats
○ Independent	2 Seats

Key Roles in the Opposition

OPPOSITION PARTY LEADERS

Opposition party leaders are usually MPs, too. As spokespeople for their parties, they play a critical role in debates and during Question Period. They challenge the government on its actions and decisions, and they offer alternative ideas. The Leader of the **Official Opposition** (the second-largest party in the House) sits directly across from the prime minister and is usually the one who asks the most questions.

Opposition leaders are also responsible for guiding their parties' policies, strategizing ways to challenge the government and selecting members of their parties' **shadow Cabinets**.

SHADOW CABINETS

Many parties have shadow Cabinets: groups of MPs who specialize in the same areas as Cabinet ministers and who closely follow their departments' work. These members (also called **opposition critics**) ask ministers about their decisions during Question Period.

WHIPS

Opposition parties also have whips, whose role is similar to that of the government whip. They keep their party's MPs informed about what's happening in the House and make sure they're present for important votes.



Did You Know?



Not all legislatures have government and opposition parties. Nunavut, the Northwest Territories and some Indigenous governments have a system called **consensus government**, where there are no political parties. Members are all elected as independents, and they all meet together as a **caucus** to set their shared priorities.



Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly

Pat Kane



Legislative Assembly of Nunavut

Michel Albert

Parliament Past, Present and Future

5

In previous chapters, we've explored what Parliament is today. Now, let's take a look back at where it began and how it has changed over time – and discover what lies ahead.

Before Parliament

The history of the land we call Canada goes back much further than the start of Parliament. Indigenous peoples have been here since time immemorial, and European colonizers since the 15th century. Understanding the relationships between all these peoples – and how they've changed over time – is very important when you're learning about Parliament and Confederation.



←
The Ottawa River, seen from Parliament Hill in the 1860s

Library and Archives Canada,
Acc. No. 1990-555-3



↪ *The original Parliament Building in the 1880s*
Library and Archives Canada / c015106

A Changing Parliament

Our modern Parliament has existed since 1867, when Canada became a country. Although its fundamentals are the same now as they were then, Parliament has changed a lot over time.

The Senate and the House of Commons have grown along with the country, the people who work there are different – even the buildings have changed. Parliament is always evolving.

Origins of Our Parliamentary System

CONFEDERATION

In 1864, the leaders of a group of British colonies in North America got together to discuss the idea of **Confederation** (joining together to form a new country). Indigenous peoples were not consulted. The colonies were facing different challenges, and they thought that Confederation might improve things for them.

After a series of meetings, the colonies reached an agreement on the rules and structures of the new country. The British Parliament supported their plan and passed the *British North America Act* – the law that created Canada. It came into effect on July 1, 1867.

*Celebrating Confederation
in Kingston, Ontario,
in 1867*

Queen's University Archives



Fun Fact

The name **Canada** probably comes from the Iroquoian word **kanata**, meaning village or community. It had been used by Europeans since the 16th century and was an obvious choice for the name of the new country – but it wasn't the only option. Some of the more unusual names that were suggested are listed below!

EFISGA

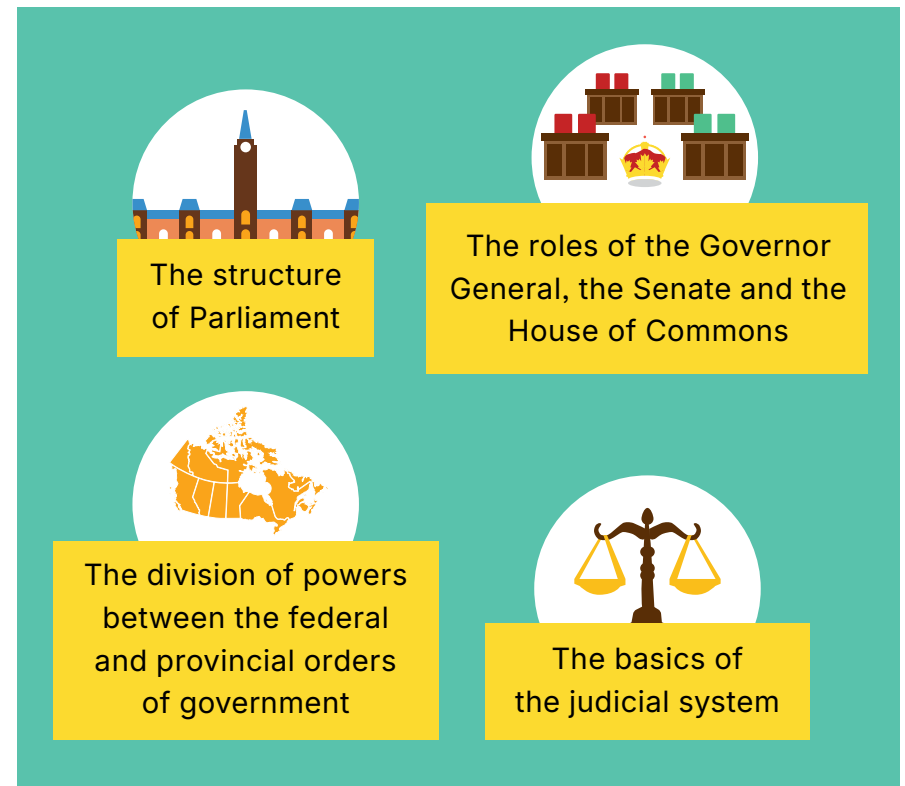
Tupona

Borealia

Transatlantia

THE CONSTITUTION ACT, 1867

The *British North America Act* is now known as the *Constitution Act, 1867*. It's still one of the most important parts of our Constitution. It outlines many of the building blocks that you read about in Chapter 1, including:



Although it established the new country, the *Constitution Act, 1867* didn't give Canada complete **autonomy** (independence). At the time, Canadian leaders wanted to keep their connection to the United Kingdom, so they left some law-making powers – including the power to **amend** (change) the Constitution – with the British Parliament.

THE CONSTITUTION ACT, 1982

Canada's relationship with the United Kingdom changed gradually during the 20th century. Finally, 115 years after Confederation, the country received full legal autonomy with the *Constitution Act, 1982*. This is sometimes called the **patriation** of the Constitution.

The *Constitution Act, 1982* also included the rights of Indigenous peoples and implemented the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.



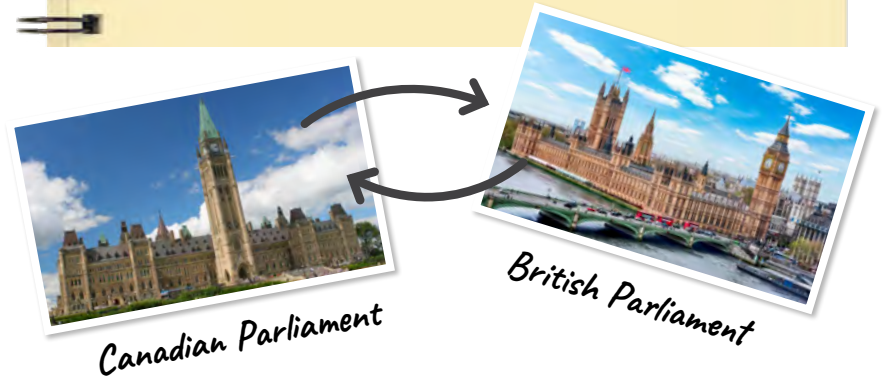
Queen Elizabeth II signing the Proclamation of the Constitution Act, 1982

Robert Cooper / Library and Archives / e008300499

Vocab Builder



Patriation is a term invented in Canada. It comes from the word **repatriation**, meaning to send something back to its home country. Since Canada's Constitution began as an Act of the British Parliament, it wasn't exactly being "sent back" to Canada – so people started using the term "patriation" instead.



Canadian Parliament: MyriadStars / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images
 British Parliament: Vladislav Zolotov / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images

SECTION 35

Section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982* recognizes and affirms the Aboriginal and treaty rights of Indigenous peoples across Canada, including First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. These include the right to self-government and the right to practise culture, including by hunting, trapping, fishing and harvesting.

The Act didn't create these rights, which have always existed, but it did guarantee that they would be better protected under Canadian law. Many Indigenous leaders and groups worked hard to make sure their rights were written into the Constitution.

The Growth of Parliament

Canada was much smaller in 1867 than it is today. There were only four provinces at the time and a total population of around 3.4 million people. The other provinces and territories joined Canada in later years.

Each time a new province or territory has joined Confederation, Parliament has grown as well. The House of Commons has also gained more members because of population changes, with new seats added after each **census** (a survey of the population that's done every 10 years). Imagine what Parliament might look like in the future!

Most of these numbers have changed further since 2000. Do you know what they are today? Try looking it up online!

YEAR	1867	1900	1950	2000
PROVINCES & TERRITORIES	4	9	12	13
POPULATION (MILLIONS)	3.4	5.3	13.7	30.6
SENATE SEATS	72	81	102	105
HOUSE OF COMMONS SEATS	181	214	262	301

- 
- 1867 Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia
 - 1870 Manitoba, Northwest Territories
 - 1871 British Columbia
 - 1873 Prince Edward Island
 - 1898 Yukon
 - 1905 Alberta, Saskatchewan
 - 1949 Newfoundland and Labrador
 - 1999 Nunavut

The People in Parliament

Another aspect of Parliament that has changed is the people who serve as our representatives. Early Canadian Parliaments were made up almost entirely of white men. Many people – including women, First Nations, Inuit and some Asian Canadians – didn't even have the right to vote, much less be appointed or elected to Parliament.

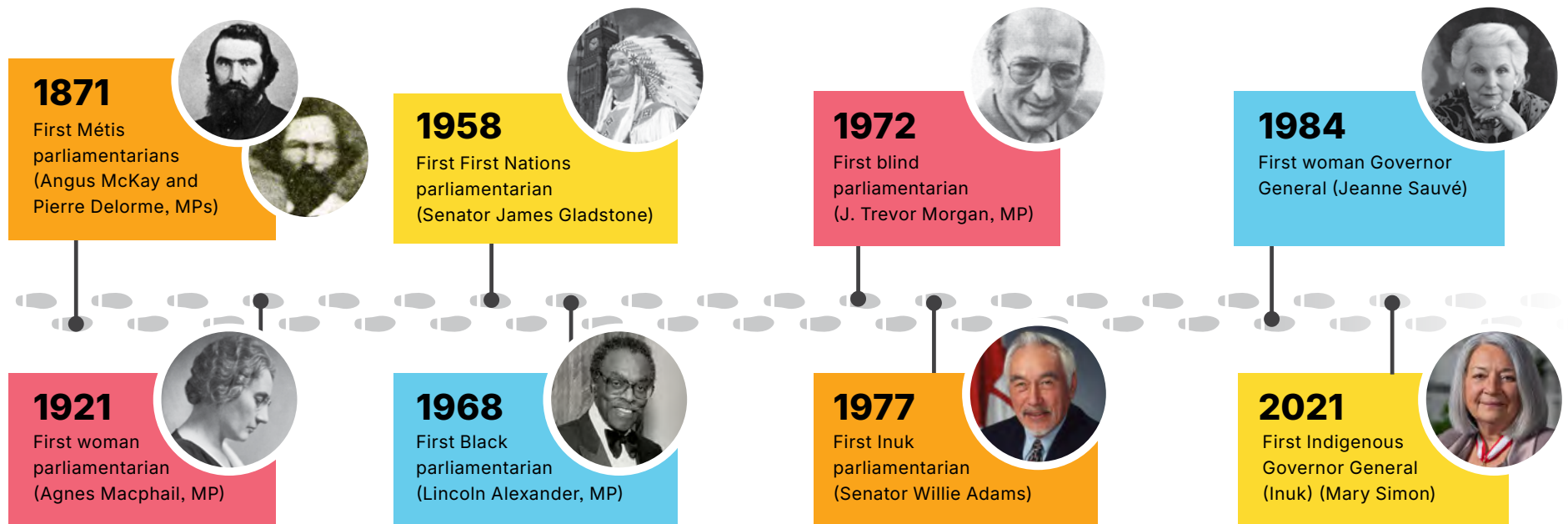
Over time, the makeup of both the Senate and the House of Commons has changed, and Parliament now better represents Canada's diverse population.

Laws at Parliament

The types of laws passed by Parliament have also changed over time, as society, technology and the environment have shifted. Parliament often amends or strikes down old laws that are no longer suitable for today's world. Our democratic system is flexible and allows Parliament to change old laws and create new ones.

A FEW PARLIAMENTARY TRAILBLAZERS

These are just a few examples of people who have made their mark on Parliament. There have been lots of trailblazers over the years, and there will be many more to come.



Angus McKay: Archives of Manitoba, Archives of Manitoba photo collection, Personalities - McKay, Angus (a) 1. MLA, Lake Manitoba, ca. 1870, N12819 / Pierre Delorme: Archives Manitoba, Archives of Manitoba photo collection, Personalities - Delorme, Pierre 1. 1870, MLA, St. Norbert, P1268 / Agnes Macphail: Yousuf Karsh, Yousuf Karsh fonds, Library and Archives Canada, Accession 1987-054, e010679117 to e010679129 / James Gladstone: Library and Archives Canada/National Film Board/ e011176910 / Lincoln Alexander: Richard Lautens/Contributor via Getty Images / J. Trevor Morgan: House of Commons / Willie Adams: Senate of Canada / Jeanne Sauvé: Barbara Woodley/Labatt Breweries of Canada/Library and Archives Canada / Mary Simon: Sgt Johanie Maheu, Rideau Hall © OSGG-BSGG, 2021.

The Parliament Buildings

It's not only the institution of Parliament that has changed over time. The buildings have also been through a series of transformations.

The Site

The Parliament Buildings are in the national capital, Ottawa, on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe people. This part of the Ottawa River (Kitchissippi) has been an important gathering place for many Indigenous nations over time.

Vocab Builder



The name **Ottawa** comes from the Algonquin word **adawe**, meaning “to trade.” The river has a long history as a trading and transportation route for First Nations.

Origins of the Buildings

The Parliament Buildings have their roots in the Province of Canada, one of the United Kingdom's former colonies in North America. The Province, which existed from 1841 to 1867, included parts of what are now Ontario and Quebec.

Choosing a centre of government for the Province was a major challenge – its capital city changed six times in just 17 years! In 1857, Queen Victoria was asked to choose a permanent capital, and she picked Ottawa. Construction of the Parliament Buildings began in 1859.

Did You Know?



Why Ottawa? Queen Victoria had a few reasons:

- It was on the border of Canada West and Canada East (today's Ontario and Quebec)
- It had both English- and French-speaking residents
- It was on a cliff above a river, far from the American border, making it hard to attack. This was not long after the War of 1812, and there were still some concerns about Canada being invaded by the United States.



Pgiam / E+ via Getty Images

Fire!

Tragedy struck Parliament on the night of February 3, 1916, when a fire began in the reading room of the main building. The flames spread quickly and, by morning, the seat of Parliament was in ruins. Only the Library was saved, thanks in part to its fireproof iron doors.

For the next four years, Parliament met at the Victoria Memorial Museum (now the Canadian Museum of Nature). The new building (Centre Block) was built from 1916 to 1927.



J.B. Reid / Library and Archives Canada / C-010079

Fire at Parliament, February 3, 1916



William James Topley / Library and Archives Canada / PA-009236

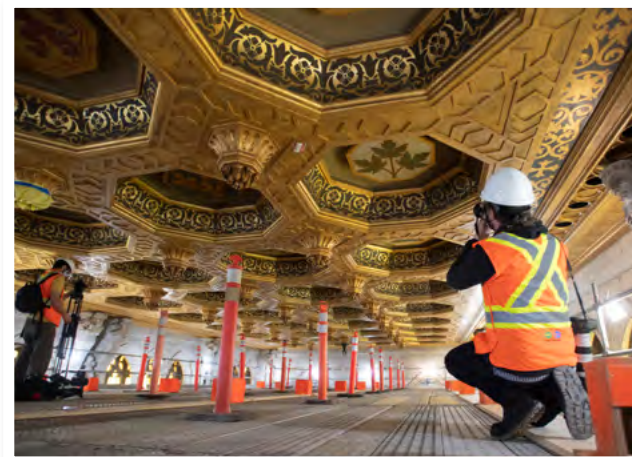
Did You Know?



There are many theories about how the fire started, including a careless smoker, faulty wiring or even arson by one of Canada's wartime enemies. Although there have been investigations, it remains a mystery to this day.

Rehabilitation

Centre Block was the seat of Parliament for almost a century, but there were damages to the building over time. In 2019, it closed its doors for long-term **rehabilitation** (renovation and modernization). The Senate moved to the Senate of Canada Building, Ottawa's former train station. The House of Commons relocated to West Block, another of the three original Parliament Buildings. The chambers will continue to work from these sites until Centre Block reopens.



Restoring the Senate ceiling

THE CANADIAN PRESS / Adrian Wyld

Sharing Your Voice

What issues are most important to you?

Are there rules at home or at your school that you wish you could change? What about in your town, city or community?

Maybe there's something wider-reaching that you're concerned about: an issue affecting your province, territory or Nation, a situation across all of Canada or an international matter.

Whatever is on your mind, you can always speak up. It's part of your rights as a Canadian.

Did You Know?



Youth-led movements have sparked change at all levels of government in Canada. Try looking up some examples from your area online.

Parliament Hill, where many groups of people have gathered to celebrate, protest and remember



Getting Involved

You may be too young to vote, but you can always get involved in your school council or a community association. There are lots of groups and organizations out there that want to hear from young people.

Canada's system of government depends on citizens getting involved, and you're never too young to be part of the conversation.



Talk about it with your friends, family and teachers



Contact a senator or MP



Join a club (or start a new one)



Write for a blog or newspaper



Sign a petition



Attend a rally



Share your ideas on social media

Learn More

Curious to know more about how Parliament works and how you can get involved?

Connect with Parliament



Stay up-to-date with Parliament on the official Facebook page (@ParliamentOfCanada) and YouTube channel (@ParliamentOfCanadaOfficial)

Explore online



Browse learn.parl.ca for more information about Parliament, from basic overviews to in-depth explanations.

Discover publications



Check out learn.parl.ca/publications for more print and digital resources about the Senate and House of Commons. If you live in Canada, you can ship print copies to your home for free – including of this book!

For educators



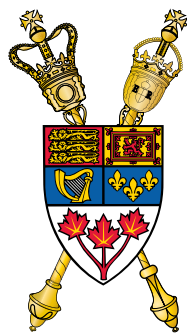
Visit learn.parl.ca/resources for educational videos, lesson plans, in-class activities and more.

bloodua / iStock / Getty Images Plus via Getty Images

Produced by



LIBRARY OF PARLIAMENT
BIBLIOTHÈQUE DU PARLEMENT



PARLIAMENT | PARLEMENT
CANADA