

DEMOCRACY

Educational Resource

November 2019

Parliamentary Democracy in Alberta

Parliamentary democracy in Alberta is based on principles of government that are centuries old. Some of these are rooted in ancient Greece and Rome while others developed in Great Britain, now the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Parliamentary democracy is well suited to our modern way of life. While its roots are in antiquity, its strength lies in its ability to adapt to a changing world.

Tips for a successful school visit

- Review the Confirmation of Visit to ensure that all information is correct.
- Discuss expectations with students and volunteers. Teachers and parents are asked to turn off their cellphones, model good listening, supervise and remain with the students at all times.
- Ensure the bus driver is aware of the current drop off and pick up location (effective September 2018).

What's Happening at the Legislature this Month?

07– Service of Remembrance
(Legislature Rotunda)

11– Remembrance Day (No
School Programming)

14– [Thursdays to be Discovered](#)
(TBD): [Unsung Heroes:](#)
[Alberta's Indigenous Veterans](#)

21–TBD: [Alberta Branded](#)
[Workshop](#)

28– [TBD: Movie Magic](#)



Alberta Legislature (courtesy of the Legislative Assembly Office)

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Ancient Roots

The word “democracy” comes from two Greek words: “demos” meaning people and “kratia” meaning rule. The idea that the people should rule themselves developed in Greece about 2 500 years ago. Ancient Greece was divided into small units called city states, and all citizens assembled to make decisions on how to govern their city state.

In modern representative democracies citizens elect people to represent them in the Assembly rather than attending the Assembly themselves. But the basic principle behind democracy as we know it, the idea that power is fundamentally vested in the citizens, was evident in the direct democracy practiced in ancient Greece.

Did You Know?

Holding elections in which ordinary citizens elect representatives to parliament is also part of our English heritage. Local village leaders were called to parliament as early as the 13th century.

The term “government” is used in many different ways, but in the British parliamentary system it has a very specific meaning and refers strictly to the Premier or Prime Minister and the cabinet.



Our British Heritage

The Greeks gave us the ideas that made the parliamentary system of government possible, but our modern Parliament originated in what is now the United Kingdom. It came into being because monarchs needed revenue to fight wars and run the kingdom, and the nobility refused to pay taxes unless they had a say in how that money would be spent.

From the 13th to 19th centuries, the British Parliament struggled with the monarch for control of taxation, spending and law-making, resulting in an antagonistic relationship between the Crown and Parliament. Since the late 17th century the Prime Minister and cabinet gradually obtained more and more control while the monarch became largely a ceremonial head of state who almost routinely approves Parliament's decisions. In the Alberta Legislature today the monarch remains the official head of state, as represented by the Lieutenant Governor. The Premier, as head of government, along with the cabinet governs in the monarch's name.

The bicameral, or two-House system, also originated in England. The English Parliament evolved into an elected House of Commons and an appointed House of Lords in the 14th century. Canada has a bicameral system at the national level (House of Commons and the Senate). Each provincial Legislature consists of a unicameral Legislature with an elected Assembly.

The Parliamentary System in Canada

The British brought their political institutions to the Great Lakes regions of North America following the conquest of New France by the British forces in 1759 to 1760. Canada's parliamentary system differs from the system that has generally been used by the United Kingdom in that Canada is a federation with a national Parliament and provincial Legislature. Legislative power is divided between the federal Parliament and the provincial Legislatures, each with its own areas of jurisdiction. Canada modelled its federal system on that of the United States. Both countries occupy a vast geographical area and the federal system provided the strength of unity while allowing local control where practical.



Speech from the Throne in the Alberta Chamber
(courtesy of the Legislative Assembly Office)

Responsible Government

Our system is based on the British parliamentary principle of responsible government, meaning that the cabinet must have the support of a majority in the elected Assembly to continue governing. In other words, the government is responsible, or accountable, to the Assembly. If a major policy or law is defeated, the government must resign and call an election.

Responsible government was formally incorporated into the 1689 English Bill of Rights and has always been a part of the Canadian system.

In this system the areas of proposing, passing and administering laws overlap somewhat. The Premier and cabinet, otherwise known as the executive branch, are the chief lawmakers.

“...it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time...”

- Sir Winston Churchill¹



Signing of the Proclamation of the Constitution Act, 1982 (courtesy of Library and Archives Canada)²

Canada's Constitution

Alberta's system of democracy is derived from the British Westminster model and the Canadian Constitution. Canada's Constitution determines the powers and responsibilities of the various governments, the courts and the Crown and gives its people certain rights. When the Trudeau government patriated Canada's Constitution in 1982, it not only brought the Constitution home from the United Kingdom, but it also modernized it by combining Acts and orders dating from 1867.

The British North America Act, 1867

Later referred to as the Constitution Act, 1867, this Act united Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick in Confederation. The Act divided powers between the federal Parliament and provincial Legislatures. The BNA Act also gave Parliament the power to make laws "for the Peace, Order, and good Government" of Canada. The BNA Act is the foundation of our modern Constitution.

The Rupert's Land and North-Western Territory Order of 1870

Created the new Canadian jurisdiction of the North-West Territories, which comprised what is now Alberta, Saskatchewan and the Yukon Territory as well as most of Manitoba and parts of Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, Ontario and Quebec.

The Constitution Act, 1871

Provided for the creation of new provinces. All Acts which created provinces, beginning with the Manitoba Act, 1870, are part of our Constitution.

The Adjacent Territories Order of 1880

Brought into Confederation all remaining British possessions and territories in North America except Newfoundland, which joined Confederation on March 31, 1949.

The Statute of Westminster, 1931

Gave Canada full sovereignty over its own affairs except that the British Parliament retained the power to amend Canada's Constitution. This law marks the point at which Canada became legally independent from the United Kingdom.

The Constitution Act, 1982

Combined the above Acts and orders, gave Canada the power to amend its own Constitution (patriation) and enshrined Canadians' rights and freedoms in a Charter.



The pillars of the Alberta Legislature (courtesy of the Legislative Assembly Office)

Activities

These three suggested activities ask students to consider how democratic principles are a reflection of a society's citizens. Refer to the Resource Links and Videos for more activities and background information.

Critique

What relevance does the Constitution have on the lives of Canadian and Albertan citizens today? Reflect on the legacy of this important document and how it was shaped by other constitutional documents such as Magna Carta.

Develop

You have been stranded on a desert island and the survivors must now decide what government should look like for your new country and its citizens. In your deliberations, consider the democratic models used by societies such as those in Ancient Athens, 17th century England and modern day Alberta as well as other forms of government.

Compare

In a representative democracy, citizens choose people to make decisions on their behalf. In a direct democracy, citizens have the power to make those decisions themselves. What are the strengths and weaknesses of both types of democracy?

Resource Links

[Ask an Expert](#)

[Citizen's Guide](#)

[Mock Legislature Resources](#)

[The Road To Democracy \(Canadian Museum of History\)](#)

[How Canadians Govern Themselves](#)

[Canada's Democracy Week](#)

[Constitution Acts, 1867 to 1982](#)

[How it Works \(UK Parliament\)](#)

[In Brief: Canadian Constitution \(Ontario Justice Education Network\)](#)

Resource Videos

[Government and Democracy \(CIVIX\)](#)

[Greek Direct Democracy](#)

[Heritage Minutes: Responsible Government](#)

[Parliament, Democracy & You](#)

[Democracy– A Short Introduction](#)

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- Honour and value the traditions, concepts and symbols that are the expression of Canadian identity (Social Studies, Values and Attitudes)
- Recognize the influence of historical events and legislation on democratic decision making in Canada (Social Studies, 6.1.1)
- Demonstrate an understanding of the fundamental principles of democracy by exploring and reflecting upon the following questions and issues: What is democracy (Social Studies, 6.1.2)
- Appreciate the relationship between the values of a society and the model of government adopted within a society (Social Studies, 6.2.1)
- Assess critically, how historical events shaped collective identity in the Canadian context by exploring and reflecting on the following issues and questions: How was the patriation of the Constitution in 1982 a step toward nationhood? (Social Studies, 5.3.5)
- Listen, speak, read, write, view and represent to explore thoughts, ideas, feelings and experiences. (English Language Arts, General Outcome 1)

Alberta Education Program of Studies

Contact Us

Please let us know if you enjoyed this resource and if there are any other topics you would like to see covered.

Also, if you tried any of the suggested activities, we would love to see examples of your students' work!

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Unless indicated otherwise, the included information has been taken directly from the Legislative Assembly Office's *The Citizen's Guide to the Alberta Legislature* (9th edition, 2016) or from the Legislative Assembly Office's Agora Interpretive Centre.

1. "The Worst Form of Government", *International Churchill Society*, September 13, 2019, <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/quotes/the-worst-form-of-government/>
2. Robert Cooper, *Signing of the Proclamation of the Constitution Act, 1982*, 1982, photograph, accessed September 18, 2019, http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3206003

