



8 How Parliamentary Government Works in Canada

Chapter Summary

- The Organization of Government
- The Executive Branch
 - The Monarch and Governor General
 - The Prime Minister and Cabinet
 - Setting the Agenda
 - Central Agencies
 - Department of Finance
 - The Privy Council Office
 - The Treasury Board Secretariat
 - The Prime Minister's Office
 - Prime Ministerial Government
 - The Bureaucracy
 - The Structure of Canadian Bureaucracy
- The Legislature
 - Functions of the Legislature
 - Scrutinizing Government Performance
 - Representation
 - Debate

- Legitimation
- What Does an MP Do?
- Is There a Democratic Deficit in Canada?
- The Judiciary
- Summary

Learning Objectives

After reading Chapter 8 in *Canadian Democracy*, you should be able to do the following:

- Set out the essentials of the formal organization of the Canadian government.
- Explain why the prime minister is the pre-eminent member of the government.
- Describe and differentiate the role of the Governor General in comparison to the Prime Minister.
- Identify and describe the roles played by central agencies.
- Identify and distinguish the functions of a government department, a regulatory agency, and a Crown corporation.
- Respond to the question of whether the idea of representative democracy is consistent with the merit principle.
- List and explain the functions performed by the legislature.
- Discuss the importance of the independence of judges.
- Discuss whether the courts are a democratic or undemocratic body, and discuss whether or not the ability to seek recourse in the courts is undemocratic.
- Explain the process by which a bill becomes a law.
- Compose one or two paragraphs that use as many key concepts (listed below) as possible.

Key Concepts

Backbenchers MPs who are not cabinet ministers (p. 276)

Bicameral legislature A legislature with two chambers—the House of Commons, which is democratically elected, and the Senate, with appointed senators (p. 293)

Bureaucracy The political rule by unelected government officials (p. 288)

Caucus The body of elected MPs belonging to a particular party (p. 296)

Central agencies Areas of the bureaucracy whose main or only purpose is to support the decision-making activities of cabinet (p. 283)

Coalition government A temporary agreement between two or more political parties to form a government (p. 271)

Constitutional monarchy A system of government with a monarch, as a formal head of state, that operates within a constitutional framework (p. 270)

Crown Corporations Organizations that generally perform commercial functions and typically operate at “arm’s length” from the government, such as Canada Post (p. 290).

Democratic deficit The excessive centralization of power in and around the prime minister and cabinet and the marginalization of the legislature (p. 303)

Department of Finance Federal government administration that plays the leading role in formulating economic policy (p. 283)

Economic statement Provides the government’s analysis of the state of the economy and where the government plans to steer it (p. 281)

Estimates the detailed spending plans that the government tables in the House of Commons each winter (p. 285)

Expenditure budget Presented in February of each year by the minister of finance, it represents the government’s spending plans for the forthcoming fiscal year (p. 281)

Head of government In Canada, the prime minister (p. 271)

Head of state In Canada, the Queen’s representative, the Governor General (p. 272)

Intergovernmental Affairs Federal government administration that provides policy advice to its minister and the prime minister on issues ranging from health and social programs to national unity and Aboriginal matters (p. 254)

Mandarin Powerful senior civil servants (p. 291)

Orders-in-council Administrative orders (appointments, regulations, or legislative orders authorized by an existing act of Parliament) issued by cabinet and approved by the Governor General (p. 291)

Prime Ministerial government Government where the executive is essentially dominated by the prime minister and the PMO (p. 286)

Prime Minister’s Office The government office that handles the prime minister’s correspondence and schedule; speech writing; media relations; liaison with minister, caucus, and the party; and providing advice on appointments and policy (p. 285)

Primus inter pares First among equals (p. 287)

Privy Council Office The cabinet’s secretariat and a principal source of policy advice to the prime minister (p. 284)

Prorogation A postponement of parliamentary activities without a dissolution of Parliament (p. 273)

Public Sector The part of the economy that includes those organizations that receive all or a major part of their operating revenues from one or more levels of government (p. 289)

Representative bureaucracy A concept and an expectation that the bureaucracy should “represent” the population and reflect in fair proportion certain demographic characteristics of society (p. 292)

Responsible government Constitutional principle that the prime minister and cabinet require the confidence (majority support) of the elected members of Parliament in the House of Commons in order to govern; the governor, himself chosen by the British Colonial Office, was obliged to select cabinet ministers who were members of the elected legislature (p. 276)

Revenue budget Outlines the government's plans to change the tax system (p. 281)

Royal Commission A task force or some other consultative body that has been created by the government to study and make recommendations on an issue (p. 304)

Speech from the Throne Marks the beginning of each parliamentary session, in which the Governor General reads a statement explaining the government's legislative priorities (p. 280)

Stare decisis The legal principle of determining the points in litigation according to precedent (p. 309)

Substantive equality That individuals should be looked at in terms of their group characteristics and the possible advantages or disadvantages they may have experienced as a result of these attributes (p. 308)

Treasury Board Secretariat An administrative adjunct to the Treasury Board, which is, in a sense, guardian of the purse strings, and is the government's voice on employment and personnel matters and on administrative policy within the federal government (p. 285)

White paper A report for discussion on proposed legislation, which is based on research by the bureaucracy and/or the legislature, and serves as a statement of the government's legislative intentions (p. 305)

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Assess Donald Savoie's comments about the strength of the prime minister in our parliamentary system.
2. What can be done to make the House of Commons and the Senate more democratic?
3. Is it appropriate, in our democracy, to let judges have the last word on important public issues?
4. Should the Senate be abolished? How important is the role of the Senate in Canadian government?
5. How significant is the Governor General to Canadian values and culture?

Additional Resources

CBC Archives, video clips on prime ministers: http://archives.cbc.ca/politics/prime_ministers/

CBC Archives, video clips on political parties and party leaders:
http://archives.cbc.ca/politics/parties_leaders/

CBC Archives, video clips on federal politics: http://archives.cbc.ca/politics/federal_politics/

For the Parliamentary legislative process: http://www.parl.gc.ca/compendium/web-content/c_g_legislativeprocess-e.htm

For Parliament's committee process: http://www.parl.gc.ca/compendium/web-content/c_g_committees-e.htm