Structure of Canadian Government

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Levels of Government

Canada is a representative democracy, which means we are able to vote for individuals to represent us at each level of the government. These elected representatives become our voices in proposals, debates, and votes on decisions within the government. There are three levels of government in Canada: federal, provincial/territorial, and municipal. Each level has their own elected officials and specific responsibilities.

the most elected MPs is appointed Prime Minister by the Governor General of Canada (3). The Governor General is also responsible for appointing Cabinet Ministers, based on the advice given by the Prime Minister (1). The Cabinet serves as a group of advisors for the federal government, through setting priorities and establishing consensus among members (1).

Federal

The Federal government takes the responsibility for matters that affect Canada as a whole. These duties may include taxes, criminal law, foreign affairs, immigration, currency, and national defence (1). The federal government gathers in the House of Commons in Ottawa, Ontario, to discuss policies and debate bills that may become laws (2). Members of the federal government are elected representatives, titled Members of Parliament (MP) (3). Each defined geographical area in Canada, also known as a 'riding', will vote for MPs that represent them in the federal government (4). The leader of the political party that gains

Provincial

The Provincial/Territorial governments take responsibility for matters that affect each province or territory. These duties may include, but are not limited to, matters such as education, health care, and road regulations (1). The Provincial/Territorial governments gather at their respective legislative assemblies within the capital city of of province/territory (5). Members of the provincial/territorial governments are elected representatives, titled Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) (6). This title is with the exception of Ontario, where they are Members of Provincial Parliament (MPP), Quebec, where they are

Members of the National Assembly (MNA), and Newfoundland and Labrador, where they are Members of the House Assembly (MHA) (6). Each riding is defined by different geographical boundaries as compared to the ridings used for federal elections (4). Similar to the Federal Government, each provincial/territorial riding elects a single representative (4). The leader of the political party in each province/territory that has the most elected members becomes the Premier (3). The Premier will appoint and work with provincial/territorial Cabinet Ministers to establish priorities and develop policies for the government (7). The provincial/territorial Cabinet follows a similar model to the federal Cabinet, focused on establishing priorities and passing government legislation (5).

Municipal

The municipal government is responsible for cities, towns, or districts. Their duties include public parks, libraries, local police and fire services, public transportation, and community water systems (1). Members of the municipal government consist of elected councillors, and the leader is voted in as a mayor or reeve (3). The municipal government meets at their local city or town hall to discuss and pass bylaws (3).

As Canadian citizens, we have duties. We are able to elect political representatives at all three levels of government. This enables us to select what voice we want to represent us in matters that impact all Canadian citizens.

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Minority vs. Majority Governments

Elected members at each level of the government win seats in their respective legislative buildings (1). Located in Ottawa, ON, the House of Commons is the legislative building for Canada, with a total of 338 seats (1). Each electoral district, or riding, has the opportunity to vote in one member to occupy one seat in the legislative assembly (1). This election occurs once every four years, where Canadians are able to vote for a Member of Parliament (MP) to represent their riding in the Federal government (2). At the federal level, the leader of the party who wins the most seats will become the Prime Minister of Canada (3). At the provincial/ territorial level, the leader of the party who wins the most seats will become the Premier of the province or territory (3). When the party with the most seats in the government obtains over 50% of the total number of seats, they form a majority government (4). However, if they do not achieve over 50% of the seats, they do not have a majority government (4). This introduces the possibility of a minority government, meaning that no single party wins a majority of the seats in the House of Commons or other legislature (4). A minority government may exist at a federal or provincial/territorial level, with the exception of Nunavut and Northwest Territories, which are governed by a consensus government (4).

A minority government continues to exist when a party can hold confidence in the House of Commons without a majority of the seats (4). Minority governments are often viewed as unfavourable by the governing party, as the opposition parties have a greater opportunity to prevent legislative changes (4). In order to get a sufficient number of votes to pass legislation, a minority government will often negotiate policies with opposition parties and independents (4). If the leader of the governing party loses the confidence of the house, or obtains less than 50% of votes, they risk losing their position and a call for a re-election (5). To avoid re-election, the government may also consider forming a coalition government between two parties (6). This structure creates a Cabinet with members from more than one party and a larger number of MPs (6).

While majority governments are able to be strong and decisive, minority governments often rely on collaborations with other parties and individuals. There is an ongoing debate about which structure of government tends to be more productive in office (7). Some politicians will even claim that a majority government is essential for their party to be productive in government (4). Although a majority government tends to be less restricted when passing legislation, past minority governments in Canada have also proven to be productive through incorporating the views of opposition parties and individuals. Past minority governments are responsible for major breakthroughs in Canada, including universal health care, the Canadian Pension Plan, and the Canada Student Loans Plan (4).

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Accountability

On April 11th, 2006, the Government of Canada implemented the Federal Accountability Act to ensure accountability and increase transparency in the Canadian government (1). This act included banning large personal donations to political parties, providing protection to individuals who disclose government wrongdoings, and increasing transparency of appointments or contracts (1).

The Office of the Comptroller General (OCG) is responsible for applying the Federal Accountability Act. They hold the Government of Canada accountable and make federal official's decisions clear and straightforward (2). By reporting to the Deputy Minister of Finance, the OCG serves to maintain the quality and honesty of the government's financial management and policies (3). This system helps Canadian citizens develop a sense of trust with the government, through financial

Close to Home

Lack of Accountability in Halifax, NS

Africville was a primarily black community in Halifax, Nova Scotia that, despite paying taxes, was deprived of access to clean water, sewage, and waste management (5). Instead of taking action, the Municipal government worsened the problem by adding unwanted developments surrounding the community, such as an infectious disease hospital, a prison, and a garbage dump (5). After 120 years of unjust living conditions, the Municipal government relocated the residents of Africville (5). The destruction and relocation of Africville was approved without consulting over 80% of the community members (6). After years of resistance and resilience, Africville was destroyed between January 1964-January 1970 (5). This destruction removed individuals and families from their homes, worsening financial struggles already present in the community (6). Although this example of discrimination and displacement occurred decades ago, marginalized communities in Halifax still exist today. The placement of Halifax's waste disposal facilities tend to be concentrated around black or First Nations communities, including Shelburne (see Figure 1.) (7). Although the dump in Shelburne closed in 2016, residents of the community continue to suffer the long-term effects of living in close proximity to burning waste (7). The poor living conditions in minority communities emphasizes the importance of holding the government accountable for the safety and health of residents.
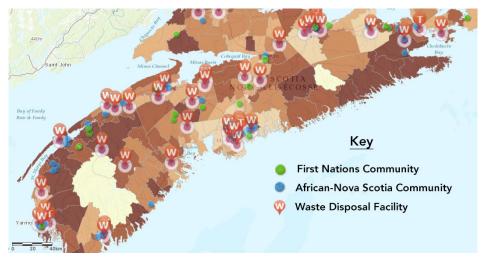

Key

- 🟢 First Nations Community
- 🔵 African-Nova Scotia Community
- 🔴W Waste Disposal Facility

Figure 1. ENRICH Project is a collaborative community-based project investigating the causes and effects of toxic industries near Mi'kmaq and the African Nova Scotian communities." Source: https://www.enrichproject.org/map/ (data circa 2006).

honesty (2). The OCG monitors complete this task providing information to the public on what government spending goes towards (2). It is important to increase this release of financial information from the government to ensure Canadian taxpayers are aware of the value of their contributions and see meaningful results (2). Opposition members in the House of Commons also play a role in accountability by holding the Government publicly accountable for decisions and defending differing views (4).

Establishing accountability in the Canadian Government is key in ensuring the proper use of public resources and encouraging trust from Canadian citizens. Without practices in place, Canadians may feel uneasy about trusting how their government is being run.

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