

Summer Institute for Future Legislators 2013

Glossary of Terms Relating to Parliamentary Government in Canada

This list gives brief definitions of terms used to describe parliamentary government Canada. Some of the terms are included because they help to explain the overall system of government; others provide more specific information on the parliamentary process. In the entries below, words which are in bold are further explained elsewhere in the glossary.

This glossary can be used in conjunction with the book by David C Docherty, *Legislatures* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005).

act of parliament See **legislation, bill**.

address in reply See **speech from the throne; confidence**.

adversarial system An adversarial political system is one dominated by a struggle for power between two rival party groupings. Under such a system, politics is seen as highly competitive with little room for compromise. Actions by the governing **party** are always opposed by rival parties. See also **consensus; majoritarian**.

assembly This term can be used as an abbreviation for **legislative assembly**, the representative body which voters in each province elect as their provincial parliament. More generally, it can refer to an elected body which forms part of the **legislature**, or to any group which claims to represent a political community.

assent See **royal assent**.

backbench In British derived **parliamentary systems**, the members of parliament who are **ministers** sit in the front row of the seats or benches assigned to the governing party in parliament. As a consequence, those who sit on the backbenches are members of the governing party who are not ministers. These members are known collectively as the backbench. The opposition backbench are those members of the **opposition party** who are not senior members of the party or do not hold a position as **shadow minister** or parliamentary spokesperson for a particular area of policy for the opposition party.

A backbencher can also be called a private member, as in a private member's bill. See also **bill; legislation**.

ballot Ballots are the papers on which votes are recorded. A vote can be a single mark, or one or more marks or numbers to elect one or more candidates or parties (see **electoral formula**). The term ballot can also be used to refer to the process of casting votes or the holding of an election.

bicameralism A bicameral **parliament** is one which has two **chambers**, a lower house and an upper house. The lower house is often called the legislative assembly or house of assembly and, in **parliamentary systems**, is the house where the **government** is formed. The Canadian parliament is bicameral with the non-elected **Senate** as the upper house, the **House of Commons** as the lower house.

British Columbia has always had a unicameral parliament, with its single chamber known as the **legislative assembly**. Some provinces joined confederation with upper houses but all of these have since been abolished, the last being Quebec's Legislative Council in 1968.

bill A bill is a proposal for a new or amended law brought before parliament. The introduction of a bill is usually controlled by a minister on behalf of the government, but time may be made available for **private members** to introduce their own bills. Only the **government** can introduce bills for raising or spending funds (money bills).

Bills must go through a number of stages before they are passed by parliament; for the national parliament, a bill must pass both the **House of Commons** and the **Senate** before it can be given the **royal assent** and become law.

BNA Act See **Constitution Act, 1867 (Canada)**.

British North America Act 1867 See **Constitution Act, 1867 (Canada)**.

by-election The death, resignation or disqualification of a **member of parliament** creates a **casual vacancy** in the chamber. Such vacancies are filled by holding a special election called a by-election in the **electoral district** whose seat has become vacant.

cabinet The cabinet is a meeting of the **prime minister** or **premier** and the **ministers** who together make key decisions about government administration and policy. Decisions made by cabinet bind all members of the **ministry**, and public disagreement with a cabinet decision by a minister will require the resignation or dismissal of the minister.

Even though the cabinet plays a central role in the operation of **parliamentary government**, the responsibilities and operation of the cabinet are not written down in any formal constitutional document. When the cabinet makes decisions which require formal recognition, they are made in the name of the **privy council** (for the Canadian government) and the **executive council** (for the provinces). See also **constitution; government**.

candidate A candidate is someone who runs for office at an election. The rules for being nominated as a candidate vary for each parliament in Canada and are usually set out in an Elections Act. These acts prescribe the administrative and financial requirements for candidates and their official agents. See **Elections Act (Canada)** and **Election Act (British Columbia)**.

The rules governing candidates for the House of Commons are extensive and Elections Canada provides *An Election Handbook for Candidates* for federal elections. This is available online at:

<http://elections.ca/content.aspx?section=pol&dir=can/man/ec20190&document=nomi&lang=e>

Almost all successful candidates are members of political **parties** and parties themselves have procedures for choosing candidates. The process of nominating candidates is a vital one for a political party; by choosing a candidate, it permits that candidate to use the party label and to contest the election in the name of the party. See also **nomination; party discipline**.

casual vacancy A casual vacancy is the technical term used for a vacancy in the membership of the House of Commons or a legislative assembly which occurs between **general elections**. Such vacancies can occur because of the death, resignation or disqualification of a member of the legislative assembly. Such vacancies are filled by holding a **by-election**.

caucus Caucus is a meeting of the **members of parliament** who belong to a particular **party** (as in, the Liberal caucus, the NDP caucus). Meetings of caucus—which are usually held in private—may discuss a wide range of topics of concern to party members, including the policies to be followed by the party and parliamentary tactics. Caucus meetings are an important forum for the exchange of information between the party leaders, **ministers** (if the party is in government), and the **backbench**. In the past, voting at a meeting of the party caucus was used in Canada as a common way of choosing the **party leader**. Today, leaders are usually chosen at a party convention, or by direct **ballot** of all party members.

chamber The room in which the House of Commons or a legislative assembly meets is often called the chamber, but the term can also refer to the parliamentary **assembly** that meets in the room. Bicameral means ‘having two chambers’ so a bicameral parliament is one with two chambers; see **bicameralism**.

charter of rights and freedoms See **Constitution Acts (Canada)**, and note **Westminster system**.

coalition A coalition is a group of two or more parties which agree to work together to form a government. A coalition government is one supported in the parliament by two or more parties which share the various **portfolios** in the **government**. That is,

the ministers in a coalition government are drawn from the parties which form the coalition and not just one party. Parties may indicate before an election that they intend to work together if they win office, or coalition agreements may be formed after the election when it is clear that no single party has a majority of seats. See also **majority government**.

Coalition governments have not been common in Canada although they are familiar in other parliamentary systems.

The difference between a coalition government which holds a majority of seats in the lower house of a parliament and a **minority government** kept in office by the support of one or more parties or groups of independents in the lower house is that, in a coalition government, the parties in the coalition have ministers in the government. In a minority government, the parties or independent members keeping the government in office do not have ministers in the government.

commission The formal authority given to someone to hold a senior position in government is called a commission. For the government of Canada, a commission can be issued by the **governor general** alone or with the **privy council** (for the provinces, a commission can be issued by **the lieutenant governor** alone or by the **lieutenant governor in council**). **Ministers**, senior public servants and judges are all issued commissions when they are appointed; see **order in council**.

When the party in government is defeated at an election, or loses the support of a majority of members in the **parliament**, the governor general (or lieutenant governor) invites the leader of the party which has the support of a majority of members to form a new **government** by offering to commission the leader as **prime minister** (or **premier**). Once other ministers have been chosen by the prime minister (or premier), they are given commissions for their departmental responsibilities, sometimes called portfolios.

committee system Parliaments often delegate some of their deliberations or inquiries to committees. There are many kinds of committees, some of which continue from one parliament to the next (standing committees), and others which are set up for particular purposes. The composition of parliamentary committees usually reflects the composition of the chamber from which they are drawn; the governing party usually has a majority and selects the chair.

An extensive and well-resourced committee system has often been seen as enhancing the ability of parliament to scrutinize the legislative and financial programs of the government, and to enhance public involvement in the parliamentary process. But the design of the committee system, its funding and operation are matters usually controlled by the government of the day.

confidence A government must maintain the 'confidence' of the lower house of parliament; this means that the **government** relies on the support of a majority of

members in the **House of Commons** or a provincial **assembly** to stay in office. A 'loss of confidence' means that a government has lost control of a majority of seats in the **lower house** of parliament and must resign or call a **general election**.

What amounts to a loss of confidence is not always clear, but the defeat of a government's budget, or the loss of a vote on the **address in reply** will automatically signal a loss of confidence.

consensus (system) In contrast to a **majoritarian** or **adversarial** system, a consensus system aims to disperse power among a number of political institutions, actors and **parties** so that government policy requires compromise and the accommodation of a range of views before action can be taken. Consensus systems do not regard bare majority support as sufficient to legitimize government action—broader support is required so that as many groups as possible can be persuaded of the merits of the action. **Electoral systems** with proportional representation are seen as consensus systems because they are more likely to produce **coalition** governments and the need for parties to compromise over their policies.

constituency This term is often used interchangeably with riding to refer to an **electoral district** of a parliament. It can also refer to the audience, interested public, or interest group which is the concern of a particular **member of parliament**. See also **seat**.

constitution A constitution is a set of rules which describes the key institutions of **government**—particularly the composition of the **legislature** and the **executive**—and specifies the procedures which government institutions must follow if their actions are to be authoritative. A constitution can be thought of as a higher law because it limits what governments can do.

As a federation, Canada has eleven sets of constitutional documents, one for the national government, and one for each of the ten Canadian provinces.

Constitutional documents vary in what they contain and how much detail they provide about the day-to-day operation of government. British derived constitutional documents typically say little about the institutions of executive government, especially the role of the **prime minister**, **premier**, **ministers**, the **cabinet** and the relationship between these institutions and **parliament**.

Constitution Acts, 1867 to 1982 (Canada) The 1867 Act (known before 1982 as the *British North America Act* or simply the *BNA Act*) is a component of the Canadian **constitution** together with the *Constitution Act 1982* which includes the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. The 1867 Act established the confederation of Canada by setting up a new national government and dividing law-making power between the national government and the provinces.

The Canadian Constitution Acts set out many of the rules relating to the operation of parliament and executive government in Canada, but they are far from a complete specification of the operation of the Canadian government. Some of the rules relating to the conduct of government can be found in other acts of parliament or official documents; others rely on accepted practices which are not set out in formal constitutional documents. These unwritten rules are sometimes called **constitutional conventions**.

A copy of the Canada Constitution Acts can be found on the web at:
<http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/const/>

Constitution Act (British Columbia) British Columbia is the only province with an act called the Constitution Act; other provinces have similar legislation but with different designations. Provincial constitutional documents sets out many of the rules relating to the operation of provincial assemblies and executive government, but, as with the Canadian government, the critical relationships between the **premier**, the **cabinet** and **parliament** are not specified. A copy of the British Columbia Act can be found on the Queen's Printer website:
http://www.bclaws.ca/EPLibraries/bclaws_new/document/ID/freeside/00_96066_01

constitutional conventions Constitutional conventions are accepted practices which supplement or modify the provisions of formal constitutional documents. It is a constitutional convention, for example, that the **prime minister** of Canada is a member of the **House of Commons**, and that the **governor general** only **dissolves** parliament on the advice of the prime minister.

convention See **constitutional convention**.

Crown The formal exercise of power by **government** in Canada is carried out by the **governor general** and provincial **lieutenant governors** in the name of the Crown. The Crown is symbolic **head of state** of the Canadian federation and its provincial components, and reflects the fact that Canada is a monarchy under Queen Elizabeth II. **Bills** passed by parliament not become law until they receive the **royal assent**.

democracy Democracy has become an imprecise term but, at its core, it refers to the belief that **governments** should be responsive to the wishes of the majority of citizens. This explains why elections and democracy are often thought of as being closely related; elections provide a means of choosing a government acceptable to the majority of voters and, by electing a representative **assembly**, creating a body which can make governments accountable. But what we think of as democratic government needs more than just elections; it requires a constitutional structure (see **constitution**) and a set of rules which protect minorities and individuals as well as majorities. See also **representative democracy**.

dissolution A parliament is said to be dissolved when the **governor general** (or **lieutenant governor**) ends a session of the parliament and starts the process for holding a

general election. In this matter, the governor general (or lieutenant governor) acts on the advice of the **prime minister** (or **premier**) alone.

Until 2002, members of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia held their seat for five years from the date of the previous general election but, since 2002, provision has been made for the legislative assembly to have a **fixed term** of four years. See also **prorogation**.

division A division is the name given to a formal vote on the floor of a parliamentary **chamber**. In several British derived parliaments, voting is carried out by members moving to one or other sides of the chamber, hence 'division'. In the **House of Commons**, members rise in their place and indicate whether they agree or disagree with the motion before the house.

election, timing of See **dissolution**

Election Act (British Columbia) The *Election Act 1996* (as amended) sets out the administrative machinery for running elections in the Province. Its sections dealing with the many aspects of organizing an election including the appointment and duties of electoral officials, the qualifications and registration of voters, the procedures for calling an election, the procedures for the **nomination of candidates**, the arrangements for voting, the scrutiny and counting of votes, the registration of **parties**, the monitoring of election expenditure and political advertising, and the penalties for breaching the rules laid out in the Act. A copy of the Act can be found on the Queen's Printer website:

http://www.bclaws.ca/EPLibraries/bclaws_new/document/ID/freeside/96106_00

Elections Act (Canada) For the Canadian House of Commons, the rules for candidates are set out in the *Canada Elections Act SC 2000 c 9* (as revised 1 April 2012). The Act sets out the administrative machinery for running elections. It has sections dealing with the many aspects of organizing an election including the appointment and duties of electoral officials, the qualifications and registration of voters, the procedures for calling an election, the procedures for the **nomination of candidates**, the appointment of **official agents** for candidates, the arrangements for voting, the scrutiny and counting of votes, the registration of parties, the monitoring of election expenditure and political advertising, and the penalties for breaching the rules laid out in the Act. A copy of the Act can be found at:

<http://canlii.ca/en/ca/laws/stat/sc-2000-c-9/latest/sc-2000-c-9.html>

electoral district The geographical area from which one or more representatives is chosen at an election is called an electoral district. Electoral districts are also called ridings or constituencies; see also **seats**.

electoral formula The electoral formula is the rule which governs the translation of votes into **seats**. The electoral formula for the current electoral system across Canada is a

simple one: the candidate who wins more votes than any other in each electoral district is elected.

There are many different kinds of electoral formulas, but they can be grouped into a number of families: **plurality** systems where seats are won by the candidate with the most votes even if the candidate does not get a majority of votes; **majority systems** where candidates must get a majority of votes to be elected; proportional systems where the parties fielding candidates are represented in proportion to the votes won by each party; and **mixed systems** which combine two of these systems.

electorate The electorate is the whole body of electors. The term is also used occasionally to mean a single **electoral district**.

endorsed (candidate), endorsement See **candidate; nomination; party; party discipline**

executive The institutions of **government** have traditionally been classified under three heads: the **legislature** which makes laws; the **judiciary** which interprets laws and applies them to particular cases; and the executive which administers laws made by the legislature. The biggest of these components is the executive because it includes most of the activities we associate with government—all government departments and public servants as well as the **prime minister, premier, the cabinet and ministers** are part of the executive.

It can be helpful to subdivide the executive into three components: the formal executive, the **head of state** which, in Canada is the **governor general** (for the provinces, the **lieutenant governor**) acting in the name of the **Crown**; the political executive which is the premier, ministers and the cabinet acting as the key decision makers for steering government; and the public service and government agencies which administer the laws of Canada or a province.

executive council The executive council is a formal meeting of the **premier** and one or more **ministers** to prepare documentation for authorization by the **lieutenant governor**. See also **privy council; order in council; royal assent**.

federal The term federal is used in two ways: ‘the federal government’ refers to the national government in Ottawa. But as an adjective derived from federalism, federal government is a way of dividing government so that there are two spheres of government activity, a national one with responsibility for services which relate to the whole country, and several constitutionally autonomous regional governments called states or provinces to look after regional concerns.

first past the post A first past the post (FPTP) electoral system is one in which the candidate with a **plurality** of votes wins the **seat** in a **single member district**. All Canadian parliaments currently use this electoral system for electing members. See also **majority**.

fixed term Representative **assemblies** can be elected for a fixed term (the United States House of Representatives has a fixed term of two years), or for a maximum term with the provision for an early election.

British derived **parliaments** have usually had maximum terms which, depending on the parliamentary system, have varied between three to seven years. Few parliaments run their full term and are dissolved earlier at a time when the **government** of the day considers it appropriate to hold a **general election**; see **dissolution**.

In British Columbia, as in all Canadian provinces, the discretion to advise the calling of an election has been a powerful weapon in the armoury of the **premier** to use for partisan advantage. But, since 2002 and the bringing into force of the *Constitution (Fixed Election Dates) Amendment Act* of 2001, the timing of general elections in British Columbia has been fixed for ‘...May 17, 2005 and thereafter on the second Tuesday in May in the fourth calendar year following the general voting day for the most recently held general election’ (**Constitution Act (British Columbia)** section 23(2)). Note that the **lieutenant governor** can still dissolve the **legislative assembly** before that date (see section 23(1)) but the circumstances required for this to occur would have to be either that the parliament had become unworkable because of split in the governing party or **coalition**, or that a strong willed premier was willing to advise that a general election be held notwithstanding the ‘fixed’ date.

front bench in British derived **parliamentary systems**, the members of parliament who are **ministers** sit in the front row of seats or benches assigned to the governing party in parliament; see **backbench**.

general election A general election is an election for all the **seats** in a parliament. Vacancies which occur as a result of the death, resignation or disqualification of a member of parliament in between general elections can be filled at a **by-election**. See also **casual vacancy**; **dissolution**; **fixed term**.

government In everyday language, the government is the label given to the whole structure of public sector activities but the term also has narrower meanings (see **executive**). Where there is a distinction made between the government and the parliament, government refers to the **ministers** and public officials who steer the day-to-day operation of departments and agencies, as opposed to the debating, scrutinizing and law making activities which occur in the parliament. The **prime minister** (or **premier**) and other ministers, as members of parliament, are politically responsible for government policy and collectively form what is sometimes called the government of the day (see also **cabinet**). In this narrow sense, the government is the prime minister (or premier) and the body of ministers **commissioned** to implement the policies of the party or **coalition** which has the support of a majority of the members of the parliament. See also **parliamentary system**.

government of the day See **government; cabinet; executive; premier; prime minister**

governor general All the functions of **head of state** for the Canadian government are performed by the **governor general** in the name of the **Crown**. The governor general is appointed by (and can be removed by) the Queen. The appointment (or removal) is made on the advice of the **prime minister**, although the process for appointment and removal is not specified in the constitution.

The formal powers of the governor general are very extensive and include the power to commission governments, to appoint all important Canadian **executive, judicial** and military officers, to initiate legislation, to endorse all laws passed by the Canadian Parliament, and to summon, **prorogue** and **dissolve** parliaments. These powers are, on almost all occasions, exercised on the advice of the prime minister or the **privy council** (a formal meeting of ministers). The current role of the governor general is to perform official governmental duties as the representative of the Crown, to represent the federal government at a wide range of community functions throughout Canada, and to represent Canada internationally as the Canadian **head of state**.

The relationships between the governor general, the prime minister, ministers and parliament are not well specified in constitutional documents and rely heavily on customary practices (often called constitutional **conventions**) rather than constitutional law; see **constitution**.

In relation to the electoral process, the governor general has a formal role in setting in process the procedures for holding elections for the **House of Commons**, but is not otherwise involved. If, after an election, no party gains a majority of seats in the House of Commons, the governor general may play an important role in the selection of the prime minister and the formation of a government. The governor general may also play a role in the choice of prime minister if a prime minister resigns in mid-term. See also **privy council; lieutenant governor**.

head of government See **premier; prime minister; parliamentary system**

head of state The head of state is the name given to the office which exercises the formal **executive** power of the **government** and, on official occasions, represents the whole political community. While Canada is nominally monarchical in form, the powers of the **Crown** as head of state are exercised by the **governor general** for the national government, and the **lieutenant governors** for the provinces. The head of state in parliamentary systems is an office which is seen to be above politics, in contrast to the head of government who is the **prime minister** or **premier**.

Note that the distinctive characteristic of the United States presidential system is that the roles of head of state and head of government are combined in the office of an elected President. In **parliamentary systems**, the offices of head of state and head of government are kept separate.

House of Commons The House of Commons is the name given to the lower house of the Canadian Parliament. It currently has 308 members, but this will be increased to 338 after the election due in 2015. Members are elected from single member districts using a first-past-the-post (plurality) **electoral formula** for a term of five years unless the House is dissolved earlier (see **fixed term; dissolution**).

The **government** must maintain the support of a majority of the members of the House of Commons to stay in office. The functions of the House of Commons include passing legislation, authorizing the raising and expenditure of public money, scrutinizing the activities of government, raising issues of public concern, investigating matters of public interest, and acting as a forum for publicizing the concerns of individuals and groups throughout Canada.

independents An independent candidate or member of parliament is one who is not a member of a political **party**. Independents have occasionally been elected to Canadian parliaments (one was elected at the 2013 election for the British Columbian Legislative Assembly). A member elected to any parliament as a member of a party may subsequently decide to leave the party and sit as an independent. Most of the members who have resigned from the political party under whose name they were elected (or who have been expelled from the party **caucus**), join another party or do not contest subsequent elections. Only small proportion are re-elected as independents.

judiciary The judiciary is the collective term for courts and judges; the judicial branch of government. See also **executive; legislature**.

leader of the opposition See **official opposition**.

legislation Laws and government regulations are collectively known as legislation. A **bill** (a proposal for a law) which has been passed by both houses of the Canadian Parliament or by a provincial **assembly**, and has been assented to by the **governor general** (or the **lieutenant governor** for a province), becomes law as an act of parliament. Such an act of parliament can also be referred to as a statute of Canada or a province. See also **bill; private member's bill; royal assent**.

legislative assembly The Legislative Assembly of British Columbia has been the elected component of the Province's **parliamentary system** of government since the establishment of self-government in the Province in 1871. It is currently a representative body of 85 members elected from single member districts for a term of four years unless dissolved earlier (see **fixed term; dissolution**). The government must maintain the support of a majority of the members of the Assembly to stay in office. The functions of the legislative assembly include passing legislation, authorizing the raising and expenditure of public money, scrutinizing the activities of **government**, raising issues of public concern,

investigating matters of public interest, and acting as a forum for publicizing the concerns of individuals and groups throughout British Columbia.

All Canadian provinces have a representative assembly which discharges similar functions. All but three provincial assemblies are called the legislative assembly; Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador each have a house of assembly, and Quebec has a national assembly.

legislature The legislature is the law making component of government (see **executive**). In the case of the federal government, the legislature is the **House of Commons** and the **Senate**, and for the provinces, the legislature is the provincial **assembly**. It should be noted that legislation which has passed through the house or houses of the legislature does not become law until it has received **royal assent** and proclaimed to be in force. See also **parliamentary system; representative democracy**.

lieutenant governor All the functions of **head of state** for the provinces are performed by the lieutenant governor in the name of the **Crown**. The lieutenant governor is appointed (and can be removed) by the **Governor General** of Canada (see *Constitution Act, 1867 (Canada)* section 59). The appointment (or removal) is made on the advice of the **prime minister**.

The formal powers of the lieutenant governor are very extensive and include the power to **commission** governments, to appoint all important **executive** and **judicial** officers in the province, to initiate legislation, to endorse all laws passed by the provincial **legislature**, and to summon and **dissolve** parliaments. These powers are, on almost all occasions, exercised on the advice of the **premier** or the **executive council** (a formal meeting of the premier and one or more **ministers**). The current role of the lieutenant governor is to perform official governmental duties as the representative of the Crown, and to represent the province at a wide range of community functions.

The relationships between the lieutenant governor, the premier, the executive council, ministers and **parliament** are not well specified in provincial constitutional documents and rely heavily on customary practices (often called **constitutional conventions**) rather than constitutional law; see **constitution**.

In relation to the electoral process, the lieutenant governor has a formal role in setting in process the procedures for holding assembly elections, but is not otherwise involved. If, after an election, no **party** gains a majority of seats in the assembly, the lieutenant governor may play an important role in the selection of the premier and the formation of a **government**. The lieutenant governor may also play a role in the choice of premier if a premier resigns in mid-term.

lieutenant governor in council This refers to a formal meeting of the **lieutenant governor** and the members of the **executive council** to ratify decisions made by the

premier and **cabinet**. In practice, this formal ratification usually takes place through an exchange of documents rather than a meeting.

local member This term usually refers to a member of parliament chosen from a single member **electoral** district. Each geographically defined district has a single ‘local’ member. Those supporting single member **plurality** or **majority** electoral systems often argue that representation, accountability, and access to government is enhanced by having a single local member to speak for those resident in his or her electoral district. See also **electoral formula**.

lower house See **bicameralism**

majoritarian This term is used in a general sense to refer to a system of government where power is concentrated in a single governing **party** which controls a parliamentary executive having broad constitutional powers to act in the name in the majority. See also **adversarial system**; **consensus**.

majority A majority of votes or seats is one more than half the total number of votes or seats; fifty percent plus one. See also **plurality**.

majority government A majority **government** is one which is supported by a majority of members of the **House of Commons** or a provincial **assembly**, all of whom are members of the same political **party**. This is in contrast with a **coalition** government where a parliamentary majority is composed of the members of two (and occasionally more than two) political parties, both of whom have **ministers** in the government. It can also be contrasted with a **minority government** where the governing party does not hold a majority of seats but is kept in office by the support of one or more parties or **independent** members who do not have members of their party as ministers in the government.

member of parliament A member of parliament is a generic term for member of any representative **assembly** which is part of a **parliamentary system**.

member of the legislative assembly (MLA) This is the title of someone who is elected to a provincial **assembly**. The abbreviation MLA can be used as shorthand for a member of the legislative assembly.

Members of other provincial parliaments usually have titles to suit the name of their legislatures: MLA for a member of the legislative assemblies of Alberta, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Saskatchewan; MHA for a member of the houses of assembly of Newfoundland and Labrador, and Nova Scotia; and MNA for a members of the National Assembly of Quebec (Député de l’assemblée nationale de Québec). Ontario is unusual in that members of its legislative assembly are called MPP—member of provincial parliament. Members of the Canadian House of Commons are called MP—member of parliament.

minister A government minister in Canada is (almost always) a member of the House of Commons or the Senate (or a provincial **assembly**) who is **commissioned** by the **governor general** on the advice of the **prime minister** (or by the **lieutenant governor** on the advice of the **premier**) to be responsible for one or more government departments or areas of government activity. These responsibilities comprise the minister's **portfolio** or portfolios. All the ministers in a government, including the premier, are known collectively as the ministry and meet as the **cabinet** to make decisions about government policy and administration. The lieutenant governor, acting on the advice of the premier, can terminate a minister's commission. The resignation or termination of the commission of a premier terminates the commissions of all the ministers in that government.

It is assumed that ministers are, or will soon become, members of **parliament** but this is not constitutionally specified for any Canadian parliament

ministerialist See **party**

ministry See **government**; **minister**.

minority government A minority government is one where the governing **party** does not control a **majority** of seats in the **lower house** of **parliament**, and has not formed a **coalition** agreement with another party in the assembly to establish a parliamentary majority and to share **ministerial posts**. A minority government is kept in power by an understanding that the government will gain the support of another party (or one or more **independent** members) who will vote to support the government. This support does not involve the party becoming part of the government's ministerial team, and the support may not extend to supporting all of the government's legislative program.

The essence of a minority government is that the support keeping the government in office can be withdrawn at any time, triggering the loss of the government's majority in the assembly (a loss of **confidence**). Loss of majority support in the assembly gives the **prime minister** or **premier** two choices: the premier can resign in favour of the leader of another party who can generate the support of a majority of assembly members; or—and this will be the usual outcome—the prime minister or premier can recommend to the **governor general** or **lieutenant governor** that parliament is **dissolved** and a **general election** is held.

Minority governments are not necessarily unstable or short lived if they can come to an agreement with another party to support the government. Even with this support, the government must work continually to gain support beyond its own partisan supporters for every piece of legislation. Such a situation makes governments responsive to the views of members of parliament, and open to parliamentary scrutiny in ways which rarely occur under **majority governments**.

MLA See **member of the legislative assembly**.

money bill See **bill**.

nomination Nomination is the process of fulfilling the requirements for becoming a **candidate** at an election. It has two components: an official component requiring the candidate to fulfil the formal requirements specified under the relevant election act (**Election Acts (Canada)**, **Election Act (British Columbia)**), and a partisan component requiring a candidate who wants to run under a party label to gain the endorsement of a **party**. See also **candidate**.

official agent (for candidates) Elections for the House of Commons require a candidate to appoint an official agent who has responsibility for the candidate's campaign expenditure and related administrative matters; see **candidate**; **Elections Act**; **nomination**.

official opposition In a **parliamentary system**, the members of parliament who do not support the **government** are known collectively as the opposition. The largest **party** grouping of these members is often given formal recognition as the official opposition, with its leader known as the leader of the opposition. This recognizes the opposition as a potential alternative government, and the leader of the opposition as the party leader who may become the **prime minister** (or **premier**) after the next **general election**.

opposition See **official opposition**.

order in council This is an official document issued in the name of the **governor general** and the **privy council** (or **lieutenant governor in council** for a province) under the authority of an **act of parliament** appointing someone to an official office, or authorizing action by a specified person, office or body.

pairs Arrangements can be made under the **standing orders** of a parliamentary chamber to permit parties to agree that, if a member of the governing party is absent because of sickness or pressing personal business, the **opposition** will not use the lack of this member's vote to embarrass the government by defeating it in a parliamentary **division**. In this way, a government member and an opposition member are 'paired'.

parliament Parliament is the general name given to legislative bodies in Canada. For the Canadian government, it refers to the **House of Commons** and the **Senate**, and for the provinces it refers to their **legislative assemblies**. These bodies make the laws which regulate our social and economic life and provide the authority for government action. Note that, as law making bodies, parliaments in Canada include the representatives of the **Crown** whose **assent** is required for a **bill** to become law. The **executive** can also delay or defer the date on which legislation comes into force. This arrangement strengthens the already considerable power of the

government of the day to control the process of law making. See also **parliamentary system**.

parliamentary government Parliamentary government is a system of **representative democracy** in which the most important **executive** officials are chosen from among the members of an elected assembly; see **parliamentary system**.

parliamentary party See **caucus**.

parliamentary secretary These **members of parliament** are not part of the ministry and do not attend cabinet but, as members of the governing **party**, assist a **minister** in the discharge of his or her duties. The position of parliamentary secretary usually involves an additional allowance for the member, and can be seen as a stepping stone to ministerial office.

parliamentary system A parliamentary system of government is one of the two basic forms of **representative democracy**, the other being a presidential system. The distinguishing characteristic of parliamentary government is that the **government of the day** is chosen from representatives who have been elected to a parliamentary **assembly**. That is, the most important elected offices of government—the **premier** or **prime minister** and the other **ministers** who together form the government—are not elected directly but indirectly through parliamentary elections. Since the emergence of **parties** with strong **party discipline**, parliamentary government has meant that governments in Canada usually have control over stable parliamentary majorities (see **majority government**). This greatly reduces the ability of parliamentary assemblies to challenge the wishes of the government of the day in parliament.

Parliamentary systems make a distinction between the **head of government** (the premier or prime minister) who is the chief elected official in the government, and the **head of state** who represents the formal exercise of executive power (see **lieutenant governor**).

The other system of representative democracy is presidential government. In this system, the president who is both head of government and head of state, is elected separately from a representative assembly. Ministers are not usually permitted to be members of the assembly but are appointed by the president. Presidential systems combine the offices of head of government and head of state in the president, but aim to check the power of the government of the day by separating power between the president, a powerful **legislature** and an independent **judiciary**.

parliamentary term See **dissolution**.

party From the perspective of parliament, a political party can be defined as an affiliation of electors comprised in a political organization whose prime purpose is the fielding of candidates for election to the **parliament**. For a party's name to appear on the

ballot paper at a parliamentary election, and for a party to gain tax and other financial benefits, the party must be registered under the relevant election act; see **Election Acts (Canada); Election Act (British Columbia)**.

The members elected to parliament under a party label form the parliamentary party or **caucus** of that party.

In parliaments with members from more than two parties, there will be rules about how many members a party must have in parliament to become an officially recognized party. This is important because being an officially recognized party brings benefits in terms of access to parliamentary resources.

Parties have a long history in Canada, predating confederation in 1867, but parties as we know them today first contested elections in British Columbia in 1903. Before that date, government majorities in British Columbia were maintained by loose groups of members of the assembly united by a general stance on public policy, by loyalty to a particular leader, or by the hope of advancement. The label 'ministerialist' is often given to governments which operated in such a system. See also **caucus; party discipline; party leader; independents**.

party convention See **party leader**

party discipline Modern parties are disciplined in the sense that, once elected to a representative **assembly** under the label of a **party**, it is expected that the member will adhere to the general principles and platform of the party and will vote with his or her colleagues in parliament. If the member does not conform to the decisions of the party, he or she may be denied advancement in the party hierarchy and the patronage available to **party leaders** (especially so on the government side), and be threatened with expulsion from the party **caucus** and the withdrawal of the party's endorsement at the next election (see **nomination**).

These are powerful inducements for members to conform to the party line. It is the price that members must pay for using the party label to gain election, and to gain the benefits of party membership especially if a member seeks **executive** office.

party leader The leader of a political **party** is a person chosen to speak for the party, to be the focus of election campaigns, and to take responsibility for the party's performance in **parliament**. If the party wins enough seats to win **government**, the party leader becomes **prime minister** or **premier**. Party leaders in Canada are now chosen by leadership conventions organized by the party, or by a **ballot** of all party members. See also **caucus**.

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PCO See **privy council office**.

plurality A **candidate** or **party** which gains a plurality of votes or seats has more votes or seats than any other candidate or party, but may not have a **majority** of votes or seats.

political party See **party**.

portfolio See **minister**.

premier The premier is the name given to the head of **government** of a province and is the province's chief elected **executive** official. The premier is **commissioned** by the **lieutenant governor** to form a government which has the support of a majority of members of the **legislative assembly**. The premier is usually the leader of the political **party** which has won a majority of seats in the legislative assembly. See also **cabinet; coalition; head of state; majority government; minister; minority government; parliamentary system**.

Even though the premier is the most important political office in the province, the functions and responsibilities of the premier as head of government are not specified in constitutional law but left to customary practices and **conventions**.

presidential government See **parliamentary system**.

prime minister The prime minister is the name given to the head of the Canadian government, and is the national government's chief elected **executive** official. The prime minister is commissioned by the **governor general** to form a government which has the support of a majority of members of the **House of Commons**. The prime minister is usually the leader of the political party which has won a majority of seats in the House of Commons. See also **cabinet; coalition; head of state; majority government; minister; minority government; parliamentary system**.

Even though the prime minister is the most important political office in the national government, the functions and responsibilities of the prime minister as head of government are left to customary practices and **conventions** rather than constitutional law.

private member's bill See **backbench; legislation**.

privy council The 'Queen's Privy Council for Canada' (Constitution Act 1867, s.11) is the equivalent of the **executive council** in the provinces; a formal meeting of **ministers** to present documents for authorization by the **governor general**. When ministers of the Canadian government are **commissioned**, they are sworn in as members of the privy council.

But the privy council has a number of distinctive characteristics that derive from British and Canadian constitutional history. Once a person becomes a member of the privy council, he or she remain so for life, so that the membership of the privy council includes all current ministers and everybody who has ever been a federal minister.

In practice, the privy council can be seen as the formal manifestation of **cabinet**; only current ministers are involved whenever there is a need for a formal meeting of the council.

privy council office (PCO) A more accurate title for this office would be the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. The PCO currently plays a critical role in the operation of the government of Canada in addition to its responsibilities in supporting cabinet meetings and its role in the formal relations between the governor general and the government. For a listing of the responsibilities of the PCO, see:

<http://www.pco-bcp.gc.ca/index.asp?lang=eng&page=about-afropos>

prorogation To prorogue parliament is to terminate the current session of **parliament** in the period between **general elections**. The **governor general** (or **lieutenant governor** for a province) can prorogue parliament on the advice of the prime minister (or premier) alone; to recall parliament, a proclamation is required from the governor general (or lieutenant governor) acting on the advice of the prime minister (or premier). See also **dissolution**.

question period For the **House of Commons**, a period of no more than 45 minutes is made available on most sitting days under **standing orders** for members to ask ministers oral questions about the administration of their departments or matters of public interest; similar arrangements are made for other parliamentary chambers. In the House of Commons, question time is usually dominated by sparring between the **front benches** of the various parties to secure favourable publicity in the evening news.

Members may also submit written questions to ministers (questions on notice) but there is often a considerable delay before a member receives an answer.

referendum See **representative democracy**.

register of voters See **voters list**.

regulations A great many of the detailed rules affecting our daily life can be found in regulations made by **ministers** under the authority of the relevant act of parliament. To this extent, much current legislation is less about setting out the law, than providing authority for the government to issue regulations; see **subordinate legislation**.

representation The notion of representation is a complex one but at its core is the idea that one thing can stand for another. Parliamentary **democracy** is based on the premise that an elected parliamentary **assembly** can represent the interests of the political community as a whole. Electoral laws are components of this system of representation. What is to be represented and how the representation is to be accomplished are key questions for the design of an **electoral system** for a parliamentary assembly.

representative assembly See **assembly**.

representative democracy A **democratic** political system is now assumed to be one in which periodic elections are held to choose key **executive** and **legislative** office holders and to keep the **government** responsive and accountable to citizen voters. That is, popular control of government is achieved indirectly through the election of representatives to act on behalf of the political community. It is now usually taken for granted that democracy means representative democracy rather than direct democracy—the use of such measures as the referendum to secure public consent for public policy.

responsible government The term responsible government is often used to describe the relationship between the **government**—the **prime minister** or **premier** and other **ministers**—and the legislature in British style **parliamentary systems**. It refers to the fact that the political executive—the prime minister or premier and ministers—are chosen from, and accountable to, an elected parliament. In this respect it is a synonym for **parliamentary government**.

Responsible government also suggests that ministers are individually and collectively responsible to parliament for the actions of government. This is true in a broad sense—the government will be held accountable for its actions at the next **general election**—but it is less true if it implies that ministers will be held to account for their actions by parliament. The existence of **disciplined** political **parties** has meant that ministers can usually escape punishment for reckless or incompetent actions by themselves or their departments by claiming ignorance or blaming an advisor or a public servant. Punishment is only meted out to ministers if the prime minister (or premier) assesses that the minister has become a political liability to the government as a whole. Note that governments are more sensitive to parliamentary criticism, and ministers are more likely to be forced into resignation, if the government is a **minority government**.

riding See **electoral district**.

royal assent Parliamentary bills do not become law until they have received the royal assent provided by the **governor general** (for national **legislation**) or the **lieutenant governor** (for provincial legislation). The royal assent is usually accomplished by an exchange of documents, but the procedure is a reminder that the **Crown** is an integral component of Canadian **parliaments**.

seat When elected to **parliament**, a member is said to hold a seat in parliament, and the membership of the **lower house** of parliament is defined by the number of seats in the chamber.

In Canada, each seat in parliament is held by a member elected from a single member district; there are as many **electoral districts** as there are members of parliament. In the past, some provincial **assemblies** included multi-member districts where there was more than one seat to be filled from some electoral districts; see **electoral formula**.

Senate (Canadian) The Canadian Senate is the upper house of Canada's bicameral parliament designed, in part, as a way of representing the regional components of the Canadian federation. It is composed of 105 senators appointed until the age of 75 years by the **governor general** on the advice of the **prime minister**. Senators are appointed from Canada's provinces and territories under a formula specified in the **Constitution Act, 1867**. The Senate's constitutional powers over **legislation** and the scrutiny of the **executive** are similar to those of the **House of Commons** but its appointed nature and the partisan way in which senators have been selected since 1867 have usually denied it the political legitimacy to challenge government majorities in the House of Commons.

For information on the Senate, see:

<http://sen.parl.gc.ca/portal/home-e.htm>

shadow minister In some **parliamentary systems**, the **opposition** party assigns members of the party to take special note of the policy areas dealt with by particular **ministers**. These opposition members who 'shadow' ministers have no official status but may, as a matter of courtesy, be given more access to government information than other opposition members. Some opposition parties may not choose to create shadow ministers or parliamentary spokespersons for particular policy areas, but may give all opposition members responsibility for monitoring an area of government activity. See also **backbench**.

speaker In Canada, the chair of a parliamentary **chamber** is called the speaker. He or she is responsible for the conduct of business in the house, for the administration of **parliament** and for the buildings in the parliamentary precinct. In the **House of Commons**, the speaker is now chosen by secret ballot of the members; this is the first order of business in a new parliament. In other parliamentary chambers, the office of speaker may be assigned by the governing **party**.

speech from the throne In Canadian parliamentary parlance, the speech from the throne is the address made by the **governor general** (or **lieutenant governor** for the provinces) at the opening of a new session of parliament. The speech is written by the **prime minister** (or **premier**) and sets out the goals of the **government** for the coming parliamentary session. An 'address in reply' debate will follow in the **lower**

house of parliament. If the government is defeated in a vote on the address in reply, it has lost the **confidence** of the house and must resign.

standing orders Every parliamentary chamber has a set of rules governing the way in which business is carried out in the chamber; this set of rules is often referred to as the standing orders. Control of a partisan majority in the chamber enables the **government** to change or suspend standing orders.

The an indexed standing orders for the House of Commons are set out at:
http://www.parl.gc.ca/About/House/ASOII/00_ASOII_Disclaim-e.html

The most recent standing orders (but harder to use than the above) are at:
<http://www.parl.gc.ca/About/House/StandingOrders/toc-e.htm>

statute See **legislation**.

subordinate legislation This is the general name given to regulations made by a minister under the authority of an act of parliament. Some parliamentary systems require subordinate legislation to be scrutinized by the **parliament** before it can be brought into effect.

voters list This is the official list of all persons eligible and registered to vote at an election.

Westminster system This term is often used to describe the British variant of a **parliamentary system**. While the term is frequently applied to describe the Canadian parliamentary system, Canadian parliamentary institutions differ significantly from the British system, most notably in the limitations on parliamentary government imposed by the **federal** system and the entrenchment of key sections of the Canadian **Constitution**, judicial review of government action and legislation, and the existence of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The most important common factor between the British and Canadian parliamentary traditions is a monarchical **executive** and the failure of constitutional documents to specify the roles, functions and responsibilities of the **head of state**, and the relationship between the **premier**, **prime minister**, **ministers** and **parliament**.

whip The Whip is a **member of parliament** authorised by the **leader of the party** to ensure that the members of his or her party are present in the **chamber** to vote in support of the party's position on matters before the house. As the name implies, the role of the Whip is to encourage members to follow the party line; see **party discipline**.