

Government structures

In discussing the nature of federal-provincial relations, a few basic differences between the American presidential and the Canadian parliamentary-cabinet systems should be kept in mind. In Canada, the head of state and the head of government are not the same person. Canada is a constitutional monarchy and recognizes Elizabeth II, the Queen of Canada, as a permanent, non-partisan head of state. The Queen's representative in Canada is the Governor General. He is appointed by the monarch on the advice of the Government and carries out almost all the official duties of the head of state in her name. The Prime Minister, on the other hand, is the head of government.

The American presidential system separates the legislative and executive branches and restricts each with a system of checks and balances. The parliamentary-cabinet system fuses the two. In the American system an individual cannot be a member of Congress and hold an executive position at the same time. Precisely the opposite is true in Canada – all members of the Cabinet must be Members of Parliament: the Prime Minister and his ministers belong to the legislative body and are responsible to it.

If the Government loses the confidence of the House of Commons before its five-year maximum term, it must resign. The Governor General would then dissolve Parliament and call a general election. The Prime Minister may at any time advise the Governor General to call an election and, though the Governor General retains some formal powers, he will as a general rule follow the Government's advice. A Prime Minister has much more flexibility in this respect than does an American President, who is committed to a specific election date.

The Canadian legislature is composed of two houses, the House of Commons and the Senate, and the Members of the Commons are elected simultaneously from constituencies across the country, at least once every five years. The official governing party is the one controlling the greatest number of seats in the House.

The head of that party is the Prime Minister. Canadians never