

The Nature of Canada's Government

Canada, a federal union with a parliamentary system, has three government branches—the legislative, the executive and the judicial. The first has a House of Commons and a Senate. The House controls the passage of laws. Its members are elected to terms that may not exceed five years, and it must be called into session at least once every year. The Senate has less real power than the House. Senators are appointed by the prime minister and may serve until age 75.

The cabinet, also called the government, is the centre of executive power. It formulates government policy, sees that it is passed into law by Parliament and administers the federal government. In theory, the prime minister is the first among equals in the cabinet, but he alone chooses and dismisses cabinet ministers. All cabinet members must have Commons or Senate seats. Most have portfolios; some do not. Those with portfolios administer departments, such as Defence, External Affairs and Finance. The cabinet is responsible to the House of Commons and must resign if defeated there on a vote of confidence.

Most members of Parliament (MPs) represent ridings of 60,000 to 90,000 people. The largest geographically, Nunatsiak in the Northwest Territories, which covers 862,559 square miles, has the fewest people, only 12,588. The smallest, Laurier in Montreal, covers two square miles. The most populated are Hamilton West with 96,476 people and Hamilton East with 96,473. Each MP is expected to vote with his party on all issues unless the leadership has announced a free vote—one on which the party has no position. (In 1976 Prime Minister Trudeau, Opposition Leader Joe Clark, NDP leader Ed Broadbent and a majority of the other members voted to abolish capital punishment on a free vote.)

This election, like all elections, was called by the Governor-General, the Queen's representative in Canada, on the advice of the prime minister. The life of a Parliament is five years. Elections are traditionally called every fourth year. Their timing is determined by the prime minister for tactical reasons unless the government is defeated in the House on a vote of confidence.

Background for the Election

Most Canadians are well off, but unemployment and inflation rates have been high. The Canadian dollar, more valuable than the US dollar in 1976, recently reached a forty-five year low before rising. The debate over Canada's future as a single political entity is also of basic importance.

The economy boomed between 1965 and 1975. Productivity increased. The value of the Canadian dollar was higher than that of the US dollar. Huge investments developed natural resources—potash, coal, timber and others—and electrical power. Canada and the United States signed the Auto Pact, and that industry prospered.

Between 1965 and 1975, the real gross national product grew at an average annual rate of 3.7 per cent, faster than in any other industrialized country. There were, however, underlying problems. Federal and provincial governments assumed new social responsibilities and expenditures grew. Exports and imports both grew, but imports grew more rapidly. Manufacturing and service industries employed more people; agriculture and the

resources industries, fewer. The rapid rise in the international price of oil and revised reserve estimates led Canada to raise the price of domestic oil and limit its crude oil exports.

Canada's inflation rate is now over 8 per cent. The Canadian dollar, which for some years was exchanged at a rate of \$1.03 or more for the US dollar, has recently been worth about US\$.86. This exchange has increased the costs of imports and made Canadian exports more competitive. Unemployment is over 8 per cent nationally.

Canadian economists have suggested many remedies for present problems, including cutting income and sales taxes, giving tax breaks to new businesses, cutting back civil service employment, financing job programs, increasing research and development, and raising the proportion of manufactured goods in Canadian exports.

The current federal government implemented wage and price controls in 1975 and began phasing them out on April 14, 1978. It is now committed to cutting current and planned ex-