



Its origins

Nova Scotia (which until 1784, included what is now New Brunswick) was the first part of Canada to secure representative government. In 1758, it was given an assembly, elected by the people. Prince Edward Island followed in 1773, New Brunswick at its creation in 1784, Upper and Lower Canada (the predecessors of the present Ontario and Quebec) in 1791, Newfoundland in 1832. Nova Scotia was also the first part of Canada to win 'responsible' government: government by a Cabinet answerable to, and removable by, a majority of the assembly (January 1848). New Brunswick followed in February, the Province of Canada (a merger of Upper and Lower Canada formed in 1840) in March, Prince Edward Island in 1851, and Newfoundland in 1855.

By the time of Confederation in 1867, therefore, this system had been operating in most of what is now central and eastern Canada for almost 20 years. The Fathers of Confederation simply continued the system they knew, the system that was already working, and working well.

For the nation, there was a Parliament, with a governor general representing the Queen, an appointed upper house, the Senate, and an elected lower house, the House of Commons. For every province there was a legislature, with a lieutenant-governor representing the Queen; for every province except Ontario, an appointed upper house, the legislative council, and an elected lower house, the legislative assembly. The new province of Manitoba, created by the national Parliament in 1870, was given an upper house. British Columbia, which entered Canada in 1871, and Saskatchewan and Alberta, created by Parliament in 1905, never had upper houses. Newfoundland, which entered Canada in 1949, came in without one. Manitoba, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Quebec have all abolished their upper houses.

How it operates

The governor general and every lieutenant-governor governs through a Cabinet, headed by a prime minister or premier (the two terms mean the same thing). If a general election, national or provincial, gives a party opposed to the Cabinet in office a clear majority (that is, more than half the seats) in the House of Commons or the assembly, then the Cabinet resigns, and the governor general or lieutenant-governor calls on the leader of the victorious party to become prime minister and form a new Cabinet. The prime minister chooses the other ministers, who are then formally appointed by the governor general or, in the provinces, the lieutenant-governor. If no party