



Governments in democracies are elected by the passengers to steer the ship of the nation. They are expected to hold it on course, to arrange for a prosperous voyage, and to be prepared to be thrown overboard if they fail in either duty.

This, in fact, reflects the original sense of the word "government" as its roots in both Greek and Latin mean "to steer."

Canada is a democracy, a constitutional monarchy. The head of state is the Queen of Canada, who is also Queen of Britain, Australia and New Zealand and a host of other countries scattered around the world from the Bahamas and Grenada to Papua-New Guinea and Tuvalu. Every act of government is done in the name of the Queen, but the authority for every act flows from the Canadian people. When the men who framed the basis of the present written Constitution, the Fathers of Confederation, were drafting it in 1867 they freely, deliberately and unanimously chose to vest the formal executive authority in the Queen, "to be administered according to the well understood principles of the British Constitution by the Sovereign personally or by the Representative of the Queen." That meant responsible government with a Cabinet responsible to the House of Commons and the House of Commons answerable to the people. Except when the Queen is in Canada, all her powers are now exercised by her representative, the governor general. The governor general, who is now always a Canadian, is appointed by the Queen on the advice of the Canadian prime minister and, except in very extraordinary circumstances, exercises all powers of the office on the advice of the Cabinet (a council of ministers) which has the support of a majority of the members of the popularly elected House of Commons.

Canada is not only an independent sovereign democracy, but is also a federal state, with ten largely self-governing provinces and two territories controlled by the central government.

What does it all mean? How does it work?

The answer is important to every citizen. Canadians cannot marry or educate their children, cannot be sick, born or buried without the hand of government somewhere intervening. Government provides railways, roads and airlines, sets the conditions that affect farms and industries, manages or mismanages the life and growth of the cities. Government is held responsible for social problems, and for pollution and sick environments.