

HANDOUT 2.2: SHAPING DEMOCRACY IN CANADA

Canada is a democracy. We elect members to represent us in our legislatures to make decisions and pass laws. The political party with the most number of members usually forms government, and their leader becomes the leader of the government. The leader then selects members from its party to sit on the executive council or cabinet. Cabinet members manage different responsibilities. In order to maintain power, the government must receive the support of more than half of the members in the legislature. This is called responsible government.

Below is a summary of key events that shaped our government system, in what is now known as Ontario.

Colonial Government

In the late 18th century, the colonies, that later became Canada, were under British rule. The *Constitutional Act of 1791* divided the Province of Quebec into Upper Canada (now Ontario) and Lower Canada (now Quebec). The Act also gave them legislative assemblies elected by the people. This was the first form of representative democracy.

Each legislature was composed of a legislative assembly and an executive council. The governor, chosen by Britain, selected the members of the executive council. The council held all decision-making power and was responsible only to the governor, not the people. The assembly only had an advisory role.



First meeting of the assembly and council of Upper Canada (1791) (CREDIT: ARCHIVES OF ONTARIO)

Growing Demand and Debate: 1820s

In the 1820s, the population of Upper and Lower Canada grew and changed. Instead of mostly farmers and fur traders, the colonies were now made up of merchants, carpenters, doctors, lawyers and journalists. There was a growing demand among colonists to have a voice in the decisions that affected them.

It became a debate between reformers and loyalists. Reformers wanted greater local control and decision-making about spending. They desired for the executive council to be made up the elected assembly members. They felt that this change would reduce disagreements between the executive council and assembly. As a result, more would get accomplished. Loyalists wanted to maintain tradition and keep decision-making power with Britain.



Battle of St. Eustache
(CREDIT: LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA)

Rebellions: 1837-38

Peaceful efforts for change failed and pressures mounted. Tensions grew along with financial challenges for French Canadian farmers, led to violence in Upper Canada. The first uprising in November 1837, was led by Louis-Joseph Papineau. The second uprising took place in November 1838. These events resulted in 325 people dead, most of them reformers.

The events in Lower Canada inspired the Upper Canada Rebellion in 1837-1838, led by William Lyon Mackenzie. Mackenzie convinced his most radical followers to try to seize control of the government and make the colony a republic. This would eliminate any ties to the monarch and Britain. Compared to Lower Canada, the uprising was smaller and less deadly.

The rebellions prompted the appointment of Lord Durham and the writing of the Durham Report. The Report recommended the two colonies be united as one.

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The Reformers

In 1840, Upper and Lower Canada were united as the Province of Canada. Two Reformers, Sir Louis-Hippolyte La Fontaine and Robert Baldwin, began the coalition of French and English leaders. They worked together to create a united party of Reformers.

Eventually, Reformers won a majority in government in Upper Canada in 1842. This meant that more than half of the members of the assembly were Reformers. This gave an opportunity for LaFontaine and Baldwin to voice their concerns with more political force. In the end, their elected assembly fell apart because the governor refused to work with them. This was because the governor's loyalty was to the Queen.



LaFontaine and Baldwin

(CREDIT: INSTITUTE FOR CANADIAN CITIZENSHIP)

Lord Elgin and Responsible Government

In 1847, Lord Elgin was appointed as the new governor to the Canadas. Elgin began to separate the powers of the governor from the powers of the legislatures. He recognized the importance of allowing the elected legislatures to have greater control over their own affairs.

Lord Elgin officially requested that the Reformers form government in 1848. This was the true beginning of responsible government in Canada. In response, many loyalists were upset and burned down the parliament building in Montréal. Baldwin, LaFontaine and Elgin were all personally attacked.

Even though there was opposition to the new government, it forged ahead and shaped the future of Canadian democracy.



The House of Assembly, in the Parliament of Montreal, around 1848

(CREDIT: NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA)

KEY TERMS:

Representative democracy – Where people elect individuals represent them in the legislature and make decisions on their behalf.

Legislature – The legislative body (or group) that has the power to make rules and laws. Made up of the legislative assembly and executive council.

Legislative assembly – Made up of elected members, chosen by the people.

Executive council – Made up of appointed members and responsible for implementing laws.

Rebellion – An uprising or revolt.

Responsible Government – The government maintain the support of at least half of the members in the legislature to remain in power.