

LESSON 2

GOVERNMENT AND DEMOCRACY

Canada is a **parliamentary democracy**. We elect members to represent us and make decisions in our federal parliament and our provincial and territorial legislatures.

In a parliamentary system, government is separated into three branches: the legislative branch, executive branch and the judicial branch.

The **legislative branch** is composed of all elected representatives. In Ontario, these elected individuals are called Members of Provincial Parliament, or MPPs. Each MPP represents a different geographic area within Ontario called an electoral district or constituency, and most are associated with a political party.

Typically, the political party with the largest number of elected MPPs in the provincial legislature usually becomes the governing party and their leader then becomes the leader of the government (the **premier**).

The **executive branch** is responsible for developing policies, delivering programs and implementing laws. The executive branch is led by the premier and the **executive council** or **cabinet**. Cabinet ministers are responsible for leading ministries, which deliver vital programs and services associated within one area of responsibility.

In our system of parliamentary democracy, the executive branch must have the support of a majority of elected representatives (or more than half of all MPPs in the legislative branch) in order to govern. This is called **responsible government**.

The **judicial branch** is a group of independent courts that act separately from the other two branches. It is their responsibility to interpret and enforce laws, to protect citizens and discipline offenders.

The concept of responsible government means that our government is responsible to the people through elected representatives, instead of the monarch. This was not always the case. In the late 18th century, when the colonies (later to become Canada) were under British rule, it was the appointed governor that selected the members of the executive council. The legislative assembly only had an advisory role.

In the 1820s, the population of Upper and Lower Canada evolved and there was a growing demand among colonists to have a voice in the decisions that affected them. Peaceful efforts for change failed and tensions grew, leading to violent uprisings and the rebellions of 1837-1838.

In 1840, Upper and Lower Canada were united as the Province of Canada and a coalition of French and English leaders began. The Reformers won majority government in 1842 but their elected assembly failed because the governor refused to work with them.

In 1847, a new governor named Lord 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. Even though there was opposition to the new government, it forged ahead and shaped the future of Canadian democracy.