



Foundations

A History of Canada and Its Parliament



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CANADA



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Foundations

A History of Canada and Its Parliament

When did the first people arrive in Canada? What was the name of our first constitution? And how has the country changed since 1867?

Discover some of the events that have shaped Canada and its Parliament, from prehistory to the present day.

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Early Canada

Prehistory – 1599

Humans have lived on the land which is now Canada for thousands of years. Few traces remain of the earliest inhabitants, but we know that they eventually settled from coast to coast and were the ancestors of modern Indigenous people. By the late 16th century, the population of Canada is thought to have reached 350,000 to 500,000. Its Indigenous communities were organized and governed in many different ways.

Origins

At least 14,000 years ago, humans migrated to modern-day Canada from Siberia. They used a land bridge to cross the Bering Sea when waters were low.

Circa 1000

Vikings were the first Europeans to reach North America. They abandoned their settlement at what is now L'Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland and Labrador, after a few years.

Circa 1350

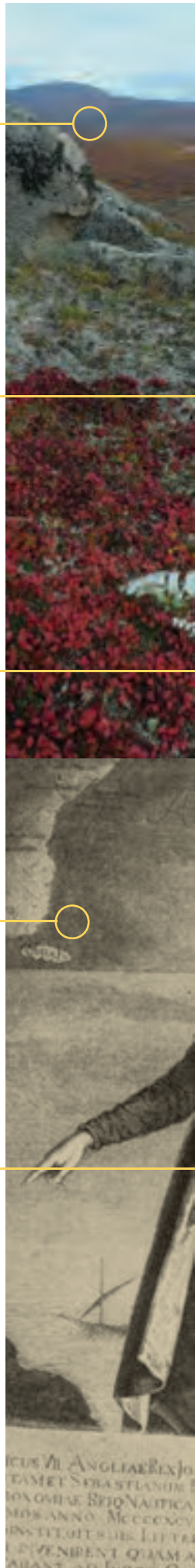
The Haudenosaunee Confederacy was founded. This group of five (later six) First Nations is still active, making it the oldest democracy in North America.

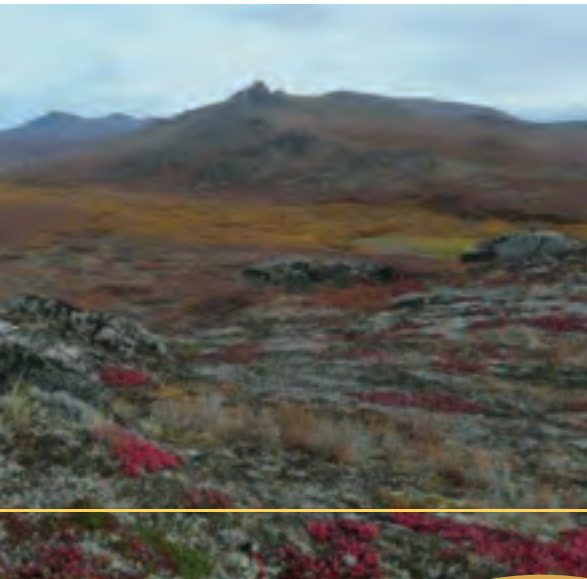
1497

John Cabot landed in Eastern Canada and claimed the land for England, paving the way for later British colonization.

1534

Jacques Cartier claimed Quebec's Gaspé Peninsula on behalf of France. This would eventually lead to the foundation of New France – and to the clash of colonial forces.





Spotlight: Two Democracies

In spite of their diverse origins, Parliament and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy share a number of similarities.

Like Canada, the Confederacy is governed according to a constitution – the Great Law of Peace. It is run by a Grand Council whose members are divided into Elder Brothers and Younger Brothers, similar to the Canadian Senate and House of Commons.

The Chiefs who make up the Grand Council are overseen by Clan Mothers, who do not participate in politics, but make sure that the constitution is respected. The Clan Mothers appoint the Chiefs and can remove them if they act improperly. These powers are similar to those of the Canadian Monarch.

The Colonial Powers

1600 – 1836

In the early 17th century, both France and Great Britain established permanent settlements in Canada. This brought them into conflict with each other and with Indigenous peoples, which peaked during the Seven Years' War (1756-1763). Even after the war ended, the colonial era was turbulent, with European-Indigenous clashes continuing – and the United States emerging as a powerful new rival.

1608

Samuel de Champlain built a “habitation” – part house, part fort – that would later grow into Québec City. It was the first permanent European settlement in Canada.

1755

As tensions grew between Great Britain and France, the British government began deporting French-speaking Acadian people from the Maritime provinces. Thousands of Acadians died during the eight-year deportation.

1759

The British army defeated France at the Battle of the Plains of Abraham. The French were forced to give up their colonial capital of Québec City.

1763

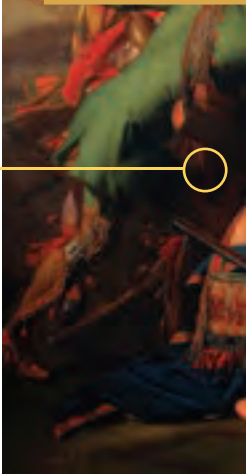
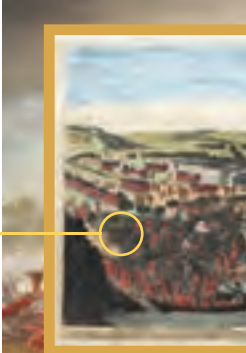
France surrendered to Great Britain, but conflict started again a few months later, when a group of First Nations went to war against the new British government. Later in 1763, King George III issued a Royal Proclamation that laid the groundwork for Indigenous rights in North America.

1775

At the start of the American Revolution, rebel forces attacked British targets in Quebec. In the following years, about 40,000 Americans loyal to the Crown emigrated to Canada.

1812

The United States declared war on the United Kingdom, launching many attacks in Canada. The War of 1812 was fought by an alliance of British, Canadian and Indigenous forces.





Spotlight: The Royal Proclamation of 1763

The Royal Proclamation of 1763 is a key document in Canadian history. Among other things, it declared that Indigenous peoples had the right to all lands that had not already been sold or given to the Crown. This became the basis of Canadian treaty law.

The Proclamation is mentioned in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which guarantees the protection of “any rights or freedoms that have been recognized by the Royal Proclamation of October 7, 1763.” As part of our Constitution, the principles of the Proclamation continue to guide Canadian law today.



Founding the Dominion

1837 – 1867

As the 19th century advanced, there were new troubles in British North America. The ties between the United Kingdom and its colonies were weakening, while the United States was growing in wealth and power. This led many people to fear annexation. In this atmosphere, the idea of Confederation – uniting the colonies to form a single country – began to take hold.

1837

Both Upper and Lower Canada (now Ontario and Quebec) were rocked by rebellions against the British government.

1841

In an effort to provide stability, Upper and Lower Canada merged into a single colony, the Province of Canada.

1864

Amid growing economic and political problems, leaders from the Province of Canada, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland met to debate Confederation. Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland would later reject the idea, but the other colonies agreed on a set of rules to govern the new country.

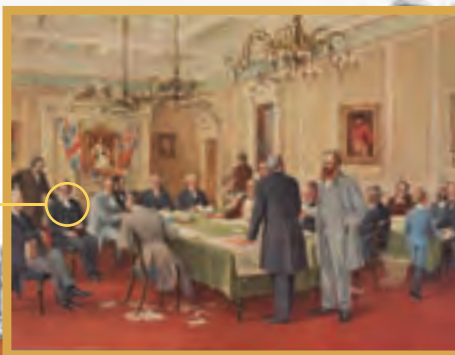
1866

Colonial leaders met one last time, in London, England, to draft the bill that would become the *British North America Act* (BNA Act).

1867

The BNA Act came into effect on July 1, and modern Canada was born. The country was made up of Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Its first Parliament opened four months later, on November 6.





Spotlight: The British North America Act

In 1867, the *British North America Act* created Canada. It was also the country's first Constitution, laying out many of the rules and traditions that still govern Canada today.

The Act specified that Canada would be a constitutional monarchy, with the King or Queen as Head of State. It created the office of the Governor General and the federal Parliament, including the Senate and the House of Commons. The Act also divided powers between the federal and provincial governments.

Although the Constitution has grown and changed since Confederation, the BNA Act is still one of its most important parts. Today, it is known as the *Constitution Act, 1867*.

Expansion and Resistance

1868 – 1905

The years following Confederation were a time of enormous growth for Canada. In a 35-year span, the country added five provinces and two territories, in a process that was mostly peaceful. In 1869, however, the Red River Resistance became the first crisis for the new federal Parliament.

1869

Canada acquired the rights to the vast Rupert's Land and North-Western Territory from the Hudson's Bay Company. The move sparked a resistance among the people of Red River (now Winnipeg).

1870

The resistance ended with the creation of Manitoba. Later that year, the North-West Territories also became an official part of Canada.

1871

British Columbia joined Confederation on the condition that the government build a railway linking it to the rest of the country. The Canadian Pacific Railway was completed in 1885.

1873

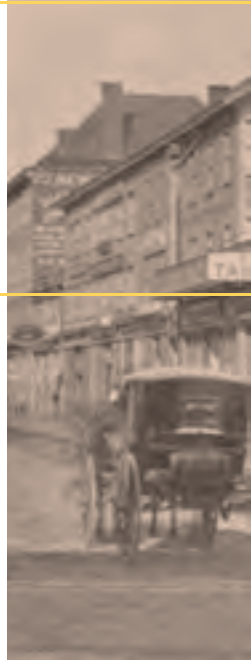
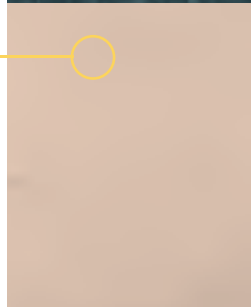
Facing heavy debt, Prince Edward Island voted to join Confederation.

1898

The Yukon Territory was created after the gold rush drew thousands of people north to the Klondike region.

1905

Following a population boom in western Canada, sections of the Northwest Territories were turned into the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan.





Spotlight: The North-West Territories Proclamation

The transfer of Rupert's Land to Canada was not a popular decision in Red River. The local population – mostly Métis, francophone and Catholic – feared losing their lands, rights and culture under the new government. In October 1869, Lieutenant-Governor William McDougall travelled to the region to try to quell the growing resistance.

After being turned away by Métis leaders, McDougall issued a proclamation of Canadian authority. This only increased tensions, which turned into an armed conflict lasting months. The legacy of the resistance is complex, but it led to the creation of Manitoba – Canada's fifth province.



Toward Independence

1906 – 1945

Canada was changing fast in the early 20th century. The population and economy were growing, women's rights were becoming an important issue, and the First World War was affecting people across the country. Though the war was devastating, it had a lasting impact on Canada: starting in the 1920s, the country began to push for greater independence from the United Kingdom.

1914

As part of the British Empire, Canada was brought into the First World War on August 4. Despite terrible losses, the war is thought to have fostered a new sense of national identity and pride in many Canadians.

1918

Canadian women won the right to vote in federal elections. The first woman Member of Parliament, Agnes Macphail, was elected in 1921.

1926

After a meeting of Commonwealth leaders, the Balfour Report declared that the United Kingdom and its Dominions (including Canada) were autonomous and equal.

1929

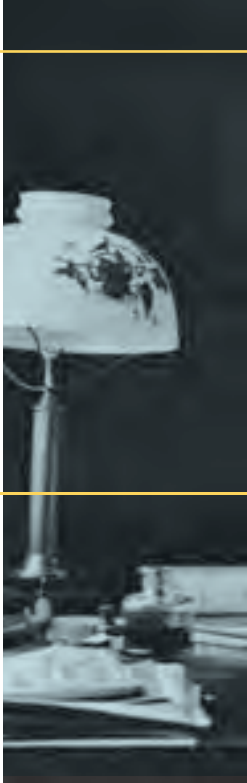
A group of five women successfully challenged the definition of "persons" in the Constitution, arguing that it applied to both women and men. The Persons Case paved the way for women to become Senators.

1931

The *Statute of Westminster* officially gave Canada (and six other Dominions) the right to full independence from the United Kingdom.

1939

After a vote in Parliament, Canada declared war on Germany on September 10 – its first independent declaration of war.





[22 Geo. 5.] *Statute of Westminster, 1931.*

[Ch. 4.]

Spotlight: The Statute of Westminster

Before 1931, the Canadian Parliament could pass laws on domestic issues, but it had no real authority to decide on foreign policy. When the United Kingdom went to war, Canada was automatically involved. When treaties needed to be signed, they were signed by London.

That changed with the *Statute of Westminster*, which gave Canada much more independence. The federal and provincial governments had not been able to agree on a process to amend the Constitution, so they chose to leave that power with the British Parliament. But in all other respects, Canada was free to make its own decisions on the world stage.



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Human Rights and Canadian Identity

1946 – 1981

In the mid-20th century, Canada grew further from its British roots and began to assert a unique national identity. Parliament passed a series of laws creating the official symbols we know today, from the Maple Leaf Flag to the national anthem. It also passed the *Canadian Bill of Rights*, the first federal law to proclaim the freedom and equality of all Canadians.

1947

Canadian citizenship was created. Previously, all Canadians had been British subjects.

1949

After years of debate, Newfoundland voted to join Confederation, becoming the tenth Canadian province. That same year, legal appeals to London were abolished, making the Supreme Court the highest court in Canada.

1960

The *Canadian Bill of Rights* was passed by Parliament. It followed changes to the *Elections Act*, which had given Indigenous people the unconditional right to vote.

1965

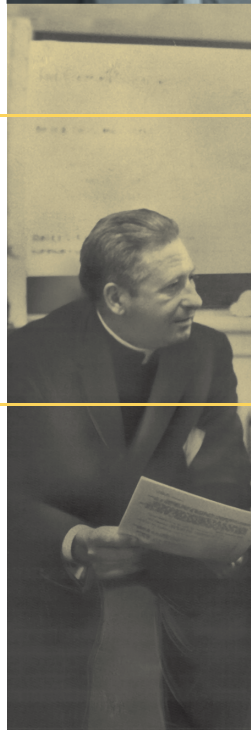
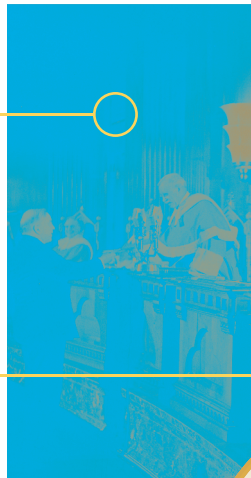
A parliamentary committee chose the Maple Leaf Flag to be the national flag of Canada. Before that, the Union Jack and Red Ensign had been used.

1969

The *Official Languages Act* made English and French the official languages of Canada.

1980

O Canada was named the national anthem of Canada.





Spotlight: The Canadian Bill of Rights

Human rights became a prominent issue after the Second World War, both in Canada and internationally. Motivated partly by a desire to prevent the kinds of abuses seen during the war, the federal government created the *Bill of Rights*. It was a milestone of human rights law.

The effects of the Bill were limited, since it was never approved by the provincial governments and applied only to federal law. However, it paved the way for the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which made human rights a part of the Constitution in 1982.



Images: Library and Archives Canada, Department of National Defence fonds, a171228; Chris Lund / National Film Board of Canada, Photothèque / Library and Archives Canada, a197418; Nick Nickels / Library and Archives Canada, a123915; Duncan Cameron / Library and Archives Canada, a142624; Musées de la civilisation, bibliothèque du Séminaire de Québec, SQ047145; Frank Grant / Toronto Star

An Independent Canada

1982 – 1999

115 years after Confederation, Canada gained full independence with the signing of the *Constitution Act, 1982* at Parliament. Known as the “patriation” (or “bringing home”) of the Constitution, the Act followed more than 50 years of unsuccessful attempts by Canadian leaders to agree on a formula to amend the Constitution.

1982

The *Constitution Act, 1982* gave Canada full independence from the United Kingdom, including the power to amend the Constitution. It also included the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

1987

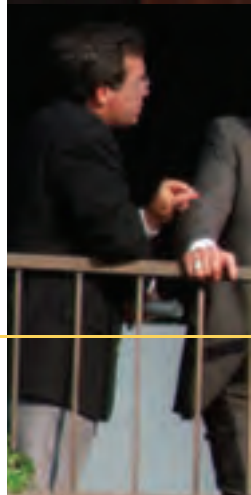
The federal government proposed the Meech Lake Accord, a series of changes to the Constitution that were designed to win Quebec’s support. The Accord proved controversial and was not approved by the provinces.

1992

The federal and provincial governments again tried to make changes to the Constitution with the Charlottetown Accord. This time the governments were all in agreement, but the Accord was rejected in a public referendum.

1999

The new territory of Nunavut was created after years of negotiations over Inuit land claims in the eastern Arctic.





Spotlight: The Proclamation of the Constitution Act, 1982

The *Constitution Act, 1982* was the last step in the road toward independence. It was signed after more than a year of negotiations between the federal government and the provinces, spurred in part by the Quebec referendum of 1980. The negotiations were very divisive, and Quebec refused to sign the agreement.

With the support of the other provinces, the British Parliament formally transferred all legislative powers to Canada in March 1982. The following month, Queen Elizabeth II travelled to Ottawa to make it Canadian law. The Proclamation of the *Constitution Act, 1982* was signed outside of the Parliament Buildings on April 7, in front of more than 300,000 people.

Canada in the 21st Century

2000 – Present

The 21st century has brought new challenges and opportunities to both Canada and its Parliament, as the country and its legislature continue to grow and adapt to a changing world. Immigration, Indigenous affairs and environmental policy are some of the issues that have dominated the early years of this century.

2001

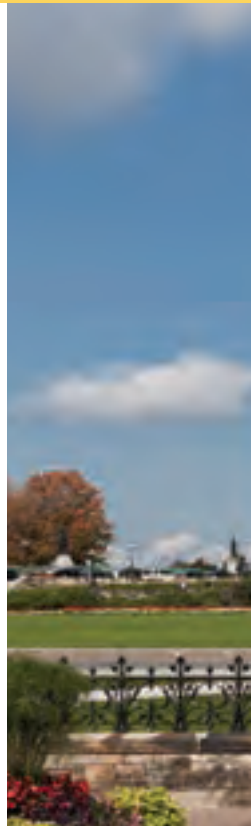
Canada joined international armed forces in response to the attacks of September 11. The mission lasted until 2014 and was the largest since the Second World War.

2008

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was launched to address the legacy of Indian Residential Schools in Canada.

2018

The Centre Block of Parliament will close its doors for a period of 10 years while the building is restored. The Senate and House of Commons will move offsite for the first time in almost 100 years.





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