

Government and the Constitution

Government is the way a group of people come together to organize their affairs.

Imagine for a moment that the government stopped working. What impact would this have on your life? Think about how many times during the day you use public, or government, services.

For example, your school was built and is operated by the government. When you go home today, there may be a letter waiting for you. The postal carrier who delivered it works for the government. When your soccer team plays a game during the weekend, it will be using a field looked after by the local parks board. The parks board is part of the government. Can you suggest other examples?

Government plays a major role in all our lives. In this chapter, you can learn how government in Canada is organized. But first of all, let's take a trip to Ottawa, the centre of government in Canada.

Welcome to Ottawa!

Ottawa is the capital city of Canada. It is a place where government is the main activity. Ottawa has many buildings that are used by the government to carry on the country's business.

The Parliament Buildings are located in the middle of downtown Ottawa. They have been the home of Canada's government since 1866. This is

where the **politicians** meet to debate laws and make decisions. The Centre Block of the Parliament Buildings burned down in 1916, but it was rebuilt. If you go to Ottawa, you can take a tour of the Parliament Buildings.

Actually, that sounds like a good idea. Let's go to Ottawa and take a tour of Canada's capital city.



Politicians are people who are elected to form the government and make laws.

The Parliament Building in Ottawa is one of Canada's most popular tourist attractions. The tall central tower is called the Peace Tower and contains a carillon, which is a set of huge bells that can be played like a piano at a giant keyboard. When the carillon is playing, the bells can be heard all across the city.

To **appeal** a decision means to ask for the decision to be changed.

The route of our tour. The boldface numbers in the text on pages 66 to 68 correspond to the numbers on this map.

A Bus Tour of Ottawa

All aboard! Our bus is leaving for a tour of downtown Ottawa. There is a lot to see and we don't want to miss anything.

The tour starts on Wellington Street in front of the Supreme Court Building (1). The Supreme

Court is the most powerful court in Canada. It consists of nine judges who decide on only the most important cases. As the highest court in the country, the Supreme Court's decisions are final. They cannot be **appealed**.

Continuing up Wellington Street, the bus arrives outside the Parliament Buildings (2). The centre building, with the Peace Tower, is called the Centre Block. It contains the House of Commons, where all the laws are passed. The prime minister's

office is in the Centre Block. The building on the right is called the East Block, and the building on the left is called the West Block. Both of these buildings contain government offices.

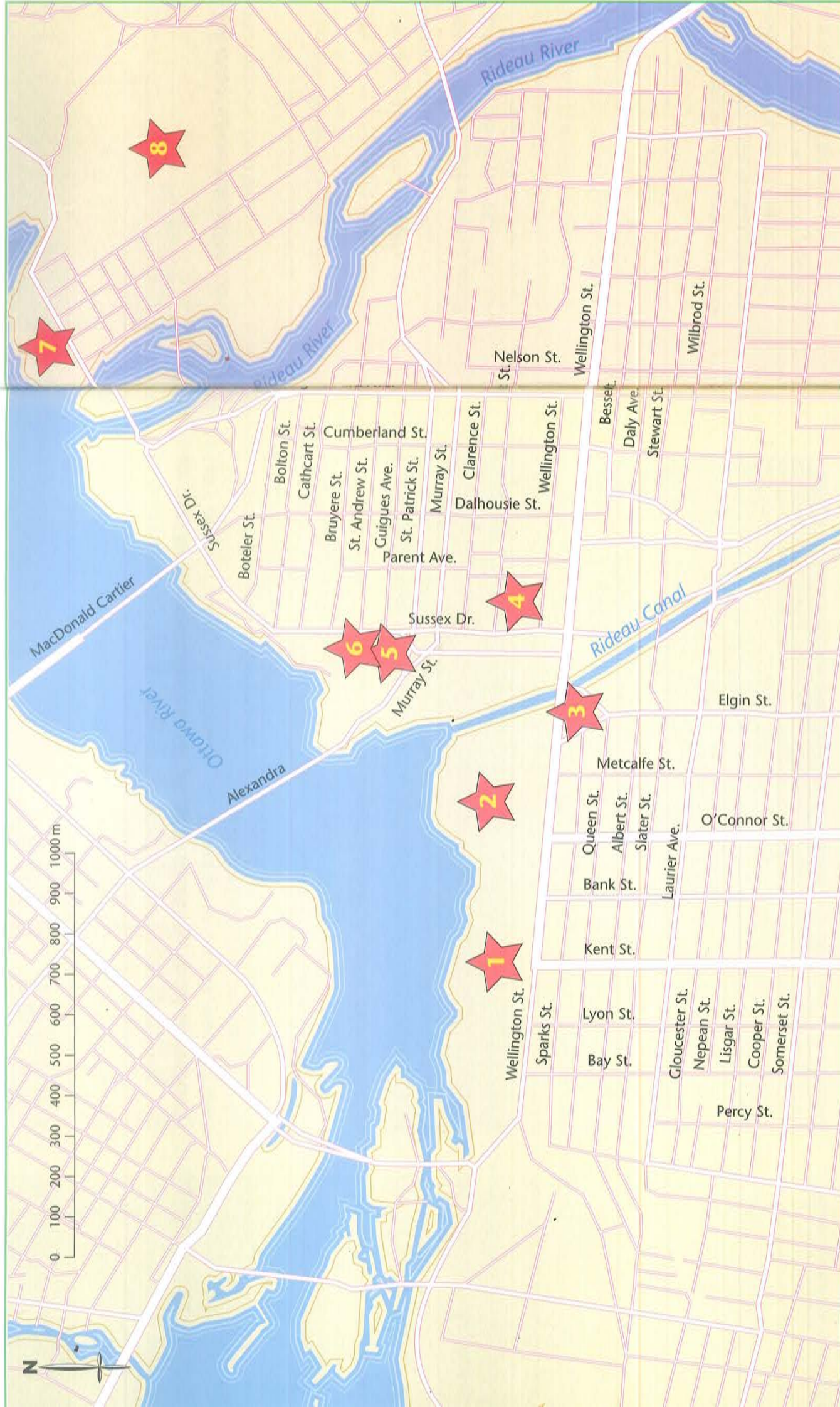
Do you notice the fountain in the middle of the open square? It seems to be on fire. It has an "eternal flame," which is fed by gas and never goes out.

After the bus passes the Parliament Buildings, be sure to look to your right. The open area is called Confederation Square (3), and in the middle is a giant sculpture. It is the National War Memorial, erected in 1939 as a tribute to Canadian soldiers killed in the wars.

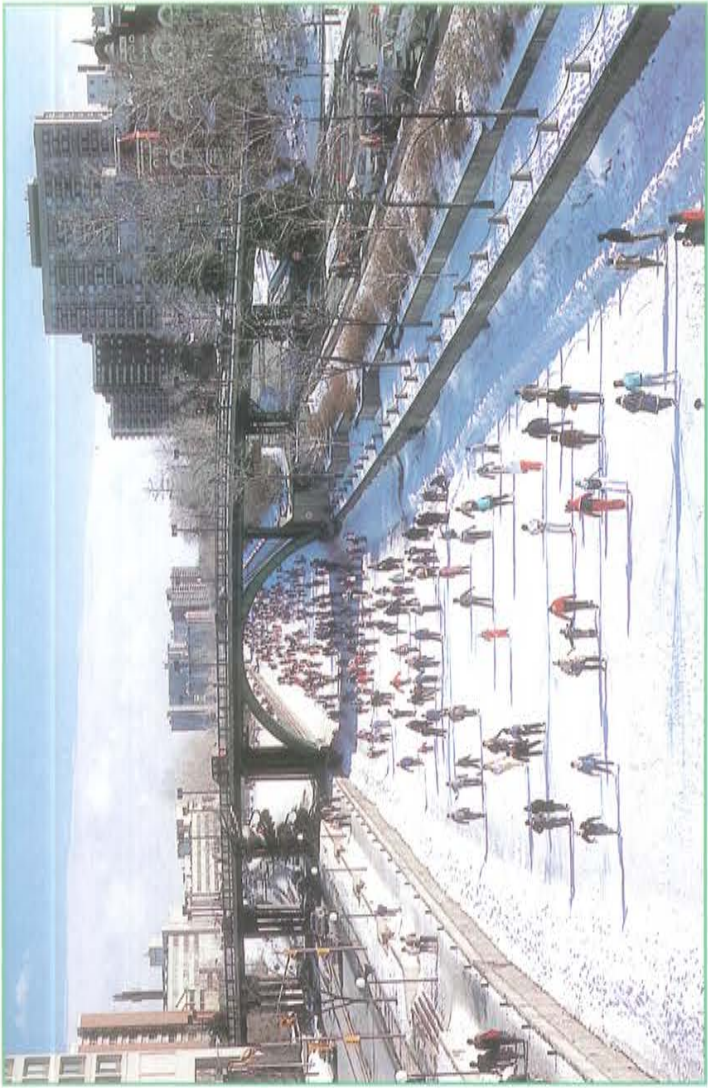
As our bus turns the corner onto Sussex Drive, we begin driving along the "mile of history." This is a stretch running down Sussex Drive to Government House, the home of the governor general. It is called the "mile of history" because there are so many old, historic buildings.

As we drive along Sussex Drive, look off to the right. You'll see a busy outdoor shopping area filled with fresh fruit and vegetable stalls. This is the Byward Market (4) where farmers have been selling their produce for 150 years.

Every year on November 11th, a crowd gathers at the National War Memorial to lay wreaths in memory of Canada's soldiers. At 11 a.m. there is a minute of silence. This marks the precise moment that the First World War ended on 11 November 1918.



The Rideau Canal was opened in 1832. It extends from Ottawa all the way to Lake Ontario, 200 kilometres to the south. Part of it runs through the middle of Ottawa. In the winter, the canal is kept open as the longest outdoor skating rink in the world.



Ottawa was the centre of the logging industry when it started in the 1850s. We are driving through Lower Town, the old part of the city where the loggers and their families used to live.

Up ahead we can see the National Gallery of Canada on our left (5). Let's stop for an hour and pay a visit. The gallery has a large collection of paintings by Canada's finest artists, as well as many paintings from other countries.

Back on the bus now, the tour continues down Sussex Drive, passing the Canadian War Museum (6) with the large tank outside. On our left, we can look across the Ottawa River and see the province of Quebec and the city of Hull. Perhaps on another visit, you'll have time to stop at

the many interesting places on that side of the river.

We'll pause for a moment outside 24 Sussex Drive, one of Canada's most famous addresses (7). It's the home of the prime minister. Since 1950, every prime minister has lived here.

Just down the street is a small gatehouse set at the entrance to a long driveway. We've arrived at Government House, also known as Rideau Hall, home of the governor general (8). It is actually a large estate, big enough to contain a cricket pitch, a curling rink, and an extensive garden.

Government House marks the end of our bus tour. But there is still a little time left in the day. Let's strap on our skates and go for a spin on the canal!

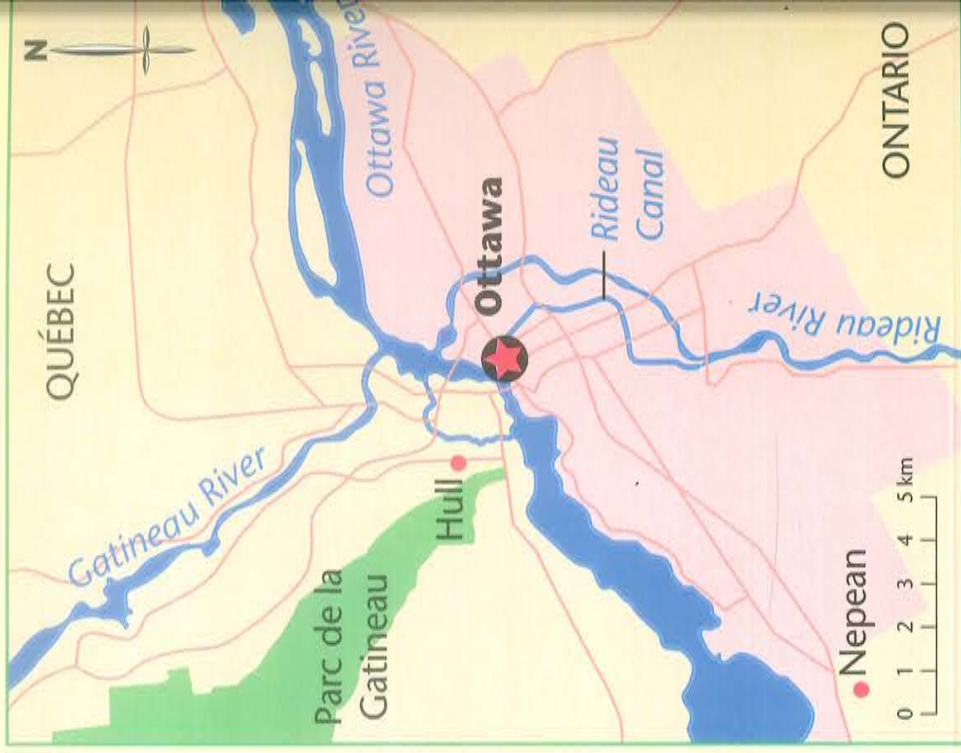


A Closer Look

Ottawa

Here are some interesting facts about the city:

- Ottawa has been the capital of Canada since 1858.
- The Rideau Canal runs through the middle of Ottawa. In the winter, the water in the canal freezes and turns into a giant skating rink. People can skate to their jobs!
- Ottawa is located where the Rideau River, the Ottawa River, and the Gatineau River all come together. The Ottawa River forms the border between Ontario and Quebec. Ottawa is in Ontario, but right across the river is Quebec. As a result, many people who live in Ottawa speak both French and English.
- The name *Ottawa* is also the name of the local First Nations people. In their language, *Ottawa* (or *Odawa*) means "traders." So a translation of the name might be "place of the traders" or "the place where trading takes place." Where does the name of your community come from?



Ottawa is located where three rivers meet. Why do you think this was considered a good place to start a community?

Think For Yourself

There are probably many interesting places in your community that visitors might like to see. How would you help them learn about your community? A bus tour is one way, but there are others. For example, a short walking tour could be just as interesting.

Step one. Look around your community. Decide on the neighbourhood where you want to have a walking tour.

Step two. Make a list of six or seven interesting places on the tour. Perhaps you could call them “stops of interest.” You might have to do some research

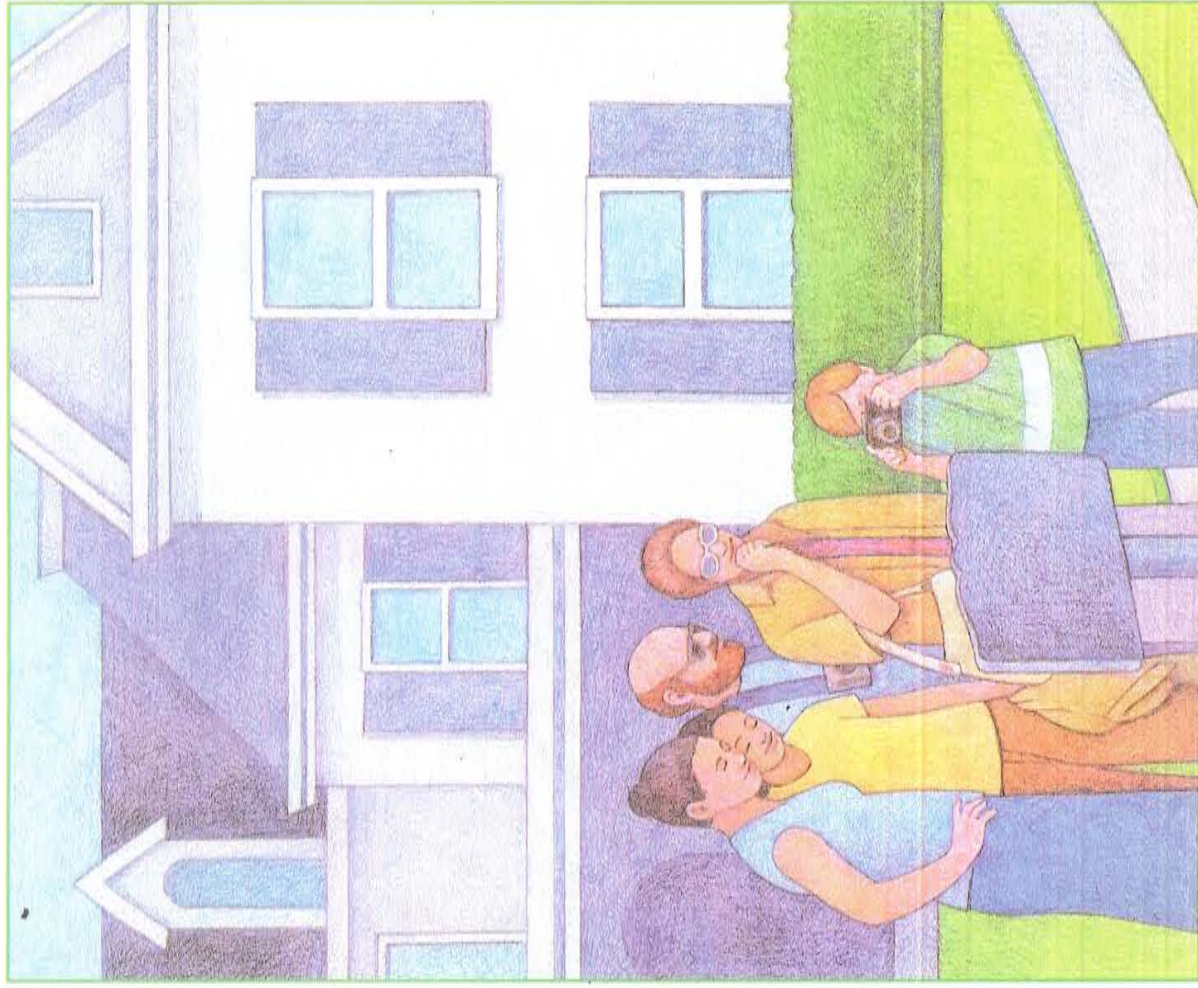
to collect information about these places. What are your reasons for choosing each stop of interest? For example, was it associated with a famous person? Is it very old?

Step three. Make a sketch map of the neighbourhood. Put numbers on the map to show where your stops of interest are located.

Step four. Write a brief paragraph about each stop of interest, using the information you gathered. For example: *The Brixton House. This old home, built in 1873, was owned by the first settler in the area. It is believed to be haunted by the ghost of his young daughter, who died of smallpox when she was 13 years old.*

Step five. Put the written information together with the sketch map. You now have a small guide book, perfect for guiding people around your tour.

It's time to lead your first tour!



Old houses often have fascinating stories to tell.

How Government Works

Ottawa is the capital of Canada. It is the headquarters of the federal (national) government. It is where decisions are made that affect all Canadians. The federal government meets in the Parliament Buildings, which you visited on your bus tour.

society or group needs to have rules so that members can live securely and know what is expected of them.

Your school probably has a student government. It has the job of running some of the events in the school. On a small scale, your student government is similar to the different levels of government in the country.

The purpose of government is to make laws. Laws are the rules by which society operates. Every

Try This

As a class, brainstorm a list of things that your student government does. Then suggest other things that you think it could be doing. Decide on a way to present your suggestions to the members of the student government.

After your brainstorming, complete this sentence: *We need student government because . . .*

The **legislature** [LEG-iss-lay-chur] is where all the province's elected officials meet. In most provinces, it is called the legislative assembly.

A **council** is a meeting of the local elected officials in your community.

Levels of Government

You have already learned something about the federal government. This is the national level of government. There are two other levels of government in Canada. Remember that your student government took responsibility for certain things around the school. Similarly, each level of government in the country takes responsibility for different issues.

- Provincial government is the government in your province. It looks after matters of concern to everyone in the province. The provincial government meets in the **legislature** of each province.

- Local government is the government in your community. It looks after issues of concern to the local community. Local government usually meets as a town or city **council**.

Each level of government has responsibility for the things that it can do best. For example, the federal government is in charge of organizing the armed forces. It is not necessary for every province (or every community!) to have its own army. There is one armed forces to protect all Canadians.

On the other hand, local government is in charge of fixing your sidewalks and streets. You would not expect people in faraway Ottawa to know about potholes and flooded drains in every street in the country. These are matters best left to the government that is closest to the community.

Sometimes there are problems that are so big they require more than one level of government to handle them. In these cases, two governments will often share the responsibility.

Think For Yourself

Here is a list of five responsibilities that the government has. Which level of government do you think is responsible in each case? Ask yourselves: *Which level of government is closest to the issue?*

- university education
- immigration
- drinking water
- drivers' licences
- protection of wildlife that is in danger of disappearing

When you have decided, do some research to find out if you are correct.

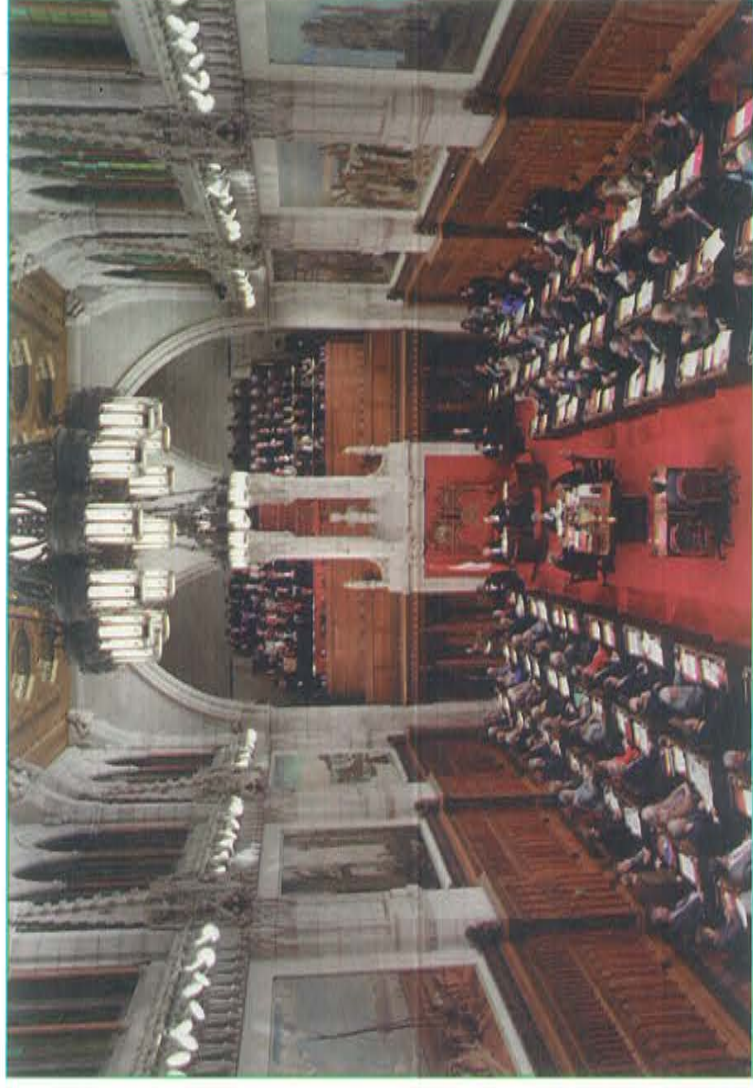
The Federal Government

The men and women who are elected to the federal government are called **Members of Parliament (MPs)**. They are chosen in national elections that must take place at least every five years. There are 295 MPs, though the number goes up as the population of Canada grows. The country is divided into 295 districts, called **ridings**, and each riding elects its own MP.

Members of Parliament hold their meetings in the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa in a large chamber known as the House of Commons. Visitors are welcome. You can sit in the Visitors' Gallery and listen to MPs discussing government business.

Parliament actually has two levels, or "houses." The House of Commons is one level. The other House of Parliament is called the **Senate**, sometimes known as the Upper House. Unlike Members of Parliament, members of the Senate, called **senators**, are not elected. They are appointed to their positions by the government. The 104 senators have their own meeting room, called the Senate Chamber.

The purpose of the Senate is to approve all laws that have been passed by the House of Commons. The job of the senators is to examine these laws to make sure that they are in the best interests of the country.



Senators meet in the Senate Chamber to pass laws and to listen to the concerns of groups and individuals affected by law. There is also a Question Period when senators may inquire about government actions and policies.

Senators may remain in office until they are 75 years old. Then they must retire. Senators are usually prominent people from all walks of life.

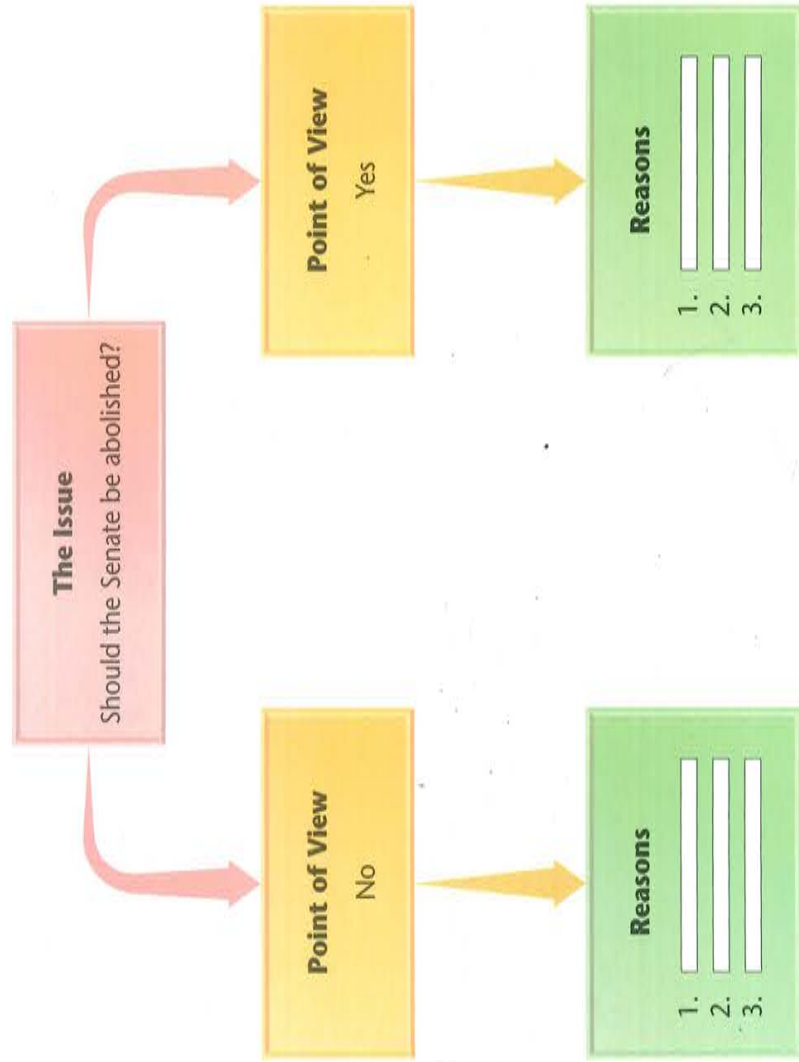
Abolish [uh-BOL-ish]
means to put an end to a
law or custom.

Think For Yourself

Some people think that the Senate is undemocratic. They feel this way because senators are not elected—they cannot claim to speak for anyone but themselves. Why should they be able to influence what the elected Members of Parliament decide? Others think the Senate should be **abolished** because it is unnecessary.

On the other hand, some people think the Senate serves an important role. They argue that because it is not elected, the Senate is not as easily pressured by public opinion.

Use a chart like the one shown here to organize both points of view on the issue.



What do you think? Discuss the issue in small groups. Analyze the different points of view, then form your own opinion.

The Provincial Government

Every province has its own government. Members are elected from around the province and carry out their duties in the capital city of the province. Just as Ottawa has Parliament, so each province has its own legislature. In British Columbia, the legislative assembly is in Victoria. The people elected to the provincial government are called **Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs)**.

Provincial governments have only one "house." There are no Senates in the provinces, only the elected assembly.

Each province is divided into many electoral districts, or ridings, and each riding elects an MLA. Each riding has approximately the same population. The MLA represents his or her riding in the legislative assembly.

Your Local Government

Local governments manage the affairs of the local community. Every city, town, and village has its own government. A typical local government provides services such as

- fire protection
- public libraries

- public transportation (bus, subway)
- snow removal

The usual form of local government consists of a mayor and an elected council. The mayor is the chief officer. He or she leads the meetings of council and represents the community at official events.

Sometimes several communities located close to one another get together to provide services in common. In this way, the cost of services for each community decreases. This is known as regional government.

In a federal or provincial election, voters make the choice on a piece of paper called a ballot. The ballot is then folded and put in a locked box.





A Closer Look

Voting

Democracy [dih-MOK-ruh-see] is a form of self-government. Its basic principle (belief) is that people rule themselves. We are not told by someone else what to do. We make the decisions ourselves.

Of course, we can't all be involved in government all the time. We have other jobs to do. So we choose people to represent us in government. This is still a form of self-government because we are choosing our own leaders to make decisions on our behalf. If we don't like what the government is doing, we can always choose a new one at the next election.

The vote, then, is the basic tool of self-government. We use it to choose the people who will represent us in government. But not everyone is allowed to vote. Young people do not have the vote. You have to be at least 18 years old to vote in an election. You also have to be a Canadian citizen. In a provincial election, you have to be a resident of the province.

Over the years, people have been denied a vote for many reasons.

- Women were not allowed to vote in national elections until 1918.

Government was considered "man's work." It took many years of effort by women to gain their basic democratic right.

- Naturalized Canadians from China, Japan, and India didn't get the vote until 1948.

- Inuit weren't allowed to vote until 1950, and First Nations didn't get the vote until 1960.

Gradually, all adult Canadians have received the same right to vote in elections, but it has been a long process.

Nellie McClung fought to gain the provincial vote for women in Manitoba and Alberta.



How To...

Influence Government

Taking part in elections is one way that people choose the kind of government they have. But elections happen only once every few years. Does this mean that you can influence the government only at election time?

Not at all. People try in many ways to have a say in how the government is managing affairs—whether or not it is election time.

If you feel strongly about an issue in your community, the country, or even in the world, here are some ways to influence the government:

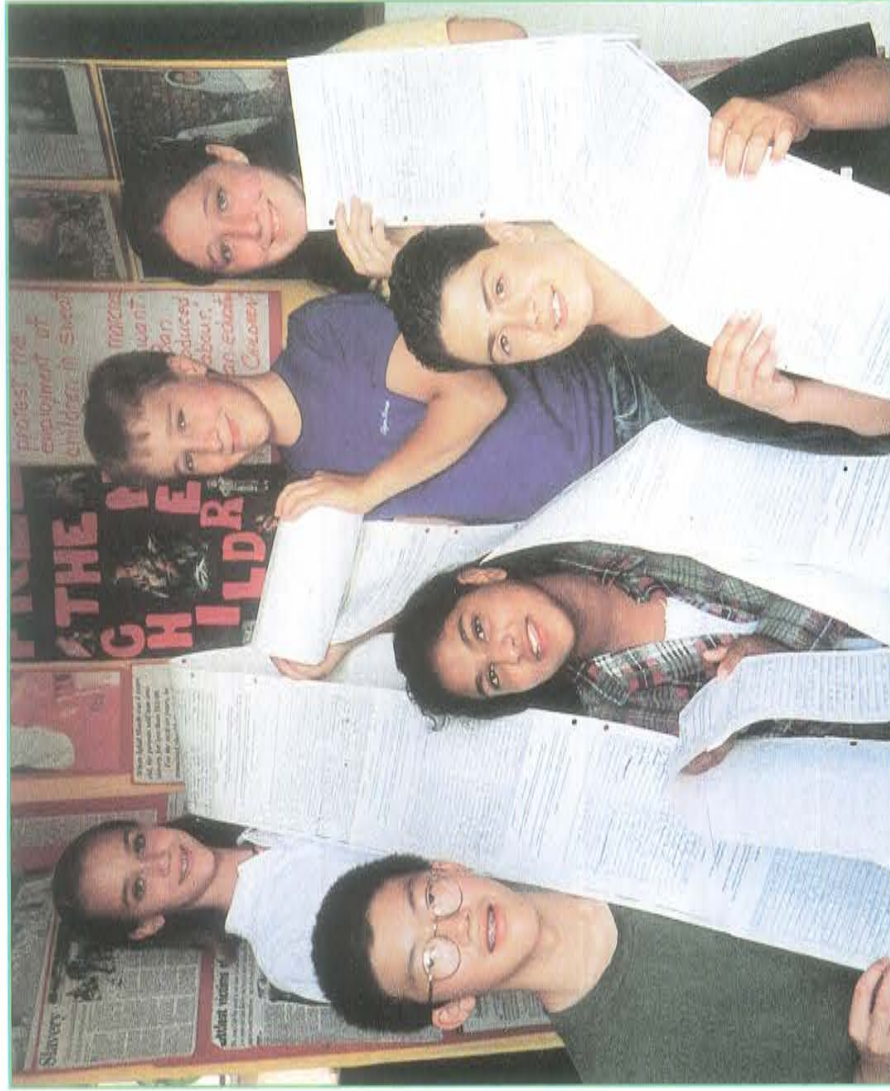
1. Write a letter to your MP, your MLA, or your member of local council. Express your opinion and suggest what you think should be done. Remember always to ask for an answer. Keep track of the issue to see whether any change takes place.
2. Start a petition asking the government to take some action. Collect signatures from your friends and people in the neighbourhood. Then send off the petition. All these signatures will show the government that many people care about the issue.
3. Local government is usually the easiest to approach. It meets right in your community, and the meetings are open to the public. Find out where the council meetings take place and attend one of them. Make your views known.

Try This

In class, brainstorm other ways that you can influence government.

Be aware that any issue involves different points of view. Try to learn about all points of view before making up your own mind.

Craig Kielburger (back row, middle), a young Canadian, started Free the Children when he was 12 years old. The organization campaigns against child labour and promotes children's rights throughout the world.



Think For Yourself

Is there an issue that you care about? It could be anything from paving the sidewalk on your street to providing more money for children in another country so that they will have enough to eat. Choose one of the actions described on page 77, and use *your influence to make change happen*.

Set specific goals for your action. For example, if you decide to collect signatures on a petition, decide how many signatures you want to have. You will also have to think about ways of deciding whether or not your action had any results.

Making Rules for Working Together

The Charter of Rights and Freedoms

When Canada created its new Constitution in 1982, it included a new document, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The Charter declares that every Canadian has the same rights, and it lists these rights. No one is allowed to violate these rights, not even the government. They are guaranteed by the Charter.

Every Canadian has these basic rights:

- the right to vote in elections
- the right to follow any religion
- the right to belong to any organization
- the right to move freely from place to place in Canada
- the right not to be put in prison for no reason
- the right to a fair trial if accused of a crime

Imagine for a moment that you want to form a club. It could be any sort of club—a hiking club or a cleanup club to keep your school grounds free of garbage.

First, find some friends to join the club. Then come up with some rules so that members will know what they are expected to do and when they are expected to do it. This set of rules is called the club's **constitution** [kon-stuh-TOO-shun].

Just like your club, countries have constitutions as well. A constitution is a document that sets down the basic rules of government.

Canada's Constitution

In Canada, the Constitution states what powers belong to the government. It also declares that all Canadians have certain rights.

For many years, the Canadian Constitution was the British North America Act, passed the British Parliament in 1867. It gave Canada most of the powers of an independent country but not all of them. For instance, Canada did not have the power to change its own Constitution. In 1982, Canada created a new Constitution Act that gave the country full independence.

These are only a few. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees many other rights to all Canadians.

One section of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Section 15) promises **equality** to all Canadians. What does *equality* mean? Does it mean that everyone has the same talents and abilities? Does it mean that

everyone should be treated the same under the law?

Unhappily, Canadians do not always treat each other equally. Sometimes people show prejudice toward someone from a different country or different background. You have already read about the poor treatment received by some people who immigrated to Canada. This is an example of prejudice.

• This is Section 15(1) of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.



CANADIAN CHARTER OF RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS



Equality Rights

15. (1) Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability. (2) Subsection (1) does not preclude any law, program or activity that has as its object the amelioration of conditions of disadvantaged individuals or groups including those that are disadvantaged because of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

Try This

Is everyone in your school treated equally? Does everyone get the same use of the facilities?

In small groups, look for ways you think your school could be made a more equal place. Share your findings with the rest of the class. After you've discussed all the groups' findings, make a list of two or three of the most important ones. Decide on what improvements would make the school a more equal place.

Think For Yourself

Now it's time to take action. Decide on the best way to present your suggested improvements to the principal. Perhaps you should write a letter. Or you could organize a group of students to meet with the principal. It's your decision!

Looking Back

In this chapter, you learned about government and the way it is organized. You also discovered the importance of a constitution.

Do you think it is important for everyone to take an interest in what the government is doing? Why or why not?