

Aboriginal Peoples and Government

You have learned that there are many different Aboriginal groups in Canada. Each group has its own customs and traditions. Many have their own languages, beliefs, and ways of living.

You have also seen that the Aboriginal peoples were the original inhabitants of Canada. They were here before the first European settlers arrived. For this reason, they have a special relationship with the government.

In this chapter, you can learn about this relationship between the government and Aboriginal peoples in Canada.

Aboriginal Government

In the last chapter, you learned that government is the way a group of people organizes its affairs. All groups have some sort of government.

Aboriginal peoples had systems of government. These systems varied from group to group, but they shared many things in common.

Living in Groups

The Aboriginal peoples lived together in family groups. Members worked together to gather food and to build their homes. At certain times of the year, the groups met to socialize and take part in special ceremonies.

Most groups had some type of leader. Sometimes this was a chief who inherited the position. In other cases, leaders gained influence because they were admired for

their bravery or their wisdom. For example, a leader might be a better hunter or a braver warrior than anyone else. When a leader lost the respect of the people, he or she would lose influence and no longer be looked on as a leader.



Many Aboriginal peoples lived together in small family groups. Do you think it would be easier for family groups to reach agreement than for all the members of your community? Why or why not?

Aboriginal peoples have particular respect for their Elders. They believe that life experience has given the Elders special wisdom. Elders help the children to learn about traditional knowledge and history. They also take part in community decision making. Can you suggest reasons why Elders might have special knowledge to share? What role do Elders play in your family? in your community?



Making Decisions

Aboriginal peoples did not use voting in their system of government. They had a form of government that was different from the European way. There were no elections and no parliaments.

Instead, most Aboriginal groups made decisions by **consensus** [kun-SEN-sus]. Everyone who wanted to could express an

opinion. An issue was discussed until everyone in the group agreed on what to do.

By contrast, a system of voting works by majority rule. The person or choice that earns the most votes wins. This is the decision of the majority of people. Those people who voted against the winning choice go along with the decision anyway because they accept the system of majority rule.

A Different Way

When Europeans came to Canada, they did not understand the Aboriginal way of government. Aboriginal societies did not have any written laws. It was hard to see how they chose their leaders. Europeans thought the Aboriginal peoples had no government because the system was so different from their own.

Europeans thought their way of doing things was best. They ignored the wishes of the Aboriginal peoples and established their own form of government in Canada.

Aboriginal peoples were not allowed to take part in this new government. They did not have a vote, and they were not allowed to hold any government positions.

The new government negotiated **treaties** with some groups of Aboriginal peoples. These treaties were written agreements between the Aboriginal groups and the government. On the one side, Aboriginal peoples agreed to give up their traditional lands. On the other side, the government agreed to

- make cash payments to the Aboriginal groups
- set aside small areas of land, called **reserves**, for the use of First Nations groups
- permit the Aboriginal peoples to hunt and fish as they had always done

A Special Relationship

There is a special relationship between the government in Canada and the Aboriginal peoples. Treaties are a part of this relationship.

Because they were the first inhabitants of the land, Aboriginal peoples have special

rights. In other words, they have these rights because they were here first. These are called **Aboriginal rights**, and they belong to Aboriginal peoples as a group. Aboriginal rights are part of the Canadian Constitution.

A series of 11 treaties was made in Canada between 1871 and 1921. These treaties covered much of Western Canada and the North. Before that, other treaties had been signed in Eastern Canada. Many parts of the country are still not covered by treaties. Only a small part of British Columbia, for example, has treaties.

After many years of inaction, treaties are again being made. In 1975, Cree people in northern Quebec signed an agreement that allowed much of their hunting lands to be flooded by a new power dam. In 1999, the Nisga'a people in northern British Columbia signed a treaty. That same year, the new territory of Nunavut was created in northern Canada. In Nunavut, the Inuit have a strong say in the way government operates.

Treaty making is an ongoing process. Treaties recognize that Aboriginal peoples have rights to their land.

Do you remember when the Inuit and First Nations were first allowed to vote in elections in Canada? If not, you can go back to Chapter 5 to find this information.

Try This

Write out your own definition of *majority* and *consensus*. Compare your understanding with the definitions from the rest of the class.

Make a list of words that have been used to describe *consensus* and *majority*. Which words are positive? Which are negative?



A Closer Look

Traditions

Traditions are important in any society. The old ways bring strength and meaning. Think of some of your own traditions. Traditions are important to Aboriginal peoples as well.

The Nuu-chah-nulth are First Nations people living on the west coast of Vancouver Island in British Columbia. One of the traditions of the Nuu-chah-nulth was hunting whales. Huge grey whales swim along the coast each year. Nuu-chah-nulth hunters used to go out in their canoes to chase them.

Only high-ranking chiefs were allowed to hunt the whales. They prepared themselves by participating in many ceremonies and prayers. While the whalers were hunting, their wives continued to follow certain rituals.

When a whale was harpooned and towed back to shore, the meat was shared with the entire village. A great feast was held in celebration.

The Nuu-chah-nulth did not kill many whales each season. Their hunt did not have an impact on the whale population. However, in the 1860s, American whalers began killing the grey whales in such huge numbers that they almost disappeared. During the 1930s, all whaling stopped. Now the whales have returned.

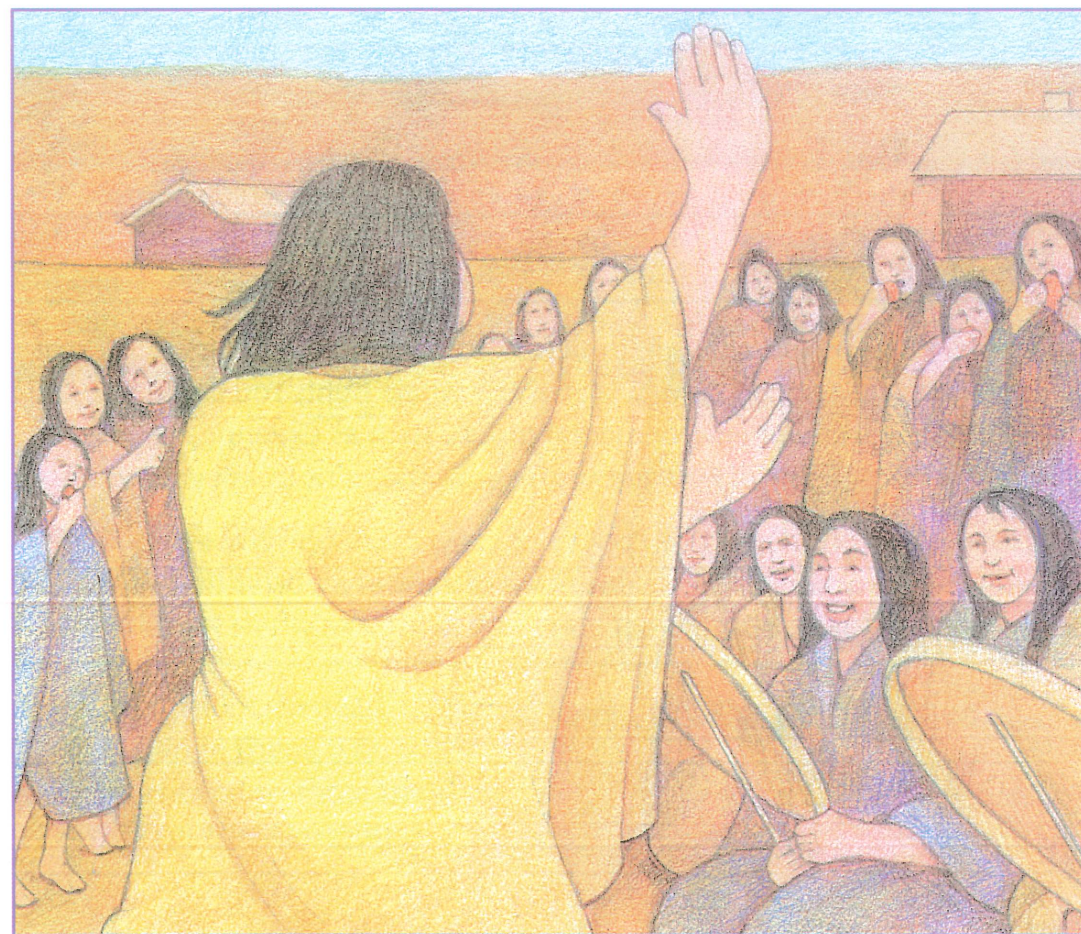
The Nuu-chah-nulth have announced that they want to go back to whaling. They say it is part of their traditions. Many people fear for the future of the whales. They are opposed to starting the hunt again.

Think For Yourself

Discuss the issue of whaling in class. Here are some things to think about:

- Whaling was an important part of Nuu-chah-nulth culture. ✓
- The Nuu-chah-nulth have not hunted whales for many years. ✓
- The grey whales were almost extinct because of hunting. ✓
- There are as many grey whales today as there ever were. ✓
- The Nuu-chah-nulth will only kill a few whales. ✓
- People worry that if the Nuu-chah-nulth start hunting, so will other groups. ✓
- Many tourists come to see the whales.

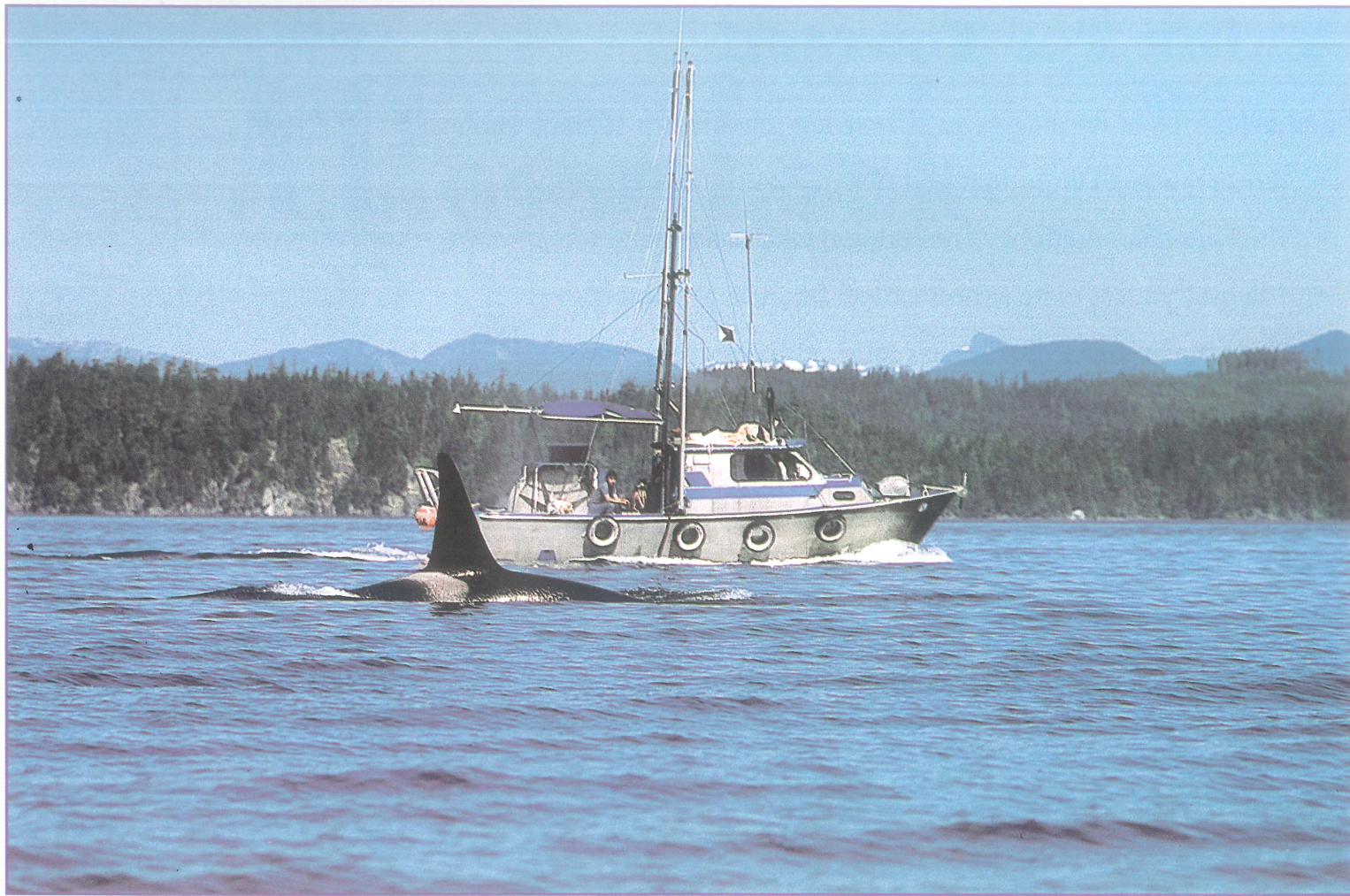
Sort these ideas into two lists. Which of the ideas support whaling (pros)? Which argue against it (cons)? List your ideas in a pro/con chart like the one above.



The entire community celebrated a successful whale hunt. The meat from the whale was shared among everyone.

Issue: Whaling

Pros	Cons
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.



Whale-watching gives people the chance to observe whales in their natural setting.

Find Out

If possible, invite a Nuu-chah-nulth person to come to your class to present the Nuu-chah-nulth point of view about the whale hunt. You could also invite someone from an environmental group, such as Greenpeace, who is against the hunt. Think of five questions about the hunt to ask your visitors.

After you've considered both points of view, make up your own mind. Should whaling occur? Express your point of view in a poster that says clearly in words and pictures what you think about the whale hunt.

When Cultures Meet

When you meet people from another culture, there may be things you do not understand about the way they live. They may wear different clothes, eat different foods, or celebrate different holidays.

In Canada, we try to understand their ways, just as they try to understand ours. You have learned that Canada is a multicultural country. This means that Canadians accept differences. We believe that all people should have the right to honour their own traditions, as long as they do not harm anyone else.

Forcing Change

When the first Europeans to come to Canada met the Aboriginal peoples, they did not attempt to understand them. Instead, they tried to change them. The newcomers tried to force their own ways on the Aboriginal peoples.

Aboriginal peoples were willing to accept many of the new ways and to share useful skills with the newcomers. But they saw no reason why they should give up their own cultures. They wanted to keep their languages and their own way of life.

Soon the new settlers outnumbered the Aboriginal peoples. They wanted them to adopt the European religions and to live in communities where they would clear the land and begin farming—just like the European newcomers.

Through their government, the new settlers tried to force the Aboriginal peoples to change, to become more like Europeans. This policy was called **assimilation**.

The Indian Act

In 1876 the government of Canada passed into law the Indian Act. (It was called the Indian Act because, at the time,

Aboriginal peoples were called Indians.) This act outlined what Aboriginal peoples could and could not do. It brought almost every part of their lives under the control of the government. Under the act, Aboriginal peoples did not have the same rights as other Canadians.

The Indian Act was administered by the Department of Indian Affairs, a branch of the federal government. The Department appointed Indian agents for different parts of the country. The agents had the authority to control the lives of Aboriginal peoples in many ways. They enforced the rules of the act.

The details of the Indian Act have changed over the years, but it remains the law. It is still administered by the same department, now called Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.

Reserves

Another way the newcomers tried to change the Aboriginal peoples was to force them to give up their lands. Before the Europeans came, Aboriginal peoples had free use of all the land. Some of the people raised crops, but most lived by fishing and hunting and collecting wild fruits.

Europeans did not live this way. They lived in towns or on farms. They did not approve of

the Aboriginal peoples' style of life. They thought that people should settle in one place and become farmers.

The government set aside small areas of land, or reserves, for the First Nations people. Other people are not allowed to settle, hunt, or fish on a reserve without the permission of the First Nations.

Today in Canada many people still live on reserves.

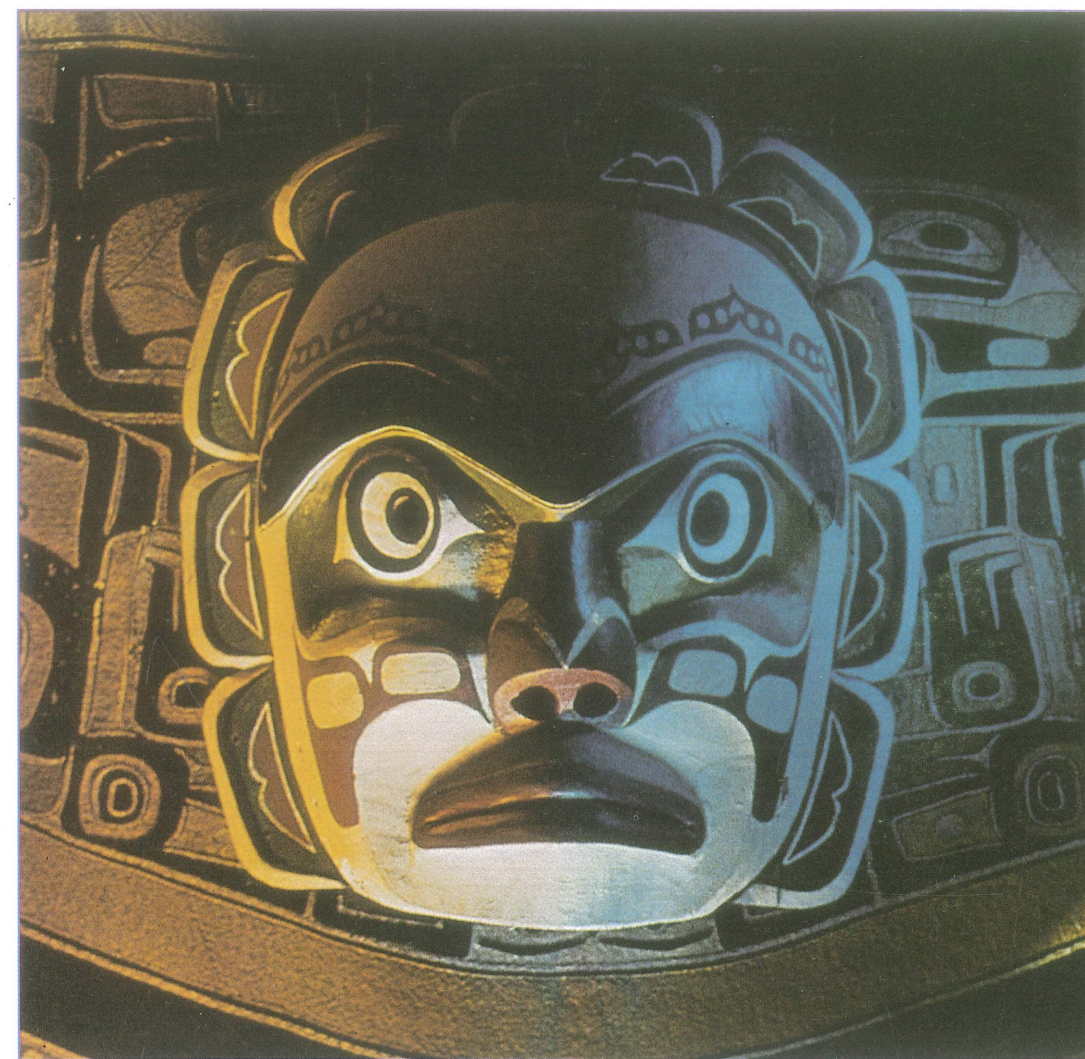
Making Masks

For some First Nations people on the coast of British Columbia, the right to hunt and fish in certain areas belonged to a family and was handed down from generation to generation. Along with this right came special songs, dances, names, and other ceremonies. All of these were considered to be possessions—things that belonged to someone.

Masks are some of the coastal peoples most valued possessions. They are worn at many of the ceremonies. Artists carve the masks from wood and decorate them with designs. Sometimes the designs are birds or animals. Sometimes they are creatures from the world of the spirits. Each mask has a special meaning for the person who owns it. It belongs to that person and cannot be used by anyone else without permission.

Try This

Design a mask for yourself. It might have round, hollow eyes, or bright-red eyebrows, or a grinning mouth. It's up to you. Think about your family. Do you have special things you like to do or special places you like to go? Can you think of a design that might have special meaning in your own case?



This is a sun mask from Kwakwaka'wakw [kwah-kah-wahkw] people of coastal British Columbia.

The Residential Schools

Long ago, Aboriginal children didn't go to school. They learned about their culture in other ways. Aboriginal peoples passed on

their traditions in stories, songs, and ceremonies. Children watched what their parents did, listened to the stories that the Elders told, and took part in ceremonies.

European settlers thought that the Aboriginal peoples should be taught in school. The government set up a system of **residential schools** for young Aboriginal students. They were called *residential* because the students lived at the schools, away from their families. Students were not

allowed to speak their Aboriginal languages at these schools. They were also forced to give up their cultures.

There are no residential schools any longer. Aboriginal children go to school with everyone else.

In The Words Of...

Shirley Sterling

Shirley Sterling is a First Nations writer and teacher from British Columbia. She wrote a book called My Name is Seepeetza about her own experiences at a residential school. In it, she describes a day at the school.

At school we get up at six o'clock every morning. As soon as sister rings the bell, we kneel on the floor and say our prayers. Then we get up and take turns washing and brushing our teeth. We're not allowed to talk. When we are dressed in our uniforms, Sister marches us in lines two by two to chapel for Mass.

After Mass we put our smocks over our uniforms and line up for breakfast in the hall outside the dining room. We get gooey mush with powder milk and brown sugar. We say grace before and after every meal.

After breakfast we have jobs to do like clean the lavatories or dust the halls and sweep stairs. After our jobs are finished we put our smocks in our closets and line up in the rec room to go to class.

After school we change into our own clothes, usually jeans and blouses. Then Sister sends us outside, even if it's cold, and everybody gets an apple.

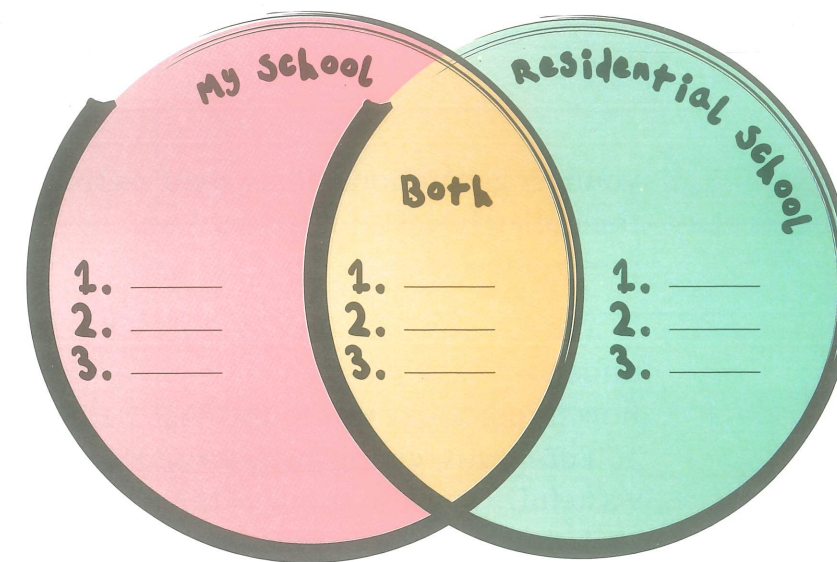
Supper is usually cabbage stew, two slices of bread with margarine, and wrinkled apples for dessert. Friday night is my favourite because we get oatmeal cookies for dessert.

Excerpt from *My Name Is Seepeetza* Text copyright © 1992 by Shirley Sterling. First published in Canada by Groundwood Books/Douglas & McIntyre. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

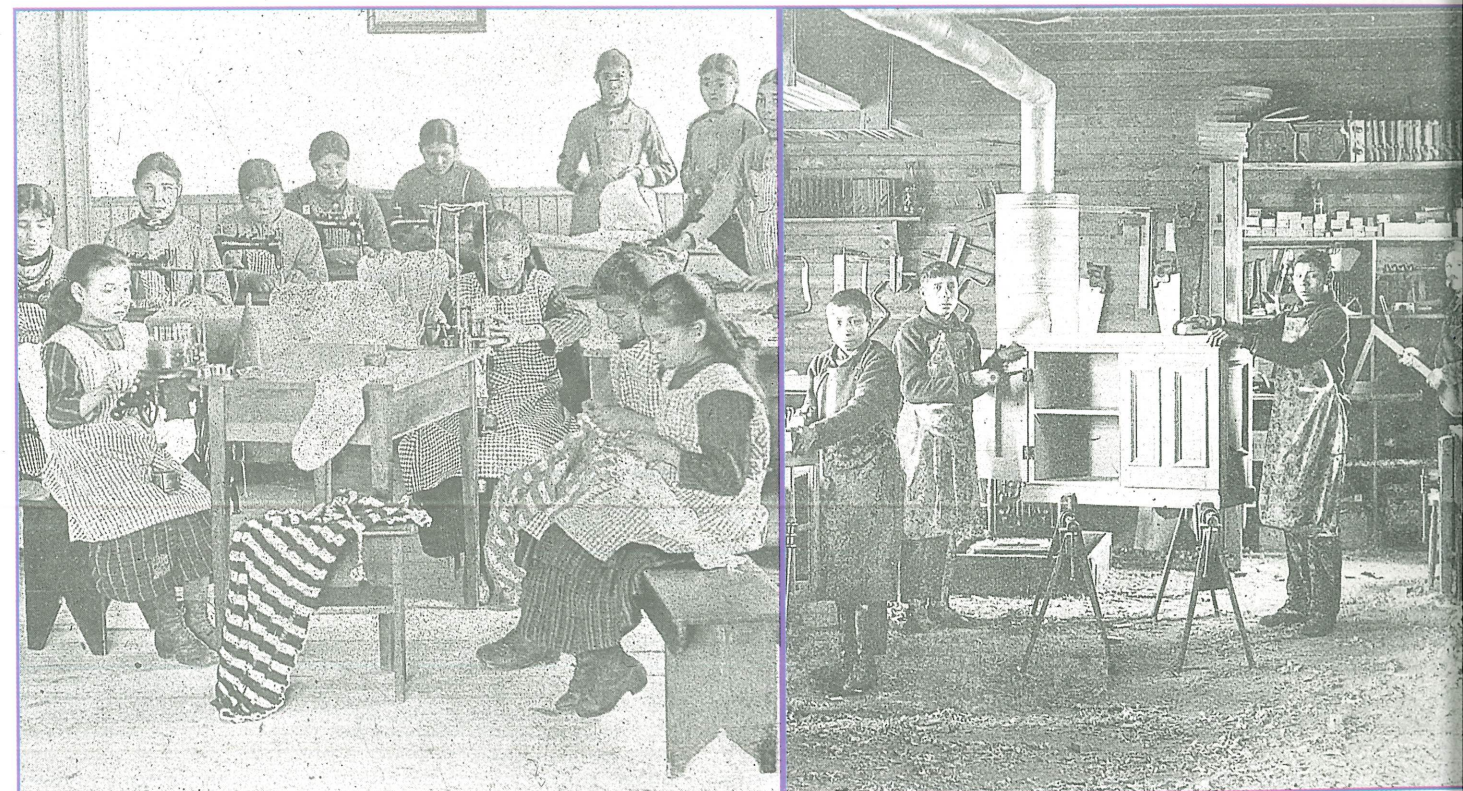
Think For Yourself

Compare residential schools with your own school. What are the similarities and differences?

Use a Venn diagram like the one shown here to make your comparison. You may want to start by putting the similarities in the middle.



These photographs show students at a residential school in Saskatchewan. Identify ways that the Aboriginal students are being assimilated into a new culture.





A Closer Look

The Potlatch

The potlatch was one of the ceremonies that the government wanted to stop when it tried to assimilate the Aboriginal peoples. Potlatches were very special events for the First Nations who lived on the coast of British Columbia.

Potlatches celebrated special moments in the life of the community. They were held to honour someone who had died, to celebrate a wedding, to raise a totem pole, or to name a new chief. These are just some of the reasons.

In the old days, a potlatch might last several days, even weeks. There was feasting and dancing, and people gave speeches. Guests received presents from the host to thank them for being there to witness the event.

The potlatch was a way of recording history. Guests returned to their own communities and told the people there what had taken place. Events were remembered and the details were handed on in stories to

younger generations. In an **oral culture**, the potlatch was an important way of preserving a record of events.

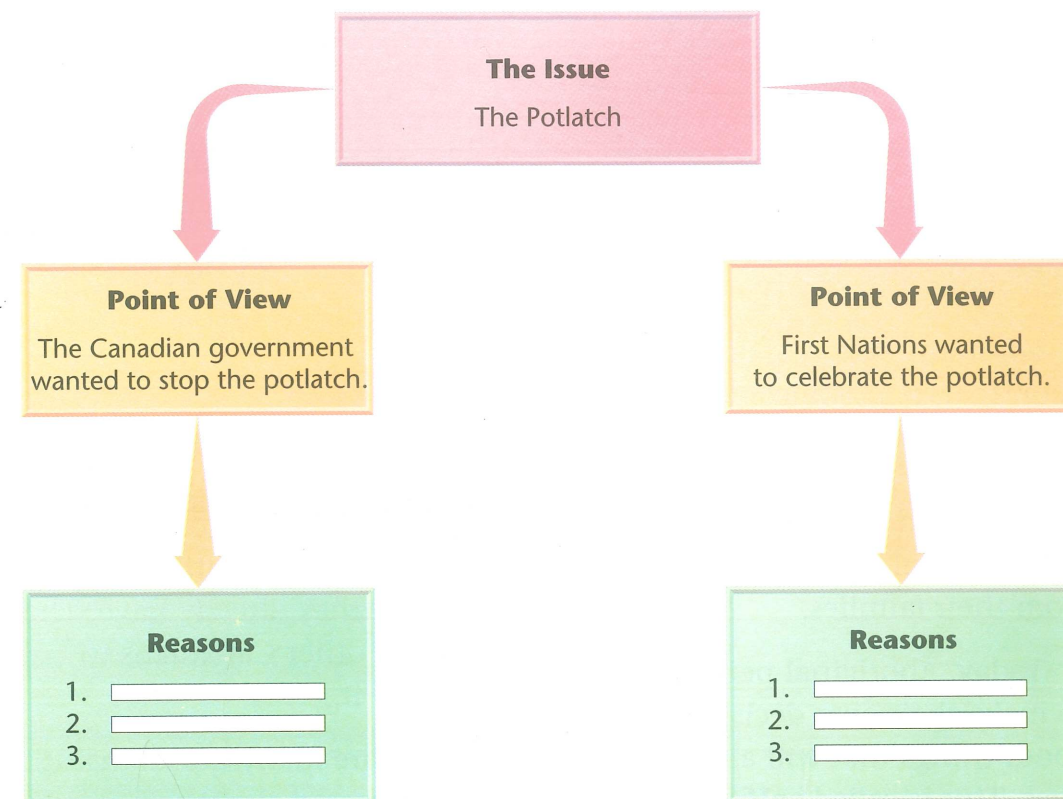
When Europeans arrived, they didn't understand the potlatch. They didn't know how important it was to the First Nations. To Europeans, giving away possessions was wasteful. They also thought the potlatch took time away from more important activities. They wanted the Aboriginal peoples to give up their traditions and assimilate into the new society. As a result, in 1884 the government passed a law that made the potlatch illegal.

The potlatch remained against the law for many years. The coastal First Nations still held their celebrations, but in secret so that they wouldn't be sent to jail. In the end, the government decided the law was unjust. In 1951, the potlatch became legal again.

Today, the potlatch remains an important ceremony for some First Nations people in British Columbia.

Try This

The potlatch was an issue that divided First Nations people and European settlers. This chart shows you the two points of view. You can make a copy of the chart. Then fill in the reasons why each side had the opinions it did.



An **oral culture** is a culture without a written language. Cultures preserve their histories in art and stories, rather than books.

Self-Government

Write out your idea of what you think *self-government* means.

What do you think the term *Aboriginal self-government* means? Perhaps you have heard this term used on the news or read about it in newspapers.

For many years, Aboriginal peoples were not allowed to follow their own traditions. Many customs, such as the potlatch, were banned. Children were sent to residential schools far away from their families.

Today, Aboriginal peoples want to make their own decisions about things that will affect their lives. This is called **self-government**. Aboriginal peoples will still be part of Canada, but they will have more control over their affairs.

A kind of self-government already exists in many Aboriginal

communities. Many communities are like local governments. They operate their own schools and health services. In the territory of Nunavut, created in 1999, Inuit are the majority and they control the government.

Aboriginal peoples say that self-government is not something that they want the government to give them. They say that it is a right that they already have. They just want other Canadians to recognize it.

There are many questions still to be answered about self-government. It may take different forms in different parts of the country. What is important is that Aboriginal peoples are gaining more control over their own lives.

REAL PEOPLE: ROSEMARIE KUPTANA

Rosemarie Kuptana [Koop-TAH-nuh] is an Inuit from the North. She was born out on the ice where her parents were hunting.

After going to a residential school, she went to work as a radio broadcaster. Her special interest was in programs that told about Inuit traditions. She has hosted her own radio



show and has also produced programs in Inuktitut, the language of the Inuit.

Rosemarie Kuptana took part in talks with the government that led to the creation of Nunavut. One newspaper called her a "Mother of Confederation" for her work on Nunavut.

Explain the term *Mother of Confederation*.

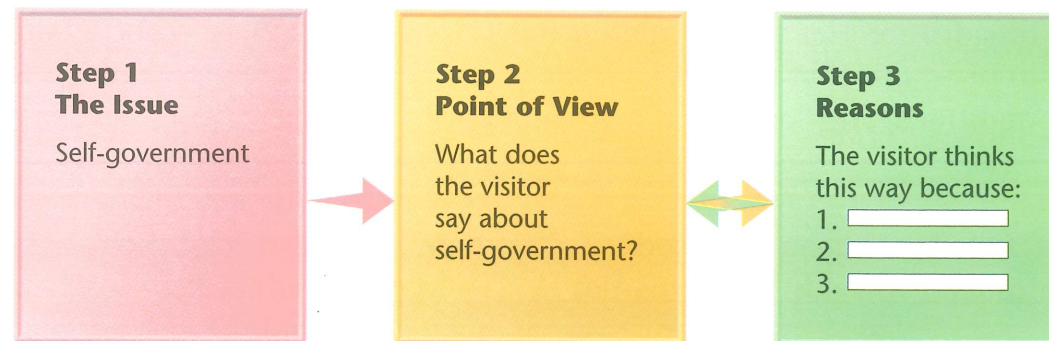


The new territory of Nunavut was created on 1 April 1999. Nunavut's land is made up of central and eastern parts of the Northwest Territories. This land has been the ancestral home of the Inuit for thousands of years. The Inuit are now shaping their new government according to their own culture, traditions, and goals.

Find Out

Invite a member of a First Nation in your community to visit your class. Ask your visitor about the history and traditions of his or her First Nation. Also ask about self-government. How would self-government change things for the local First Nation? How would it change things for your community?

After your visitor leaves, write out your understanding of what he or she said self-government means. You can use an issue chart like the one shown here to help you organize your understanding.



Have your own ideas about self-government changed since you began studying the subject? Look back at what you wrote earlier about self-government. In what way would you change what you wrote?

Looking Back

In this chapter, you learned about the relationship over the years between government and Aboriginal peoples in Canada. You also began to discover what Aboriginal peoples are doing to regain control of their affairs.

Why is it important for people to be able to make their own decisions?

Canadian Communities

If you are like most Canadians, you live in a **community**. Cities, towns, and villages are all examples of communities.

Communities are places where a lot of businesses and activities are located. If you live in the countryside or on a farm, your community probably has a business area where you shop, meet friends, or go to school. What are the many things you can do in the community where you live?

In this chapter, you can find out why different Canadian communities are located where they are. You can also learn how to find these communities on a map. Think about all the activities that go on in any community.