

Unit 11: Video 3 Transcript

Q5: Tell us about representative and responsible government.

A: The state changed over the course of the late 18th century and the 19th century in the way in which power was distributed. In the—during the French regime, power was very much at the top, at the centre, of course in theory; with the king himself back in France, but he delegated power to a governor, to an intendant, responsible for financial matters as well. But they pretty much decided what would happen. They might occasionally consult others or occasionally even consult the people, but there were no ongoing structures whereby the people were represented in government.

That was true at the beginning of the history of Nova Scotia, but quite quickly there the governor was advised and shared authority with others. There was a council to advise him, an appointed council. But representative government came for the first time in 1758 in Nova Scotia, and that's really the first time in Canada as a whole, or what later would become Canada.

By representative government we mean that the people choose individuals to represent them, to speak for them, and that there is an Assembly. This was the word used at the time before House of Commons became the familiar term, an Assembly, a Legislative Assembly, where the views of the people could be heard by authority. Part of the idea was to legitimate authority, that the state hoped to have the support of the people, and one way of getting their support was to say, well, you have a say in things. You have a share in power. And that's partly what these representatives were doing in the Houses of Assembly that were set up. Again, we see an unevenness across the country. Representative government came later everywhere else. It came to Upper Canada, later Ontario, to Lower Canada, later Quebec, in 1791 with The Constitutional Act, which for the first time introduced representative institutions. There was, again, a House of Assembly for each of these colonies. And people elected representatives to these Assemblies.

In the west it was—representative government came later still. Pushed forward in 1870 by the—or '69/'70—by the Riel Rebellion where the Métis population and others at Red River, what would later become Manitoba, soon

become Manitoba, demanded that their views be heard. And they were successful in persuading Ottawa to create a provincial government with representative institutions there. In the rest of the Prairies — and that meant most of what is now Manitoba because the original Manitoba was very tiny, most of what is now Manitoba, all of Saskatchewan, Alberta, and going north into the Northwest Territories of today — this was all the “Northwest Territories.” And the idea was that, again, the governor would have most of the power. He would consult with councilors, and representative government would be only introduced gradually with the coming of more settlers to the west. The fear was you couldn’t give the right to elect representatives. You didn’t want to hear the voice of Aboriginal peoples, who numbered the greatest on the Prairies at the outset. So only gradually was representative government introduced over the course of the late 19th century in the Northwest Territories, the Prairie region.

British Columbia was a slightly different story, but only slightly. Again, we have a governor consulting with councilors and, over the course of some time, elections held and representatives introduced into the system. But it really was only in 1871, when British Columbia became a province of the Dominion of Canada, that a full-fledged system of representative government was created.

Responsible government is different from representative government. It’s an aspect of constitutional change that took place where we had representative government already. And it took several decades of struggle, of conflict before responsible government came into play. Representative government was terrific in the idea that people could have a say at the centre and have a share in power. But so often it seemed that the governor and his cronies, his friends, really had all the power, and they didn’t listen much to the Legislative Assembly. It was supposed to be there to help make the laws, that’s what a legislature does, but in fact, the legislative council often threw out the laws that the Legislative Assembly tried to put forward or the bills that the Legislative Assembly tried to pass. So the people’s voice wasn’t being heard, and much of the political struggle of the 1820s and ‘30s and into the 1840s in central Canada and the Maritimes was around issues of letting the people have a stronger voice in government and finding ways to do that.

And one solution was to introduce responsible government. That term was very popular at the time and actually had many meanings and was rather confusing. Sometimes it meant just the opposite of arbitrary government. But it had a more particular meaning for people like the Baldwin's here in Toronto who argued that the executive should have the support of a majority in the legislature and that normally the members of the executive branch of government would be chosen from the legislature. When the—that's the essence of responsible government right there, and that was introduced in a kind of piecemeal fashion through the 1840s. But by the end of the 1840s in Nova Scotia, in New Brunswick, in the Province of Canada, responsible government was in place. This had something to do with the British government, the imperial government, too which by this point was willing to allow the colonies to go their own way. This is the era of free trade after all in the 1840s: the repeal of the Corn Law, the Navigation Acts. And the government of Great Britain decided that the colonies should take responsibility for local matters that were of real—no real concern to the imperial authorities at the centre in London.

And so we see by the late 1840s the colonies enjoying more self-government, more autonomy within the empire, and that is associated with the coming of responsible government. The governors are more symbolic now than active in managing politics and in making all the important decisions. The authority that really seems to matter now is the cabinet or the executive council in the governments. These were—the members of the executive council under responsible government were chosen from the Legislature, and they had to have the support of a majority of members of the Legislature to govern. And so this was a way in which the people got a stronger control over the decision making and the power, and many were happy about that. They'd struggled for that. This was a success. At the same time, though, it strengthened the executive. The executive became more effective, more efficient, more able to rule. And so in some ways there was a tradeoff for people, because they felt the weight of the state more directly, thanks to the way in which power was shored up under responsible government.