

HANDOUT:

Defining Liberal Democracy

The *Constitution Act* says that Canada shall be a country of peace, order and good government. This statement has a particular legal meaning, relating to federal authority over provincial governments.

Beyond its specific legal meaning, peace, order and good government has become something of a Canadian catch phrase. The words are used to explain Canada's political stability.

One reason why peace, order, and good government has prevailed in Canada is our embrace of liberal democracy.

What is Liberal Democracy

Liberal democracy combines the ideas of liberalism and democracy. Political scientist Yascha Mounk describes the combination of liberalism and democracy in his book *The People vs. Democracy*:

- A democracy is a set of binding electoral institutions that effectively translates popular views into public policy.
- Liberal institutions [such as Parliament and the Courts] effectively protect the rule of law and guarantee individual rights such as freedom of speech, worship, press, and association to all citizens, including ethnic and religious minorities.
- A liberal democracy is simply a political system that is both liberal and democratic—one that both protects individual rights and translates popular views into public policy.

In other words, liberal democracies such as Canada enact the popular will, but also protect minority and individual rights.

Liberal Democracy and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms

Canada's embrace of liberal democracy is reflected in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. The Charter grants Canadians individual rights such as freedom of expression, freedom of worship, and freedom of the press.

The Charter also recognises that we are individuals as part of a larger society. This is why the Charter affirms our rights to freedom of association. We have the right to gather together in groups of common belief. From political parties to religious groups to environmental clubs, our rights to be part of a group are protected by the Charter.



Liberal Democracy and the Western World

Canada is not alone in subscribing to liberal democracy. Liberal democratic values have been embraced across the western world, from the United States to New Zealand. Even the so-called Nordic social democracies of northern Europe, such as Finland and Norway, generally follow the principles of liberal democracy. Nordic social

democracies, however, often emphasise wider social goals over individual rights.

Liberal democracies emerged because citizens fought for liberal values. To meet the public's demand, liberal democratic constitutions and institutions were created. However, there is no guarantee that liberal democracy is here to stay. Laws and institutions are human constructs. Just as they have been built up, they can be torn down.

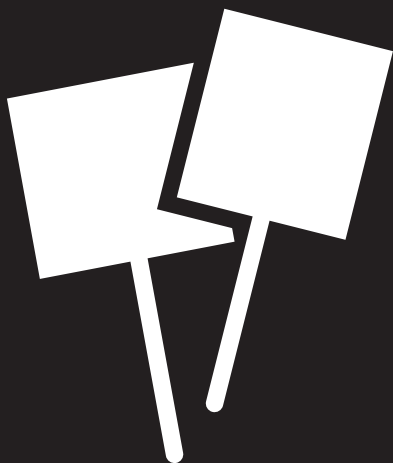
ORDERLY CHANGE IN LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Canada's liberal democratic laws and institutions are not perfect. While society has been generally progressing, we do not have to look far to see unnecessary poverty, suffering, environmental degradation, and discrimination in all its forms. This is not right.

Liberal democracies have mechanisms to help alleviate these problems. Laws and institutions can be changed to better serve the public. However, we often have to push hard to get the change we want.

If we believe that there is something wrong with society, ways to lobby for change include:

- voting
- sharing opinions with our friends, neighbours, and elected representatives
- forming or joining public interest groups (also known as civil society groups) that lobby for change
- forming or joining political parties
- peacefully protesting
- running for public office



Studies have shown that the general public is far more likely to support a movement for change if the movement follows accepted methods, and uses peaceful means.

When citizens lobby for change, it sends a signal to several different groups in society:

- like-minded people, who may be reluctant to voice their opinion, learn that others share their beliefs
- average citizens become aware of important issues
- people in power learn about the desire for change

THINK

1. In 1920, Canadian author Stephen Leacock made this statement about liberal democracy:

A man has just as much right to declare himself a socialist as he has to call himself a Seventh Day Adventist or a prohibitionist, or a perpetual motionist. It is, or should be, open to him to convert others to his way of thinking. It is only time to restrain him when he proposes to convert others by means of a shotgun or by dynamite, and by forcible interference with their own rights.

- a) Why must individuals, groups, and the press be free to express their viewpoints?
 - b) Where is the point when freedom to express an idea should be constrained?
2. Liberal democracies are open to criticism, and open to change.
 - a) What flaws do you see in our current society?
 - b) What improvements would you make to fix these flaws?
 - c) What methods do you have at your disposal to make this change happen?

3. What happens to a society if change is dictated from above, rather than being the result of the demands of people below?
4. Are there times when political change must be dictated from above, disregarding the will of the majority?
5. According to the Canadian Encyclopedia, “peace, order and good government” has come to be seen as the Canadian counterpart to the American “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Discuss the similarities and differences between these two phrases.
6. Do you think Canada is a country of peace, order and good government? Explain.