

What is the difference between power and authority?

And, why is understanding this distinction fundamental to understanding the British constitution?

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Power is the potential to act. Authority is the will to act.

Here are a couple of examples that will help you understand. The motor of a Mustang Shelby develops 500 horsepower, but it can't move the car an inch unless someone presses the gas. Similarly, a man can be as strong as an ox, but he can't lift a feather unless he wills it.

Why this distinction is fundamental to understanding the British constitution is that under the British Constitution, in Canada, the Governor General is lawfully vested with all the powers of the State, but it belongs to the people to govern themselves as they will.

The Governor General is the custodian of the people's power. It is his role to ensure that the powers of the State are exercised as the people wish. It is his role to ensure the exercise of the powers of the State with the consent of the governed, that is, by authority of the people.

To achieve this, by election, the people vest the authority in their deputies to represent and protect their wishes and interests in Parliament. They, in turn, confide the authority in a leader to advise the Governor-in-Council of the will of the people regarding their government. By this advice, parliament actually lends the authority to the Governor General to sanction the exercise of the powers of the State in accordance with the well-understood wishes and interests of the people.

The separation of the power from the authority to govern is the first of the balances in the constitutional structure conceived for the government of Canada from which naturally arise the checks that ensure a government responsible to the people for its conduct.

It is the objective of the Institute to produce a series of capsules which will bring you an understanding of the operation of the uniquely Canadian model of Responsible Government conceived by Confederation for the government of Canada.

Thank you for your attention and your interest in improving our governance.