

The First Governments

The world is divided into nearly two hundred nations, each with its own government. Governments make laws so that they can influence how the country is run and governed.

Tribes Make Rules

Ever since people started to live in groups or tribes they have needed some form of government to make and enforce rules for the benefit of the whole tribe. Thousands of years ago, small tribes or extended family groups roamed the land looking for food and shelter. They developed ways of making decisions about what the rules should be, who should do what job, and how the group should be organised. Often the strongest or the oldest members of the tribe were the main decision makers.



Australian Parliament House in Canberra

Making Decisions

About ten thousand years ago, some tribes settled permanently in one area to raise crops and farm animals. The size of these groups became larger, and making decisions became more difficult. It was evident that the way groups had been governed needed to be changed.

Over time, tribal government by chiefs developed into a system of government called a monarchy. Instead of a chief, there was a king (or sometimes a queen). When the king or queen died, power passed on to the eldest son or heir. Most people had little or no say in decisions such as how taxes would be raised and what laws would be enforced.

Parliaments Develop

Sometimes the king or queen would appoint a council of elders or warriors to advise them. This idea developed into parliaments. A parliament is an assembly of elected representatives who make laws for a state or nation. Most parliaments have a main (lower) house where laws are made, and an upper house that reviews the decisions of the lower house. The decisions are then proclaimed (approved) by the monarch, the monarch's representative (such as the governor-general) or a president before it becomes law.

Different Types of Government

In many countries people elect their government by voting for people to represent them. This system of people electing their government is called *a democracy*. In other countries an individual, a small group of powerful people, or the army takes control of the country by force. This system of government is called *a dictatorship*, where ordinary people do not have a say in how their country is run. In other countries, a single family and their descendants continue to rule. This is called *a monarchy*. In some nations there is a mixture of governing systems. For example, Britain still has a monarchy but real governing power rests with an elected parliament.

The oldest parliament

The world's oldest existing parliament is the Althing, the law-making body of Iceland, which was formed in 930 CE.