

Lesson Plan

Title

So You Think Government is Boring...

Audience

Primarily intended for Social Studies 11, but can be modified for all grade levels.

Overview

We all love to listen to a good story. Government is often viewed as being "boring", but teachers can utilize the art of storytelling to act as a medium through which they can capture their students' imaginations. Through narratives, concepts are placed within a more meaningful context, historical figures come to life, and otherwise seemingly mundane details can become memorable.

Objectives

- To engage students in the processes of government
- To foster an appreciation for the history and traditions of government
- To help students realize the impact one individual can make on government and society.

Activities and Methods

- Attached handouts. Teacher needs to pre-read the story he/she plans to use and pair it with the topic that best corresponds.
- Teacher will read selected story at the beginning and choose from the topical pairing suggestions:

[Appendix A – Gracie's Finger](#)

(Electoral boundaries and size of electoral districts)

[Appendix B – The First “Families First” \(1917\)](#)

(Suffrage, minimum wage laws, first acting female Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, first female British Empire Cabinet Minister, Independent MLA, Cabinet Solidarity)

[Appendix C – The Agony & the Architect](#)

(History of the Parliament Buildings, impact of one individual on government and society.)

[Appendix D – Off With His Head!](#)

(Role of the Speaker, History of Parliament, Parliamentary traditions)

[Appendix E – Living Legend](#)

(Role of the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, individual commitment to parliamentary democracy, civic engagement)

[Appendix F – More Than Meets the Eye](#)

(Parliamentary democracy, separating politics from government)

[Appendix G – En Garde!](#)

(Parliamentary tradition)

Duration of Activity

- Length will vary depending on how teacher chooses to incorporate individual stories into lesson plan.

Learning Outcomes

- Students will understand how individual Canadians have contributed to the formation and evolution of British Columbia's provincial government (Social Studies 11)

Materials & Resources

- Computer & internet access
- Optional: photocopier for student copies of stories

Evaluation of Activity

- Informal teacher assessment through participation in discussion

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NOTE: The ideas and opinions expressed in this classroom activity belong to their authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. The Public Education and Outreach office only edits for clarity.

Appendix A

Gracie's Finger

Grace McCarthy was a BC Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) from 1966 to 1988 for the Social Credit government under then Premier Bill Bennett.

Grace had been actively recruited by W.A.C. Bennett after a remarkable career on the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation. She held two senior cabinet posts; she helped the City of Vancouver develop as a gateway to the Pacific Rim through the federal provincial Asia-Pacific Initiative; she was a driving force for the Vancouver Trade and Convention Center, Expo' 86 and the lighting of the Lion's Gate Bridge. In 1982, she was suspected of "gerrymandering" to assist in her re-election.



"Gerrymandering" is a political term going back to 1812 when Governor Elbridge Gerry signed a bill that redistributed Massachusetts to benefit his Democratic-Republican Party. When mapped, one of the contorted districts in the Boston area was said to resemble the shape of a salamander. The term was a portmanteau of the governor's last name and the word salamander. It has evolved to the practice that attempts to establish a political advantage for a particular party by manipulating geographic boundaries to create partisan, incumbent-protected districts.

Mrs. McCarthy experienced some criticism in 1982, when the BC Electoral Boundaries Commission redrew the boundaries of her Little Mountain constituency to include an appendage of a wealthy westside Vancouver area that voted 80% Social Credit in previous elections. Political criticism ensued about this sliver of land which was nicknamed "Gracie's Finger". The actual area in question was between 16th and 33rd Avenues in Vancouver around the Arbutus Street corridor. The allegations of tampering with electoral boundaries did not stop Grace from persevering to run for the party leadership and coming second to Bill Vander Zalm in 1986.

By 1991, Premier Vander Zalm was forced to resign amid scandal allegations and the Social Credit party became divided and chose the lesser-known Rita Johnston as their new leader. Many viewed this as a mistake, especially when Johnston badly lost the 1991 election. McCarthy was chosen to replace her, but had no seat, having retired in 1988. She missed a chance to re-enter the Legislature in 1994 by 42 votes in the Matsqui riding.

Mrs. McCarthy did not slow down after politics; she co-founded the BC C.H.I.L.D. Foundation; she was awarded the Officer of the Order of Canada in 1993 and the Order of BC in 2004. Simon Fraser University and the University of British Columbia awarded her Doctor of Laws and she remains actively involved in her community today.

Appendix B

The First “Families First” (1917)

On February 26, 2011, Christy Clark was chosen as the leader of the BC Liberal Party. She was then elected in a by-election in the riding of Point Grey. Her signature campaign was “Families First”, but maybe she was taking a page from a female political hero about a century ago!

Mary Ellen Smith (1861-1933) was a fascinating feminist who immigrated to British Columbia in 1891 after teaching in England. She helped in the political campaigns of her husband, Ralph Smith, who was elected as an MLA in Vancouver. Ralph died in 1917 and Mary Ellen decided the voice of women needed to be heard.

Her campaign slogan was “Women and Children First” and it got her elected in a landslide. She set out to assist in establishing laws for a minimum wage for women and girls; establishing courts for juveniles; allowing women to sit as judges; providing pensions for women as well as assistance for deserted wives; and obtaining employment for blind children.

Mary Ellen not only became the first female MLA in BC, she went on to become the first woman Speaker in the British Commonwealth and later the first woman in Cabinet. In the true spirit of independence, she resigned from Cabinet in eight months due to feeling the rules of Cabinet solidarity restricted her political nature too much.

Mary Ellen Smith was a true BC political hero whose career ranged from raising money for Great War veterans to serving in the Canadian Red Cross to finishing as the President of the BC Liberal Party until her death in 1933.

<http://www.leg.bc.ca/info/2-2-8.htm#MarySmith>



Appendix C

The Agony & the Architect

Are great buildings always designed by trained architects?

Not always! And certainly not in the British Columbia of the late 1800's. The story of the man behind some of British Columbia's best loved public buildings is the story of a man who rose from an ordinary life with no particular skills or qualifications to the lofty heights of a brilliant career, and subsequently came to a tragic end some forty years later.

British Columbia joined Confederation in 1871 and it wasn't long before the government wanted parliament buildings that would match the optimistic spirit of the times. Victoria was selected as the capital city and the first buildings were makeshift. So in 1892, a competition was announced in a Vancouver newspaper. Local architects were invited to submit preliminary drawings for these new buildings, and amongst the many entries was a design by a man named Francis Mawson Rattenbury.

Mr. Rattenbury was not a trained architect. He was a young man of 24, fresh from England, where he had spent some time apprenticing in his uncle's architectural firm. He did not have the credentials that we would expect for an architect today, nor did they meet the standards of the times.



The competition was open to local architects, so Rattenbury entered the contest under a pseudonym: "A BC Architect". He won the competition and five years later, Victoria, still a small town on the edge of the forest, boasted a huge and impressive structure to house government. With stained glass windows, imported marble and BC stone, the structure went over budget by an enormous amount.

The same year that the Legislature opened, Rattenbury married Florence Nunn at Christ Church Cathedral, and before long they had two children. Rattenbury built a beautiful home in Oak Bay and soon was elected to city council and later became reeve (mayor).

Rattenbury went on to build numerous impressive buildings, most of them in BC. He built the second Government House, which is the official residence of the Lieutenant-Governor, and went on to build several railroad hotels, including the Empress and the Hotel Vancouver. When the Empress Hotel wanted to add a pool, Rattenbury's firm built the beautiful Crystal Garden. And at the pool's official opening in 1925, Rattenbury met a lovely young entertainer named Alma, and thus began an affair that ended his first marriage.

Divorce and a second marriage soon followed, and five years later, Francis and his young wife were off to England. His business ventures in BC were in trouble and the Great Depression had arrived; moving to England was going home.

But trouble awaited the couple there. Alma was 29 years younger than her husband and she became interested in George Stoner, the 17-year-old young man who worked in their home as chauffeur and gardener. George and Alma had an affair, and one night, while Alma's 7-year-old son slept upstairs, George took a mallet and crushed Rattenbury's skull.

There was a sensational trial. Both George and Alma confessed to the murder, although charges against her were never pressed. George confessed and was sentenced to hang. However, the public was outraged that this older "wicked" woman had scandalously seduced a 17-year-old and, in time, George's death sentence was commuted. He served seven years in prison, fought in the Second World War, and went on to live an ordinary life. Alma fell into a depression and no longer wished to live. She stabbed herself and flung herself into a river, where she drowned.

The story ends tragically for both Francis and Alma. But despite his lack of training and credentials, Rattenbury was a man of enormous talent. He left a legacy of impressive buildings throughout British Columbia that will outlast us all.

Appendix D

Off With His Head!

(NOTE: Discuss with students how your past influences who you are today. If you woke up tomorrow and had amnesia, could you really claim to know who you are, or where you were going? The same thinking can be applied to our government.)

Something to keep in mind: “If you forget where you came from, it can be tough to know where you are going.”

Did you know that the Speaker of the House acts like a referee for the MLAs? And we all know how much everyone loves the ref, right?

Well, how do they decide who gets to be the Speaker? The Speaker is chosen by secret ballot by all of the MLAs, and is, in fact, an elected MLA him or herself. It is the first order of business following a general election. The Speaker ensures that all the Members play by the House rules known as the Standing Orders. Among other responsibilities, he has powers that allow him to temporarily remove an MLA who is out of line.

Historically, the Speaker was also responsible for informing the King of the decisions made in Parliament.

The problem was, however, that none of the Members wanted to be the Speaker. Does anyone know why that might be? When the Speaker brought the news of the decisions to the King that the King was unimpressed with, often the Speaker paid the price with his head! On one particular occasion when a Speaker was chosen by the Members of Parliament, the Speaker tried to escape! He knew of the potential consequence for becoming a Speaker. Upon his attempted escape, the other members then had to physically drag him up to the Speaker's Chair so that he could assume his new position. This tradition continues today symbolically. Whenever a new Speaker is chosen, he is symbolically dragged to the Speaker's Chair by the Members, usually the House Leaders from both the governing and official opposition parties.

Charles I, King of England, Scotland and Ireland (1600 – 1649) was one notable King who did not agree with many of Parliament's decisions. As a consequence of one particular parliamentary session that Charles I did not agree with, he decided to visit Parliament himself with an armed guard to arrest five specific Members who had anti-royalist sentiments.

When His Majesty Charles I discovered that the five had disappeared before he had arrived, he asked the Speaker of the House where the five had gone. The Speaker responded with a now famous quote:

“May it please Your Majesty, I have neither eyes to see nor tongue to speak in this place, but as the House is pleased to direct of me, whose servant I am. And I humbly beg Your Majesty’s pardon that I cannot give any other answer than this.” ([See attached photo](#) for visual reference)

This incident reflects the constitutional independence of Parliament from the monarchy. It is a great symbol of our rights as individuals to have power in the land in which we live and to be involved in how and what decisions are made.

As a consequence of this incident, a symbolic bar is placed at the entrance of the Legislature/Parliament thus symbolically blocking the entrance of any future Kings. Since this date in 1645, no monarch has entered a Legislature/Parliament without the express invitation of the Speaker. As a side note, Charles I eventually became so embattled with Parliament that a Civil War ensued, and Charles I ultimately had his own head removed for refusing to abide by the wishes of Parliament.



Speaker Lenthall Asserting the Privileges of the Commons
against Charles I when Attempt was made to Seize the Five Members, 1642
by C.W. Cope, 1866

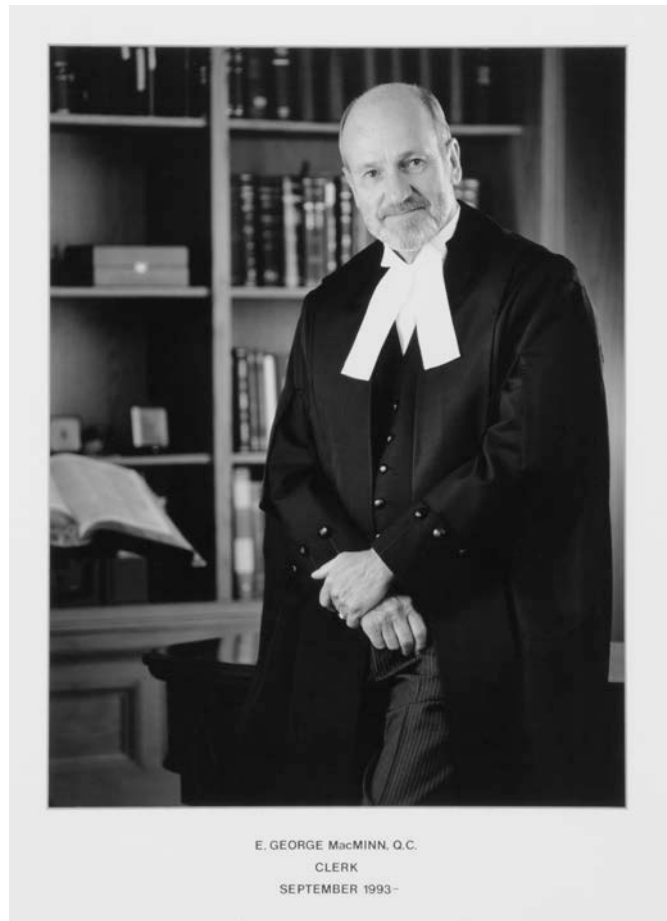
Appendix E

Living Legend

As a young man, E. George MacMinn had always displayed a strong interest in the law. Although George enjoyed his private law practice tremendously, he was later sought out to apply for the position of Clerk Assistant at the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia.

During the interview process, George was posed two questions; the first question George was asked was if he was affiliated with a specific political party, to which he replied “no”. Although George wondered if this honest reply would ruin his chances of getting the job, unknowingly, he had answered the question perfectly. Secondly, George was asked if he had a sense of humour to which he replied, “Well, I think so, sir”. Although George managed to make a good impression, ultimately, George’s appointment to the position of Clerk was decided by the fact that the person conducting his interview realized that George’s mother was his bridge partner.

While George’s appointment to the position of Clerk Assistant in 1957 was humorous, he has faithfully served the province of British Columbia for decades and is known throughout the Commonwealth for his expertise and commitment to parliamentary democracy. In fact, E. George MacMinn, OBC, QC holds the high honour of being the longest serving Clerk in the history of the Commonwealth; an accomplishment for which he was honoured with the Queen’s Medal for Outstanding Service to the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia in 2003 as well as the Order of British Columbia late in 2005.



<http://www.orderofbc.gov.bc.ca/members/obc-2005/2005-george-macminn/>

Appendix F

More Than Meets the Eye

It is so vitally important to ensure that we separate politics from our system of parliamentary democracy. Over two billion people in the world use some form of parliamentary democracy; it obviously has something going for it. Often you will hear people dismiss the proceedings of the House on the grounds that the MLAs are childish, and that they do nothing but squabble.

However, this is merely the political side that we see on the nightly news. What we have to remember; however, is the importance of the process. The fact that we have a democracy in the first place, the fact that we can choose who we want to represent us, the very fact that an institution like this even exists for debates and fervent disagreements to occur. Just take one moment to look around the world to see how many people would die seeking the opportunity to participate in the important decisions of their lives and country.

And while our parliamentary process is long and arduous, and sometimes frustrating, we must remember that the system was set up for that very purpose! That is to be slow, to be thoughtful, and to be considerate before implementing any major decisions that affect all the citizens. Therefore, the very inefficiency of our system is also its greatest strength.

Other forms of government can absolutely be faster and more reactive; however, they do not allow for participation or for majority rule.

And while we may complain or be apathetic towards our own government, the parliamentary system we have adopted is currently very near the epitome of all types of government that has ever been created.

Sir Winston Churchill (1874 – 1965) once said, “It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried.”

(class discussion)

Other quotes: “Democracy is the only system that persists in asking the powers that be whether they are the powers that ought to be.” Sydney J. Harris (1917- 1986)

(class discussion)

“The ignorance of one voter in a democracy impairs the security of all.”

John F. Kennedy (1917- 1963)

(class discussion)

“People often say that, in a democracy, decisions are made by a majority of the people. Of course, that is not true. Decisions are made by a majority of those who make themselves heard and who vote – a very different thing.”

Walter H Judd (1898 – 1994)

(class discussion)

So remember, our government has evolved and has been created for all of us to be involved, and to continue to shape our world. Get out and get involved; get out and vote!

Appendix G

En Garde!

The first Parliaments were held in churches; therefore all Members continue to bow upon entering the Parliament as a sign of respect to the original crucifixes which would have been present at the front of the church. In churches in England, the pews are arranged facing each other.

The first Members to work in Parliament brought their swords with them into the churches. They were always ready on their right hand side. That's why Members today still hit their desks with the left hand so that their right hand is ever ready to grasp their sword. Sometimes the oral arguments became so heated that sword fights would ensue. Therefore when the House of Parliament was constructed, they ensured that the seats were 2.5 sword lengths away from each other. This tradition continues today in most Commonwealth legislatures and parliaments.

In 2009, the BC Legislative Assembly had to add more Members to the House to reflect the growing population of the province following an Electoral Boundary Commission report. The House was already crowded enough but the seats are now much closer together because the rows were curved to accommodate a third row of desks. The 2.5 swords length tradition can no longer be maintained throughout the Chamber. Solution? Give the Members shorter swords!

