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Experts tell conference Canada's Constitution is a confusing mess of written and unwritten rules that allows for abuses by Prime Minister and premiers and their Cabinets

Britain, Australia and New Zealand have clarified rules to help prohibit abuses

OTTAWA – Today, the new national educational charity Your Canada, Your Constitution (YCYC) released a summary of the launching conference it held in Ottawa. The main speakers, all experts, detailed how Canada's written Constitution contains rules for the decisions and actions of the Governor General and provincial lieutenant governors, and the Prime Minister and provincial premiers, but those rules are contradicted by unwritten rules (known as "conventions") whose meaning and scope are debated by experts.

The gap between the two sets of rules creates a confusing mess that allow for what most commentators see as abuses of power. Politicians in Britain, Australia and New Zealand have all agreed to new written rules that clearly define the powers of the Prime Minister in various situations, such as calling elections, opening and closing the legislature, and votes (including on budgets) and appointments.

More than 125 people attended the conference, including representatives from 8 federal government institutions and 3 other governments, 4 countries, 4 political parties, 10 national citizen organizations, and 10 universities in 6 provinces, and the age range of attendees spanned 7 decades.

"Experts agree that Canada's written Constitution sets out rules that are not followed concerning the powers of the Governor General, provincial lieutenant governors, and the Prime Minister and premiers and their cabinets, and that no one agrees what our unwritten constitutional rules concerning these powers actually are," said Duff Conacher, Spokesperson for YCYC. "Britain, Australia and New Zealand have written down their rules, and made it clear who has the power to do what, and when, and so made their governments more democratic and accountable. Canada could do the same by simply passing a law changing the Parliament of Canada Act and other laws, and changing the related law in each province."

Philippe Lagassé, Ph.D. and Assistant Professor of Public and International Affairs at the University of Ottawa set out the broad discretion (known as "prerogative powers") that the Prime Minister and Cabinet ministers have when making many decisions in the areas of defence and national security.

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Lori Turnbull, co-author of the award-winning book *Democratizing the Constitution*, set out how the unclear prerogative powers allow Prime Ministers and premiers to open and shut down the legislature, and call snap elections, and declare a vote of confidence, whenever they want. As well, the power of the Prime Minister, most premiers, and opposition party leaders across Canada to control the career of politicians in their political party increases their ability to abuse these powers.

Keynote speaker Andrew Cohen, professor, best-selling author and award-winning journalist and professor, set out many ways in which members of the legislature, and Canadians, could be empowered, and also suggested that changes to Canada's formal constitutional ties to the British monarchy would be a step forward to building Canada as a country as it approaches its 150th birthday in 2017.

Bruce M. Hicks detailed how politicians from all political parties in Britain, Australia and New Zealand have approved new rules that govern key decisions and actions by their prime ministers and cabinets, and how these changes have not only reduced the discretion of the prime minister and ministers, but also the governor general, thereby democratizing and increasing accountability of their governments.

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