

First Nations Governments

Today many First Nations have more than one system of government. There are traditional governments and there are elected governments. They are two different ways of looking after the community.

Traditional Governments

Traditional governments are the governments of First Nations' ancestors. These governments took care of First Nations people for thousands of years.

The traditional leaders are often called Chiefs in English. Each community has a name for leaders in their own language.

In some First Nations leaders are hereditary. That means a new Chief is related to the old Chief's family. In the past, chiefs were often men.

Some First Nations hereditary systems follow the mother's side of the family. This is called matrilineal.

Other First Nations follow the father's side of the family. This is called patrilineal.

Some First Nations have other ways of choosing their traditional leaders. In these First Nations the people pick their leaders. They all agree on who is best to be the leader. This is called consensus.

Some traditional governments have councils who help make decisions. The council is made up of leaders and Elders from families and Clans in the community.

Important acts of First Nations government take place at public ceremonies where guests witness and approve the business that takes place. These are sometimes called feasts or potlatches. However, every First Nation has words in its language for these public ceremonies.

Elected Government

Elected First Nations governments started after Canada became a country. The Indian Act forced First Nations to make a new type of government. All First Nations had to have the same form of government, called a Band Council. Today many First Nations still operate under Band Councils.

Band members vote on who will be their Chief and Council. The Chief Councillor is the leader of the Band Council. Chief and Council make decisions for the community.

Some First Nations have a newer kind of government. These are Nations who have signed a treaty or a self-government agreement with Canada and British Columbia governments.

In treaty governments, the leaders are elected.

Working Together

The traditional leaders and the elected leaders often work together to govern their community. Together they look after the people. They look after the land in their traditional territory.

They keep their cultures and languages alive. They bring jobs to the community. They fix the roads. They look after the water that people drink.

They make sure their people stay healthy.