In William Golding’s novel, *The Lord of the Flies*, a group of boys find themselves stranded alone on a desert island. They have plenty of food and water but soon realize there is little hope of rescue. They begin to organize themselves to ensure their survival. The group decides to follow certain rules and to create a system to establish and enforce the rules. In other words, they decide they need a system of government.

Some type of decision-making process emerges whenever political groups are formed. The group can be as small as students deciding to hold a dance at their school or as large as a world organization promoting world peace. Once a group decides it needs a decision-making process, it then forms an organization to carry out that process. This organization is a government.

A government is a political decision-making organization that allows for common action. It enables people to do as a group what they might not be able to do as individuals. Individuals, for example, cannot defend their country against invaders. A government, however, can create a national defence force.

A government is different from a state. In Canada, the word government refers to the political organizations that exist in each municipality, each province, and federally in Ottawa. New governments are formed at each level after each election. The word state refers to the collection of publicly controlled organizations, such as the government, the bureaucracy, the courts, the police, the armed forces, the educational systems, and others, that make a country unique.

The state remains constant regardless of changes in governments.

There are many types of governments but they all have some common traits. By studying governments, political scientists better understand how groups of people are organized and how well certain types of organizations fulfill universal human needs.

### Types of Governments

It is easier to understand the governments of the world if you classify them into various types based on how they exercise power. Most political scientists suggest that there are two main types of governments.

An authoritarian government holds all political power in the country. People have little or no control over how they are governed or any choice in who their political leaders are. People exist to serve the government and the state. Many countries in the world have authoritarian governments, including Chile, Libya, and Cuba.

In countries with democratic governments, the people hold political power. They affect how they are governed and choose their political leaders. The government and state serve the people. There are democratic governments today in a number of countries, including Canada, the United States, Japan, and India.

It is important to understand that govern-
mments never adhere strictly to the definitions we try to impose on them. Many political scientists, for example, classify Nicaragua's government as authoritarian. Nicaraguans, nonetheless, elect town mayors, hold public meetings that are critical of the government, and buy Nicaraguan newspapers that criticize government policy. South Africa, on the other hand, appears to be democratic. It has a parliament and elected officials. However, the majority of South Africans are not allowed to vote in federal elections and have no control over the laws under which they live. In practice, all governments fall between the extremes of pure authoritarianism and pure democracy.

The United Nations General Assembly. The United Nations reflects the idea that, despite various styles of governing, all governments share many goals and beliefs.

Thousands of Philippines citizens gather to support the anniversary of the "People Power Revolution" that ousted the authoritarian government of Ferdinand Marcos and installed Corazon Aquino. The importance of people power was apparent again in the sweeping changes in eastern Europe in 1989.
Functions of Government

Regardless of whether governments are authoritarian, democratic, or fall somewhere between, they all perform three basic functions: legislative, executive, and judicial.

The legislative arm of government proposes bills, debates them, amends them, and finally passes them into law. A bill is a proposed law and is often called a piece of legislation. A law is a rule set by government that must be obeyed.

Parliament is Canada’s legislative arm. It is made up of the House of Commons and the Senate. In the United States, the Congress is the legislative branch of government. It comprises the House of Representatives and the Senate. In both nations, a bill must pass through both parts of the legislature before it becomes a law.

The executive is the leader of the government. It proposes bills and recommends amendments. It also implements and enforces laws. The executive is also responsible for making most government appointments, such as ambassadors, senior members of the civil service, and others. It is also responsible for the day-to-day decisions that are a part of governing.

In Canada, the executive is the Prime Minister, the Cabinet, and the governor general. The prime minister is the head of the government and the Queen is the head of state. The Governor General is her representative. In the United States, the executive is the president, who is both head of government and head of state.

The judiciary carries out the third function of government. It ensures that all laws passed by the legislature adhere to the laws and traditions of the country. If it finds that a new law is improper or illegal, it has the power to disallow that law. The judiciary is often the highest court in a country. If an individual is not satisfied with a decision made by a lower court, he or she may appeal the case to a
higher court. In Canada, a case may be appealed all the way to the Supreme Court. Its decisions are always final.

The Supreme Courts in both Canada and the United States handle the judiciary functions of government. In both countries, decisions by the Supreme Court are always respected by the citizens and by the executive and legislative branches of the governments.

In Canada and the United States, three distinct parts of government handle the three functions of government. Each part checks that the other two parts are performing efficiently and legally and are addressing the needs of the people. This separation of power, which the Americans call a system of checks and balances, exists in most democracies.

In many countries with authoritarian governments, however, one government body carries out all three functions. The executive is all-powerful. Legislative bodies may exist, but they have little or no power. The judiciary is often not independent but simply confirms all executive decisions. An authoritarian government, like all governments, nonetheless fulfills the three functions of government.

After the Second World War, the Soviet Union controlled puppet governments in many countries in eastern Europe.

A government's power is affected by the circumstances in its country or jurisdiction. The Lubican Cree, for instance, have their own government in Alberta. But the power of their government, the band council, is restricted because its people are surrounded by Canadian territory and affected by Canada’s laws, economy, and cultures. The power of the Canadian government is, in turn, restricted by the size, wealth, and international standing of the United States. No Canadian government can act without considering American cultural, economic, and defence interests. The decisions of the American government are themselves influenced by global interests and predictions about the Soviet Union's reactions to events and actions.

The nature of the society it governs affects a government's power, although this nature can change over time. Sweden has a long tradition of government involvement in social programs. For example, the government is responsible for day care and health care. In the United States, on the other hand, the government has far fewer social programs. Clearly, Swedes welcome more government intervention in their lives than do Americans.

Despite the factors that restrict their power, governments can still use a combination of four methods to exercise power. First, in many countries, a government’s power is based on a traditional respect for the state and the law. People may grumble and even protest against laws they do not like but very few advocate disobeying laws, overthrowing the government, or disrupting the state. This is the case in Canada, the United States, Iceland, and many other countries with long traditions of democracy.

In other countries, the citizens do not believe that the government has their best interests at
In 1986, members of the Lubicon Cree band blocked access to disputed lands in northern Alberta. They wanted to dramatize their claim to over 200 km² of land and force the Alberta government to negotiate.

heart. They are less likely to obey the law because of tradition. Their governments must either try to establish this tradition or use other methods to exercise power. China, for example, has no tradition of democracy. Many Chinese citizens believe laws are intended to preserve power for the government rather than to protect the best interests of the citizens.

Second, a government may try to exercise power through consensus. A consensus is an opinion shared by the majority of people. Democratic governments strive to learn what the consensus is before they create a law addressing an issue. They reason that if most people want a law, then they will probably obey that law. Democratic governments may also pass laws that they think are necessary and then try to persuade the citizens of their necessity. For example, in 1989, the Mulroney government announced a new federal sales tax. It then tried to form a nation-wide consensus about its merits. Sometimes a consensus is impossible to form in any country.

Governments of some other countries, partic-ularly authoritarian governments, pass laws without trying to establish a consensus. They use other methods to persuade people to obey laws, including fear of punishment and physical control.

Third, all governments appeal to the emotions of the governed and try to promote nationalism. Nationalism is a feeling of pride in one’s nation. Symbols such as flags and anthems that remind people of their country are prominent in schools, public buildings, sporting events, and at every gathering of political leaders. Governments realize that widespread feelings of nationalism may often render people less inclined to oppose laws or unpopular government actions. However, strong emotions can be easy to stir up but difficult to sustain. This difficulty can reduce the effectiveness of this method of exercising power.

Finally, some governments resort to force to exercise power. In most countries with democratic governments, the armed forces and police have minor roles. Many authoritarian governments, however, use the armed forces or police to ensure
that people never question, let alone disobey, laws or government officials. People who publicly question laws or decisions can be arrested, harassed, and sometimes even killed.

Force is usually very effective in protecting government power. Thousands of political prisoners are now in jails in Cuba, Chile, South Africa, and elsewhere. Historically, though, force will not allow a government to maintain power forever. People eventually always reject the use of force.

All governments use a combination of tradition, consensus, emotion, and force to exert power. Although these methods are effective, governments realize that their power and continued existence depend on the support of a large portion of the people. Throughout history, every government that has not earned the willing support of the majority of the governed has fallen.

**Utopian Governments**

A difference always exists between theory and practice. Most governments address the needs of people theoretically but in practice the needs of the people are often considered less important than the needs of the government or the state. This difference between theory and practice has frustrated many people. Some people have written of futuristic perfect governments and societies. Often, the writers do not intend to provide a realistic blueprint for an alternative society but rather to criticize the inadequacies of their current governments. They hope that their writing will bring about change. An ideal or perfect society is called a Utopia. Ironically, the word Utopia is derived from the Greek words meaning 'no place'.

In Buenos Aires, Argentina, a group called "Mothers of Argentine Disappeared Persons" demonstrated in 1983. They were protesting the government's use of force in the mid-1970s that resulted in the murder of thousands of citizens who had opposed government politics.
The first important Utopian novel was written by the English lawyer, court adviser, and philosopher, Thomas More. His two-volume book, called Utopia, was published in 1517. More’s society exists on a desert island and comprises fifty-four cities. The government is a democracy. It consists of a nationally elected assembly that oversees local assemblies chosen from among each community’s main families. The government controls the economy. There is no unemployment, no shortages or surpluses of food or other goods, no private property, and no need for money. It is a classless society with complete equality of wealth. People strive for intellectual growth rather than to accumulate material goods or status. More’s Utopia was more a criticism of his society and government than a description of some faraway place or a real plan for a better future.

Edward Bellamy was an American author and journalist who in 1888 wrote a book entitled Looking Backward. Bellamy tells the story of a man who falls asleep in 1887 and awakens in the year 2000. He finds that all of the problems of 1887, such as child labour, unemployment, and poverty, have been solved.

In 2000, society is organized like a large corporation. After finishing school, everyone becomes a labourer for three years. The most talented are then moved to more skilled positions. Those with less physically demanding jobs work longer hours. Money has been replaced by a credit system and everyone shares an equal portion of the nation’s wealth. Because economic competition and social classes have been eliminated, people are motivated solely by the desire to serve their community and each other. Except for controlling the economy, the government has a very small role in society. Government consists of a democratically elected board whose main job is to keep the peace with neighbouring nations. Artists, engineers, inventors, and other talented people have more prestige and power than politicians.

The first important Utopian novel of the twentieth century was A Modern Utopia written by American H.G. Wells in 1904. Wells’s vision differed from More’s and Bellamy’s because it imagines a worldwide Utopian state. The others describe an ideal community existing in an otherwise unchanged world.

The government in A Modern Utopia is authoritarian and is run by a ruling class called the Samurai. It comprises teachers, doctors, lawyers, and other professionals. Political leaders are picked by and from this group. All citizens are vegetarians and are forbidden to use alcohol, drugs, and tobacco. Women and men are equal. People are able to move to find work because all national borders have disappeared. There is no private property. Although some private enterprise is allowed, the Samurai control all major corporations. Permanent world peace is finally possible because there are no other nations to compete against.

All Utopian novels describe a perfect society and government. They share a common vision of a society of peace and social harmony. The writers yearn for a society without greed, hunger, homelessness, war, or any other problems that plagued their countries at the time of writing and remain with us today. They believed that some form of government would solve the world’s and humanity’s problems and fulfill the needs of both.

Summary

Although some types of governments are preferable to others, for most people, the idea of society without government is unthinkable. We expect governments to do what individuals cannot because governments allow for common action. We expect governments to allow our needs to be fulfilled.
By writing Utopian novels, critics have voiced their opinions of what perfect governments are. These novels have influenced political philosophers and have helped to create some of the political philosophies and ideologies on which many governments are based. Perhaps perfect government is not possible. But it is worth trying to improve those that we have in order to come as close to perfection as possible.

Perhaps that is why politics is sometimes called the art of the possible.