

Appendix B

Student handout: Student backgrounder – What is democracy?

The whole idea came about in Athens in 508 BC. Back then, there were kings and tyrants who ruled most countries. These people often were so power hungry that they would do anything to get more land and money... and they wanted it all for themselves. The Ancient Greek people decided that each person should have a vote about everything they did as a city. Whoever the most people voted for, won. In their democracy, everyone could have a say in what happened and anybody could propose a new law. No more rulers telling them what to do. Sounds great, right?

STOP AND THINK...

“Democracy” means rule by the people. The word is derived from the Greek words “demos” meaning the people and “kratos” meaning rule. What does the origin of the word tell you about the importance of people in this government system?

One problem that came up immediately was deciding who would be able to vote. Should people who are visiting the country be able to vote? What about little children? What are the limits on who gets to vote?

Most of the states in Greece decided that only adult male citizens could vote, and they had to own land and own their houses. That meant that in order to vote, you pretty much had to be rich.

STOP AND THINK...

What do you think of democracy in Ancient Greece so far? Do you think it would work well in Canada today? Why or why not?

There were other problems too. Because everybody had to vote on everything, it became really inconvenient for them to keep heading to a meeting place to vote. They had work to do, and all this voting was taking up a lot of time. So after a while, they decided that it was better to choose a few men who would do most of the voting, and the rest would only come when there would be a vote about something really important. Of course, picking these few men who would vote was difficult. At first, there was a lottery in Athens, Greece. If you got a winning ticket, you were on the Council of 500 for a year.

STOP AND THINK...

What are the types of problems the Greeks encountered with democracy? What do you think about how they chose to solve the problems? Can you think of another way to pick the people who would vote?

Democracy evolved a lot over hundreds of years into a system like we have today. Our Canadian system of government is called a “parliamentary democracy”. That means you do not win a lottery to become a decision maker in Canada. Instead, you need to be elected by other Canadians who pick you to represent them. The people we elect as representatives are responsible for making laws and making sure that the people who run our country are doing good things for all Canadians.

STOP AND THINK...

Why is democracy a good idea? What would happen if everyone in the country had to be a part of every decision made by the government? What would Canada be like if it were not a democratic society but a dictatorship instead? How is your classroom like a democratic society? How is it different?