

**INTRODUCTION TO THE**

# **CANADIAN LEGAL SYSTEM**



**SASHA BAGLAY**



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# INTRODUCTION TO THE CANADIAN LEGAL SYSTEM

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**PEARSON**

Toronto



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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 [WC]

**Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Baglay, Sasha, 1978–, author  
Introduction to the Canadian legal system / Sasha Baglay,  
University of Ontario Institute of Technology.

Includes bibliographical references and index.  
ISBN 978-0-13-314285-3 (pbk.)

1. Law—Canada. I. Title.

KE444.B27 2015                      349.71                      C2015-900368-7  
KF385.ZA2B27 2015

**PEARSON**

ISBN 978-0-13-314285-3



# Brief Contents

## **Part 1 Introduction to Law 1**

- Chapter 1 What Is Law? 1
- Chapter 2 Systems and Sources of Law 17
- Chapter 3 Structure of Canadian Government 42
- Chapter 4 Canada's Courts 72
- Chapter 5 Theoretical Perspectives 101
- Chapter 6 The *Constitution* and the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* 121

## **Part 2 Selected Areas of Law and Critical Perspectives 155**

- Chapter 7 Administrative Law 155
- Chapter 8 Criminal Law 179
- Chapter 9 Contract Law 202
- Chapter 10 Tort Law 226
- Chapter 11 Family Law 252
- Chapter 12 Human Rights in Canada 278

### **Chapters in Pearson Custom Library (online)**

Alternative Dispute Resolution and Restorative Justice  
Initiatives  
International Law



# Contents

Preface xvii

Acknowledgments xx

## Part 1 Introduction to Law 1

### 1 What Is Law? 1

1. How Is Law Developed and Expressed? 2
  - Box 1.1 Examples of Various Definitions of Law 3
2. What Are the Functions of the Law? 4
  - 2.1 Order and Regulation 4
  - 2.2 Justice 5
  - 2.3 Social Change 6
3. What Values Does Law Reflect and What Values Should It Reflect? 7
  - Box 1.2 Law and Its Underlying Values: Examples 8
4. What Are the Characteristics of Legal Rules? 8
5. Why Do People Obey Legal Rules? 9
6. The Rule of Law 10
  - Box 1.3 Case Study Illustration: *Henco Industries v Haudenosaunee Six Nations* (2006), 82 OR (3d) 721 11
7. Types of Law 13
  - 7.1 Domestic versus International Law 13
  - 7.2 By Subject Matter 14
  - 7.3 Public versus Private Law 14
  - 7.4 Substantive versus Procedural Law 14

Summary 15

Critical Thinking Questions 15

Further Readings and Useful Resources 15

Endnotes 15

## 2 Systems and Sources of Law 17

### Part I. Overview of Selected Systems of Law 18

1. Chthonic Legal Tradition 19
2. Religious-Based Systems of Law 19
3. Socialist Systems 20
4. Common Law System 21



5. Civil Law System	22
5.1 Common Law and Civil Law Compared	23
6. Mixed Systems	24
<b>Part II. System of Law in Canada</b>	<b>24</b>
1. Reception of European Civil and Common Law in Canada	25
2. First Nations Legal Traditions	25
<b>Part III. Sources of Law in Canada</b>	<b>27</b>
1. Legislation	27
1.1 Statutes	28
1.2 Subordinate Legislation	28
1.3 Finding and Citing Statutes and Subordinate Legislation	28
2. Case Law	30
2.1 Ratio Decidendi and Obiter Dicta	30
2.2 Binding and Persuasive Precedents	30
Box 2.1 Impact of a Binding Precedent: <i>Childs v Desormeaux</i> , [2006]	
1 SCR 643	31
2.3 Researching, Understanding, and Applying Judicial Decisions: <i>R v Hamilton</i> ,	
[2004] OJ No 3252	32
3. Interrelationship Between Case Law and Legislation	36
Box 2.2 Finding an Answer to a Specific Legal Issue	37
Summary	38
Critical Thinking Questions	38
Further Readings and Resources	39
Endnotes	39

### **3 Structure of Canadian Government 42**

<b>Part I. Systems of Government</b>	<b>44</b>
1. Democracies versus Authoritarian and Totalitarian Regimes	44
2. Republics versus Monarchies	45
3. Parliamentary, Presidential, and Mixed Systems	45
4. Unitary versus Federal States	46
<b>Part II. Structure of Canadian Government</b>	<b>46</b>
1. Branches of Government	46
1.1 Legislative Branch	47
1.1.1 Statutory Enactment Process	48
1.2 Executive Branch	51
Box 3.1 Practical Application: <i>Safe Streets and Communities Act</i> , SC 2012,	
c 1 (Bill C-10)	52
Box 3.2 Minority versus Majority Government: Refugee Reform Legislation	53
1.3 Judicial Branch	54



<b>2. Interaction Between Branches of Government</b>	<b>54</b>
2.1 Impact on the Formation of the Law	54
Box 3.3 Regulation of Tobacco Advertising: Judicial–Legislative Dialogue? ( <i>RJR-MacDonald Inc v Canada (Attorney General)</i> , [1995] 3 SCR 199 and <i>Canada     (Attorney General) v JTI-Macdonald Corp</i> , [2007] 2 SCR 610)	55
2.2 Government Accountability	56
<b>3. Federalism: The Interaction Between Levels of Government</b>	<b>58</b>
Box 3.4 Provinces as Challengers of Federal Laws: Firearms Registration	59
<b>4. External Pressures: Interest Groups</b>	<b>60</b>
Box 3.5 Example of an Interest Group: Women’s Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF)	60
4.1 Lobbying	61
4.2 Litigation	62
<b>Part III. Aboriginal Self-Government</b>	<b>62</b>
1. Brief Historic Overview	62
2. Inherent Right of Aboriginal Peoples to Self-Government and Its Implementation	64
Summary	67
Critical Thinking Questions	67
Further Readings and Useful Resources	68
Endnotes	68
<b>4 Canada’s Courts</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>Part I. Substantive Issues</b>	<b>74</b>
1. Power to Establish Courts and Appoint Judges	74
2. Functions of Courts	74
2.1 Resolving Disputes	75
2.2 Interpreting Legislation	75
Box 4.1 Practical Application: What Does “at the time of application” Mean?	75
2.3 Overseeing Administrative Decision Making	76
2.4 Reviewing Constitutionality of Government Actions and/or Legislation	76
Box 4.2 Example of a Reference Case: <i>Reference re Senate Reform</i> , 2014 SCC 32	77
3. Jurisdiction of Courts	77
4. Participants in Litigation	78
5. Structure of Canadian Courts	79
5.1 Provincial Court System: Ontario	80
5.1.1 Ontario Court of Justice	80
5.1.2 Superior Court of Justice	81
5.1.3 Court of Appeal for Ontario	82
5.1.4 Specialized Courts	82
5.2 Federal Courts	83
5.2.1 The Supreme Court of Canada	83



<b>6. Key Features of the Court System</b>	<b>85</b>
6.1 Open Court	85
6.2 Formality and Decorum	85
6.3 Adversarial System	86
<b>7. Judicial Appointments</b>	<b>86</b>
7.1 Appointments to Lowest Provincial Courts	87
7.2 Appointments to Provincial Superior Courts and Federally Created Courts	87
7.3 Appointments to the Supreme Court of Canada	88
7.4 Judicial Ethics	88
7.5 Judicial Misconduct	89
<b>8. Administrative Tribunals</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>Part II. Critical Perspectives</b>	<b>90</b>
1. Access to Justice	91
2. Adversarial System, Vulnerable Witnesses, and Discovery of the Truth	92
2.1 Does the Adversarial Process Facilitate Discovery of the Truth?	92
2.2 Is the Adversarial Process Well Equipped to Deal Sensitively with Vulnerable Witnesses?	93
Summary	95
Critical Thinking Questions	96
Further Readings and Useful Resources	96
Endnotes	96
<b>5 Theoretical Perspectives</b>	<b>101</b>
1. Natural Law	102
Box 5.1 Assisted Suicide: Can Natural Law Provide Us with a Guiding Value?	104
2. Positivism	105
Box 5.2 Natural Law versus Positivism: Hart–Fuller Debate	106
Box 5.3 Connecting Theory and Practice: Representative Democracy, Individual Liberty, and the Rule of Law	106
3. Legal Realism	107
Box 5.4 <i>Sauvé v Canada (Chief Electoral Officer)</i> , [2002] 3 SCR 519	108
4. Critical Perspectives	109
4.1 Critical Legal Studies	109
4.2 Critical Race Theory	110
4.3 Feminist Theory	111
Box 5.5 Critical Perspective: Diversity in Canadian Judiciary and Legislature	111
5. Legal Pluralism	116
Summary	118
Critical Thinking Questions	118
Further Readings and Useful Resources	119
Endnotes	119



## **6 The Constitution and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms 121**

### **Part I. Substantive Law 123**

- 1. What is a Constitution? 123**
- 2. Canada's Constitution: An Overview 123**
  - 2.1 Constitution Act, 1867 124
    - Box 6.1 Sections 91 and 92 of the *Constitution Act, 1867* 125
    - Box 6.2 Controversies Over Federal/Provincial Jurisdiction: *R v Morgentaler*, [1993] 3 SCR 463 127
  - 2.2 Constitution Act, 1982 128
- 3. Attempts for Further Constitutional Reform 129**
  - 3.1 Meech Lake Accord (1987) 129
  - 3.2 Charlottetown Accord (1992) 129
- 4. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms 130**
  - 4.1 Charter Rights 131
    - Box 6.3 Sections 1–15 of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* 131
      - 4.1.1 What is the Meaning and Scope of Each Right? 134
    - Box 6.4 Is a Fetus Considered a "Human Being" and Does it Have the Right to Life? 135
    - Box 6.5 *R v Tessling*, [2004] 3 SCR 432: Does Flying a Forward Looking Infrared (FLIR) Camera Over One's House Amount to Search and Violation of One's Privacy? 136
      - 4.1.2 Reconciling Competing Rights 137
    - Box 6.6 Reconciling Competing Rights: *R v NS*, [2012] SCJ No 72 137
  - 4.2 Limitations on *Charter* Rights 138
    - 4.2.1 Section 1 138
    - 4.2.2 Section 33 140
  - 4.3 Application of the *Charter* 140
  - 4.4 Remedies Under the *Charter* 141
    - Box 6.7 Practical Application: Exclusion of Evidence Under s. 24(2) 142
    - Box 6.8 Practical Application: *Sauvé v Canada (Chief Electoral Officer)*, [2002] 3 SCR 519 143
- 5. Impact of the Charter 145**
  - Box 6.9 Limited Nature of Judicial Review Prior to the *Charter*: *R v Quong-Wing* (1914), 49 SCR 440 145

### **Part II. Critical Perspectives 146**

- 1. How Has the Charter Influenced Political Life in Canada? 146**
  - 1.1 Judicial Role in Policy Making 146
  - 1.2 Interaction Between Legislatures and Courts in the Context of *Charter* Challenges 147
- 2. Who Has Benefited from Charter Challenges the Most? 148**
- 3. Has the Charter Brought about Positive Changes Overall? 149**



Summary	150
Critical Thinking Questions	151
Further Readings and Resources	151
Endnotes	151

## **Part 2 Selected Areas of Law and Critical Perspectives 155**

### **7 Administrative Law 155**

Box 7.1 Administrative Agencies and Abuse of Power: *Roncarelli v Duplessis*, [1959] SCR 121 157

- 1. Administrative Agencies and Decision Making: An Overview 158**
  - 1.1 Administrative Agencies 158
  - 1.2 Administrative Decision Making 163
    - 1.2.1 Powers of the Decision Maker 163
    - 1.2.2 Decision Making Procedure 163
  - 1.3 Key Principles of Administrative Law 164
- 2. Fairness of Decision Making 164**
  - 2.1 The Right to be Heard 164
    - 2.1.1 The Nature of the Decision 165
    - 2.1.2 The Nature of the Statutory Scheme 166
    - 2.1.3 The Importance of the Decision to the Individual Affected 166
    - 2.1.4 Legitimate Expectations of the Parties 166
    - 2.1.5 Procedure Chosen by the Agency 166
  - 2.2 The Right to Have a Decision Made by an Independent and Impartial Decision Maker 166
- 3. Administrative Tribunals and Fair Process 167**

Box 7.2 Example of an Administrative Tribunal: The Immigration and Refugee Board 169
- 4. Oversight of Administrative Decision Making: Appeal and Judicial Review 171**
  - 4.1 Appeal 171
  - 4.2 Judicial Review 172
    - 4.2.1 Scope of Judicial Review 172
    - 4.2.2 Standard of Review 172

Box 7.3 Choosing between the Two Standards of Review: *Canada (Citizenship and Immigration) v Khosa*, [2009] 1 SCR 339 174
- 5. Remedies 174**

Box 7.4 Judicial Review of Administrative Decisions and Remedies: *Johnstone v Canada (Border Services)*, [2014] FCJ No 455 175

Summary	176
Critical Thinking Questions	177
Further Readings and Resources	177
Endnotes	177



## **8 Criminal Law 179**

Box 8.1 Determining Principles of Criminal Liability:  
The Case of Vince Li 180

### **Part I. Substantive Law 181**

#### **1. The Basics of Criminal Law 181**

1.1 Jurisdiction Over Criminal Law and Sources of Criminal Law 181

1.2 Elements of an Offence 182

1.2.1 Actus Reus 182

1.2.2 Mens Rea 182

Box 8.2 Intent versus Motive: *R v Latimer*, [2001] 1 SCR 3 183

1.3 Safeguards to Ensure a Fair Criminal Process 184

#### **2. Types of Offences 184**

2.1 Summary Conviction, Indictable, and Hybrid Offences 184

2.2 True Crimes and Regulatory Offences 185

2.3 Incomplete Offences 185

#### **3. Parties to an Offence 186**

Box 8.3 Practical Application: Parties to an Offence 186

#### **4. Defences 187**

4.1 Self-Defence 187

4.2 Defence of Property 187

4.3 Not Criminally Responsible (NCR) 188

4.4 Automatism 188

4.5 Provocation 188

4.6 Duress 189

4.7 Necessity 189

4.8 Mistake of Fact 189

4.9 Consent 189

4.10 Intoxication 190

Box 8.4 The Defence of Intoxication: *R v Daviault*, [1994] 3 SCR 63 191

#### **5. Sentencing 192**

5.1 Sentencing Options 192

5.2 Objectives and Principles of Sentencing 193

### **Part II. Critical Perspectives 194**

1. *Bedford v Canada*: Should Sex Work be Criminalized? 194

2. *R v Hamilton*: How Should the Disadvantaged Background of an Accused Factor into Sentencing? 196

Summary 197

Critical Thinking Questions 198

Further Readings and Resources 198

Endnotes 199



## **9 Contract Law 202**

### **Part I. Substantive Law 204**

#### **1. Main Principles of Contract Law 204**

1.1 Formation of a Contract 204

1.2 Agreement 205

1.3 Intention to Create a Legally Binding Relationship 205

1.4 Consideration 206

Box 9.1 An Agreement to Obtain a *Get* (Jewish Divorce): *Bruker v Marcovitz*, [2007] SCJ No 54 206

1.5 Terms of a Contract 207

1.6 Legal Formalities 207

1.7 A Contract Must Not be Illegal 207

1.8 Consequences of Not Fulfilling Essential Elements of a Contract 208

#### **2. Capacity to Enter into Contracts 208**

2.1 Minors 208

2.1.1 Contracts for Necessaries of Life 209

2.1.2 Contracts for Nonnecessaries of Life 209

2.2 Persons with Mental Disorders and Disabilities 209

2.3 Intoxicated Individuals 210

#### **3. Privity of Contract 210**

#### **4. Circumstances Putting into Question Validity of a Contract 211**

4.1 Mistakes 211

4.2 Misrepresentation 212

4.3 Coercing a Party into a Contract 213

4.3.1 Duress 213

4.3.2 Undue Influence 213

4.4 Unconscionability 213

Box 9.2 Unconscionability: *Williams v Condon*, [2007] OJ No 1683 214

#### **5. Discharge of a Contract 214**

5.1 By Performance 215

5.2 By Agreement 215

5.3 By Frustration 215

5.4 By Operation of the Law 215

5.5 By Breach 216

#### **6. Remedies 216**

6.1 Damages 216

Box 9.3 Punitive Damages: *Whiten v Pilot Insurance Co*, [2002] 1 SCR 595 217

6.2 Rescission 218

6.3 Specific Performance 218

6.4 Injunction 218

Box 9.4 Rescission and Damages: *Murch v Dan Leonard Auto Sales Ltd*, [2013] SJ No 523 218

6.5 Rectification 219



## **Part II. Critical Perspectives 219**

- 1. Classical Contract Law: Autonomy, Efficiency, and a Minimalist State 220**
- 2. Contemporary Contract Law: Balancing Individual Autonomy and Protection of Weaker Parties 221**

Summary 222

Critical Thinking Questions 223

Further Readings and Resources 224

Endnotes 224

## **10 Tort Law 226**

### **Part I. Substantive Law 228**

- 1. Functions of Tort Law 228**
- 2. Types of Torts 229**
  - 2.1 Intentional Torts 229
    - 2.1.1 Battery 229  
Box 10.1 Battery: *Malette v Shulman et al*, 63 OR (2d) 243 (upheld on appeal: 72 OR (2d) 417 (ONCA)) 230
    - 2.1.2 Assault 231
    - 2.1.3 False Imprisonment 231
    - 2.1.4 Trespass to Land 231
    - 2.1.5 Wrongful Interference with Chattels 231
    - 2.1.6 Defamation 231
    - 2.1.7 Defences to Intentional Torts 231
  - 2.2 Negligence 232
    - 2.2.1 Duty of Care 232
    - 2.2.2 How do We Know When a Duty of Care Exists? 233  
Box 10.2 *Dobson (Litigation Guardian of) v Dobson*, [1999] 2 SCR 753: Does a Mother Owe a Duty of Care to Her Fetus? 234
    - 2.2.3 Breach of the Duty of Care and the Standard of a “Reasonable Person” 234
    - 2.2.4 Causation and Proximity 235  
Box 10.3 Causation: *Cottrelle v Gerrard*, [2003] OJ No 4194 235
    - Box 10.4 Proximity: *Palsgraf v Long Island Railway Co*, 162 NE 99 (1928) 236
    - 2.2.5 Defences to Torts of Negligence 236
- 3. Special Categories of Liability 236**
  - 3.1 Strict Liability 237
  - 3.2 Nuisance 237
  - 3.3 Occupier’s Liability 238
  - 3.4 Crown Liability 238  
Box 10.5 Policy versus Operational Decisions: *Just v British Columbia*, [1989] 2 SCR 1228 239
- 4. Contributory Fault or Negligence 239**



<b>5. Joint Tortfeasors</b>	<b>240</b>
Box 10.6 Duty of Care, Voluntary Assumption of Risk, and Contributory Negligence: <i>Crocker v Sundance Northwest Resorts Ltd</i> , [1988] SCJ No 60	241
Box 10.7 Contributory Negligence and Damages: <i>Jacobsen v Nike Canada Ltd</i> , [1996] BCJ No 363	242
<b>6. Remedies</b>	<b>242</b>
6.1 Damages	242
6.1.1 How Do Courts Calculate the Amount of Damages to be Awarded?	243
Box 10.8 Defamation and Punitive Damages: <i>Reichmann v Berlin</i> , [2002] OJ No 2732	243
6.2 Other Remedies	244
<b>Part II. Critical Perspectives</b>	<b>244</b>
1. Theoretical Perspectives on Tort Law: An Overview	244
2. What Harm is Recognized as Compensable?	245
3. What is the Impact of Gender/Race/Class Factors on the Calculation of Future Loss of Income?	246
3.1 Reliance on Gendered and Race-Specific Income Tables	246
3.2 Presumptions about Women's Lifestyles	247
3.3 Reliance on Family Background as a Predictor of Future Education and Career Achievement	247
Summary	248
Critical Thinking Questions	249
Further Readings and Useful Resources	249
Endnotes	249
<b>11 Family Law</b>	<b>252</b>
<b>Part I. Substantive Law</b>	<b>254</b>
1. Jurisdiction Over Family Law	255
2. Formation of Marriage and Cohabitation	255
2.1 Marriage	257
2.2 Cohabitation	257
3. Rights and Obligations in Marriage and Cohabitation	258
4. Dissolution of Marriage	258
4.1 Divorce	258
4.2 Annulment	259
5. Issues Upon Breakdown of Marriage or Cohabitation	260
6. Interrelationship of Family and Contract Law	260
Box 11.1 <i>Hartshorne v Hartshorne</i> , [2004] 1 SCR 550: Should a Marriage Contract Be Set Aside?	261
7. Support Payments	262
7.1 Spousal Support	262
Box 11.2 Practical Application: Andrew and Gina's Case	263



Box 11.3 *Gammon v Gammon*, [2008] OJ No 603: Should a Separation Agreement Be Set Aside? 264

7.2 Child Support 265

7.3 Enforcement of Support Payments 265

**8. Child Custody 266**

**9. Division of Property 268**

9.1 Married Couples 268

9.2 Unmarried Couples 268

**10. Family Violence 269**

10.1 Public Law Remedies 270

10.2 Private Law Remedies: Torts 271

**Part II. Critical Perspectives 272**

1. Choice, Autonomy, and Power Imbalance in Family Law 272

2. Law and Social Change: Lesbian Families, Assisted Conception, and Donor's Right to Custody and Access 273

Summary 274

Critical Thinking Questions 275

Further Readings and Resources 275

Endnotes 275

**12 Human Rights in Canada 278**

**Part I. International Human Rights 279**

1. International Human Rights Treaties 280

Box 12.1 Excerpts from the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* 280

1.1 The *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR) 283

1.2 The *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR) 283

1.3 *Convention Against Torture* (CAT) 284

2. International Treaty Bodies 284

3. Canada and the International Human Rights System 287

3.1 Canada's Sixth Periodic Report to the Committee Against Torture 287

3.2 An Individual Complaint Against Canada to the Committee Against Torture 289

4. Do International Human Rights Make a Difference? 290

4.1 What is Canada's International Human Rights Record? 291

**Part II. Canadian Human Rights Act and Provincial Human Rights Codes 292**

1. Situation Prior to the Implementation of the *Canadian Human Rights Act* and Provincial Codes 293

2. Key Elements of Human Rights Systems 293

2.1 Types of Discriminatory Treatment and Prohibited Grounds of Discrimination 293

2.2 Duty to Accommodate 294



Box 12.2 How Human Rights Complaints Can Make a Difference: *Lepofsky v Toronto Transit Commission* (2005 and 2007) 294

Box 12.3 The Duty to Accommodate: Case Examples 295

2.3 Human Rights Commissions and/or Tribunals 296

**3. Ontario *Human Rights Code* and System 296**

Box 12.4 Remedies: *Qureshi v G4S Security Services (Canada) Ltd*, [2009]

OHRTD No 428 298

Summary 299

Critical Thinking Questions 299

Further Readings and Resources 300

Endnotes 300

## **Chapters in Pearson Custom Library (online)**

### **Alternative Dispute Resolution and Restorative Justice Initiatives**

#### **Part I. Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR)**

**1. An Overview of ADR**

1.1 Advantages of ADR

Box CW1.1 Limitations of Litigation: *Suzuki v Munroe*, [2009]

BCJ No 2019

1.2 Routes to ADR

1.3 Understanding Conflict

1.3.1 Typology of Conflicts

1.3.2 Typology of Responses to Conflict

**2. ADR Mechanisms**

2.1 Negotiation

2.2 Mediation

2.3 Arbitration

2.4 Comparison of Negotiation, Mediation, Arbitration, and Court Adjudication

**3. Factors of Power and Culture in ADR**

3.1 Power Dynamics

3.2 Culture

Box CW1.2 Example of ADR: Resolution of Aboriginal Land Claims

**4. ADR and Court Processes**

#### **Part II. Restorative Justice**

**1. The Concept of Restorative Justice**

**2. Restorative Justice Initiatives in the Criminal Justice System**

2.1 Victim–Offender Mediation

2.2 Group Conferencing

2.3 Sentencing Circles



Summary  
Critical Thinking Questions  
Further Readings and Resources  
Endnotes

## **International Law**

### **Part I. Basics of International Law**

- 1. Main Characteristics of Public International Law**
  - 1.1 The Difference Between Domestic and International Law
  - 1.2 Governing Principles of Public International Law
- 2. Sources of Public International Law**
  - 2.1 Customary International Law
  - 2.2 Treaties
  - 2.3 Interrelationship Between Treaties and Customary International Law
- 3. Interrelationship Between Public International Law and Domestic Law**

### **Part II. International System**

- 1. Key Principles of Interstate Relations**
  - 1.1 Recognition
  - 1.2 Reciprocal versus Community Rights and Obligations
  - 1.3 Jurisdiction
  - 1.4 State and Diplomatic Immunity
    - 1.4.1 State Immunity
    - 1.4.2 Diplomatic Immunity
  - Box CW2.1 Suing a State for the Infliction of Torture: *Kazemi Estate v Islamic Republic of Iran*, 2014 SCC 62
  - 1.5 State Responsibility
  - Box CW2.2 Attributability: *US v Iran*, [1980] ICJ Rep 3
- 2. The United Nations**

### **Part III. Selected Areas of Public International Law**

- 1. Responsibility To Protect**
- 2. Prohibition on the Use of Force or Threat of Use of Force**
  - 2.1 Self-Defence
  - 2.2 Use of Force Under Security Council Authorization
- 3. International Criminal law**
  - 3.1 International Crimes
  - 3.2 International Criminal Tribunals and the International Criminal Court

Summary  
Critical Thinking Questions  
Further Readings and Resources  
Endnotes

Glossary 304

Index 308



# Preface

This book was inspired by my experience of teaching a first-year Introduction to the Canadian Legal System course at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT). The course needed the right balance between substantive law and theory, sophistication and accessibility, and breadth of coverage and depth of analysis, so I wrote the book with these considerations in mind. On the one hand, it is an introductory text intended primarily for first-year university students in disciplines such as law and society, political science, and legal studies. It may also be a useful resource for some second-year university courses as well as college students in law-related programs. On the other hand, the book goes beyond a mere outline of the basics and seeks to help students challenge and question legal rules. It includes a variety of case studies that exemplify the workings of the law and show students the connections between the discussed rules and real life. The writing of this book was an enjoyable learning experience, and I hope the final product will offer a similarly accessible and exciting learning opportunity for you, the reader.

The book is divided into two parts. Part 1 represents a general introduction, covering the systems and sources of law, structure of Canadian government, Canada's courts, theoretical perspectives on the law, and the *Constitution* and the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Part 2 examines six selected areas of law: administrative law, criminal law, contract law, tort law, family law, and human rights in Canada. Each chapter in this part provides not only an outline of substantive law, but also a critical analysis of its selected issues, utilizing theoretical perspectives discussed in Part 1.

In addition to the printed book, the Pearson Custom Library contains two more chapters that can be accessed electronically on the Companion Website; they deal with alternative dispute resolution (ADR) and international law. The ADR chapter describes three main mechanisms of resolving disputes outside of traditional court litigation processes (negotiation, mediation, and arbitration) as well as provides an overview of typologies of conflicts and responses to conflicts—information that helps us to better understand underlying tensions between parties to a dispute and to find more effective ways to address them. The chapter on international law outlines main characteristics of public international law and its difference from domestic law, provides an overview of the United Nations as the main international organization that helps promote peace and interstate cooperation, and briefly reviews three selected areas of international law: the responsibility to protect, prohibition on the use of force in interstate relations, and international criminal law.

Two major themes resonate throughout the book:

1. Principles of liberty, justice, and limited government as guiding values of our legal system. They are reflected and engaged in one way or another in all areas of law. The constitutional structure of our government protects individual liberties and provides



for a range of mechanisms that serve as a check against arbitrary and abusive use of power. The ideas of justice are promoted through the rules of various areas of law: for example, in tort law, through the obligation of wrongdoers to compensate victims for the harm inflicted; in criminal law, through imposition of punishment on offenders; and in administrative law, through the requirements of fairness in government decision making.

2. **Pluralism of perspectives and critical analysis.** The book emphasizes that there are multiple ways of understanding and analyzing the law: law can be defined in different ways and there may be a variety of views on its underlying values and functions. The book offers students a range of perspectives that can be used for the analysis of legal phenomena. It emphasizes that understanding of the law cannot be separated from its critical analysis: it is not enough to know the content of legal rules; it is necessary to question their underlying rationales, evaluate their perceived objectivity and neutrality, as well as explore the potentially differential impacts of those rules on various groups in society.

As you read the book, you will discover that law does not always provide clear or satisfactory answers; it is a process that evolves under the influence of many factors, including our everyday practices in applying the law, behaving according to it, or challenging rules that we consider unfair or illegitimate. Learning the law is a constant quest, but this is what makes it so exciting. Enjoy the journey!

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# Acknowledgments

This book project was a bit more challenging and time-consuming than I originally anticipated. Nevertheless, it was a wonderful and rewarding experience, in large part due to the support of my family (mom and dad, you are a constant source of love and inspiration) and friends (Lena, thank you for being there to listen to my stressed out ramblings ☺). Thank you, all! Many thanks to my colleagues at UOIT, particularly Rachel Ariss and Thomas McMorro, for providing very helpful comments on the draft chapters of the book (Tom, I still owe you many, many dinners ☺).

I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the following reviewers whose comments helped shape the first edition of *Introduction to the Canadian Legal System*: Walter Babicz, University of Northern British Columbia; Graham M. Bennett, University of Waterloo; Leo de Jourdan, Canadore College; Stephen Duggan, Humber College; Greg Flynn, McMaster University; Curtis Fogel, Lakehead University; Mike Gamble, Humber College; Kevin Guest, Seneca College; Melanie Marchand, Georgian College; Craig Stephenson, Conestoga College; Larry White, Seneca College; and Brian Young, Camosun College.

I also appreciate the help of all Pearson Canada staff involved in this project, including Matthew Christian, Madhu Ranadive, Cheryl Finch, Andrea Falkenberg, and copy editor Laurel Sparrow of Sparrow & Associates.

**Sasha Baglay**



# Chapter 1

## What Is Law?

### Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- Describe at least five approaches to the definition of law.
- Explain three main functions of law.
- Name three main characteristics of legal rules.
- Describe three main reasons why people obey legal rules.
- Explain the notion of the rule of law.
- Name four ways to classify legal rules.

### Chapter Outline

#### Introduction

1. How Is Law Developed and Expressed?
  - Box 1.1 Examples of Various Definitions of Law
2. What Are the Functions of the Law?
  - 2.1 Order and Regulation
  - 2.2 Justice
  - 2.3 Social Change
3. What Values Does Law Reflect and What Values Should It Reflect?
  - Box 1.2 Law and Its Underlying Values: Examples
4. What Are the Characteristics of Legal Rules?
5. Why Do People Obey Legal Rules?
6. The Rule of Law
  - Box 1.3 Case Study Illustration: *Henco Industries v Haudenosaunee Six Nations* (2006), 82 OR (3d) 721
7. Types of Law
  - 7.1 Domestic versus International Law
  - 7.2 By Subject Matter
  - 7.3 Public versus Private Law
  - 7.4 Substantive versus Procedural Law



# Introduction

What is law? At first blush, it seems to be an easy question: everyone intuitively knows what law is. Yet, on further contemplation, you may discover that there is no one simple answer to it. For centuries, scholars have debated the issue and come up with a variety of responses. In fact, in order to answer “What is law?”, we need to examine at least five sub-questions:

- How is law developed and expressed? That is, what form does it take: oral narrations? written documents? ceremonies?
- What are the functions of law in society?
- What values does law reflect and what values should it reflect?
- What are the characteristics of legal rules?
- Why do people obey legal rules?

In this chapter, we will discuss each of the above questions and familiarize ourselves with the concept of the rule of law and various ways to classify legal rules. The ultimate objective of this chapter is to introduce you to various approaches to understanding the law and its forms, functions, and characteristics.

## 1. HOW IS LAW DEVELOPED AND EXPRESSED?

Read the two descriptions that follow. In your opinion, which one more accurately reflects how law is developed and expressed?

*Description 1:* Law is a system of rules that are created by a government authority and supported by the enforcement powers of the state. The rules appear in a written form as statutes, regulations, and judicial decisions. Rules are created according to formal, centralized, and strictly prescribed processes. While the general population may have some input into the formation of legal rules, for the most part, it is delegated to specialized bodies: statutes are passed by legislatures; regulations, rules, and policies are developed by various executive departments; and common law rules are developed by courts. Legal rules are arranged in a hierarchy, with the *Constitution* being the supreme law with which all other laws must comply.

*Description 2:* Law is “the expression of the way to live a good life.”<sup>1</sup> It derives from multiple sources: customs; codes and regulations made by chiefs and clan elders; creation stories; and observation of the physical world.<sup>2</sup> Rules are produced in a decentralized manner, often through deliberation and discussion by community members. Such meetings can be formal or informal, ad hoc or highly structured.<sup>3</sup> Law is interrelated with spiritual, political, and other practices of a community. While some rules are written, others are passed through oral narration from generation to generation. Spiritual connection to the land is of great significance to the community. The law’s role is to help maintain good relations within the community, with other communities, and with the land and its inhabitants.<sup>4</sup>



Which of the two descriptions provides an accurate characterization of the development and expression of the law? Actually, both of them do. Roughly speaking, description 1 is closer to the system established by the dominant European settler society in Canada—something that many of us are more familiar with. It reflects a state-centred approach to law: law is produced and enforced by government authorities in a highly structured and hierarchical way. Description 2 more closely reflects Aboriginal legal tradition, which represents a deliberative, nonhierarchical, and community-driven process of law creation. Both of these forms of law (descriptions 1 and 2) are present in Canada.

These examples show us that law may be expressed in a variety of ways and should not be understood merely as a system of government-pronounced rules. In fact, in every jurisdiction, various legal regimes exist at the same time: there are centralized rules produced by the state; local customs that developed through habitual long-term practices of a given community; legal traditions of indigenous communities; and rules developed by other nonstate actors such as professional associations, corporate groups, and international bodies. The idea of **legal pluralism** reflects precisely this multiplicity of legal regimes developed by various actors (state and nonstate) and at different sites (local, national, international). (For more on legal pluralism, see Chapter 5.) The Canadian legal system may be better understood through the lens of legal pluralism.

Law is not a mysterious domain reserved exclusively for lawyers and government officials. Each and every one of us can contribute to the development of the law, but in order to do this, we first need to gain a better understanding of its main structure and characteristics—the issues that this book helps to illuminate. Box 1.1 gives some examples of how some writers have described law.

## Box 1.1

### Examples of Various Definitions of Law

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (1265–1274): “Law . . . is nothing else than an ordinance of reasons for the common good, made by him who has care of the community, and promulgated.”

Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–1769): “Law, in its most general and comprehensive sense, signifies a rule of action; and is applied indiscriminately to all kinds of action. . . . And it is that rule of action, which is prescribed by some superior, and which the inferior is bound to obey.”

*Black’s Law Dictionary* (7th edition, 1999): “Law is the regime that orders human activities and relations through systematic application of the force of politically organized society, or through social pressure, backed by force, in such a society.”

Paul Schiff Berman, *Global Legal Pluralism: A Jurisprudence of Law beyond Borders* (2012) at 56: Law is “what people view as law. This formulation turns the what-is-law question into a descriptive inquiry concerning which social norms are recognized as authoritative sources of obligation and by whom.”



There is no single definition of law. As you can see from the examples in Box 1.1, there are as many definitions as there are theorists. For the purpose of our discussion, it is useful to highlight two ways of characterizing law: a narrow and a broad approach. A narrow approach understands law as a system of prescribed rules. It reflects a more practical orientation of the study of law: we need to know what the rules are in order to identify our rights and obligations, and to know the consequences of our actions and the ways to protect our interests. Much of the discussion in this book is dedicated to this practical information and focuses primarily on the rules created by state authorities.

A broader perspective characterizes law as a process of searching for and formulating principles by which society should operate. It can be viewed as “. . . a social experience that requires us to associate with one another and communicate about how we should best conduct our affairs.”<sup>5</sup> Law is not static; it changes and evolves as a result of deliberation and engagement of various actors with the law, including individuals in their everyday activities. Law reflects a particular worldview of a given society and changes along with it. This perspective will be useful for our critical analysis of the law: what objectives does law serve? What should be its objectives? Does it always reflect perspectives of all diverse groups in society? How does it help to ensure legitimacy and accountability of the state and other powerful actors?

## 2. WHAT ARE THE FUNCTIONS OF THE LAW?

Law performs multiple functions, but we will focus only on the following three:

- establishment and maintenance of order in society;
- promotion of justice and fairness; and
- response to and promotion of social change.

### 2.1 Order and Regulation

Law establishes rules and parameters of behaviour for individuals, corporations, and the state. It can create incentives to encourage desirable behaviour and impose sanctions to discourage undesirable conduct. Law helps classify human social activities and create rules governing each particular area of those activities.<sup>6</sup> It sets out the scope and limits of state authority. It helps prevent and settle disputes by delineating actors' rights and responsibilities. Law allows us to “speak the same language” in the sense that it creates certain predictable patterns of behaviour: we know what to expect from one another.

The content and underlying rationales of the rules are defined by the nature and worldview of a given society. At a high level of abstraction, we can distinguish two prominent perspectives on society: conflict and consensual. The conflict model relies on the ideas of such philosophers as Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and Karl Marx (1818–1883), while the consensual perspective can be identified with the ideas of John Locke (1632–1704), for example.

**Hobbes** viewed people as selfish and violent. In the “state of nature,” an individual's life would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”<sup>7</sup> Hence, the purpose of public institutions



and the law would be largely coercive in order to restrict the violent nature of human beings. **Marx** also highlighted the oppressive nature of the law, although from a different perspective. He viewed society as consisting of two opposing classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie is in the position of power: it holds wealth, controls the means of production, and has political influence. In contrast, the proletariat is in an oppressed position, which the bourgeoisie seeks to exploit in order to gain more from the workers' labour at the lowest cost. In this system, law defined by class division is a tool of oppression in the hands of the rich and powerful bourgeoisie. A Marxist perspective can be applied more broadly to highlight power imbalances and divisions between different groups in society.

In contrast to the conflict perspective, **Locke** viewed society as largely peaceful and cooperative. While individuals do agree to cede some of their freedoms to a central authority, such authority does not take a strongly coercive nature.<sup>8</sup> Law is focused on promoting individual rights and interactions rather than stringently controlling human behaviour.

Of course, the conflict and consensus perspectives reflect two ideal types. Hardly any contemporary society can be viewed as reflecting a model based exclusively on conflict or on consensus. Rather, they are located somewhere on the spectrum between the two extremes, often combining both conflict and consensus dynamics. For example, a large part of the history of interactions between the First Nations and settler communities in Canada can be characterized by conflict and oppression. European settlers employed law, among other means, in order to limit the rights of the First Nations communities and suppress their culture, practices, and traditions (see more on this in Chapters 2 and 3). The lack of consideration of the First Nations' interests provoked challenges and resistance from those communities, which periodically erupted in physical standoffs such as those at Oka and Ipperwash. Since the 1990s, government policy has signalled a shift toward a more consensual approach, emphasizing negotiation and reconciliation. For example, negotiation (as opposed to litigation) is considered a preferred approach to resolving land claims (for more on this, see Chapter 3 and the chapter on alternative dispute resolution and restorative justice on the Companion Website). However, conflicts and tensions still exist for a variety of reasons, including protracted and ineffective land claim resolution processes. Thus, current interactions between the First Nations and settler communities can be characterized by both conflict and cooperation.

## 2.2 Justice

Law is usually considered instrumental in promoting a just society. However, just as there is no single definition of law, there is no single definition of justice. Justice can be viewed as one of the principles used to regulate human interactions and address conflicts. It can take several forms. Here, we will discuss four forms of justice: distributive, corrective, retributive, and restorative.

**Distributive justice** refers to rules prescribing how resources and entitlements are to be allocated in a given society. The allocation can be made according to various criteria: equality (each citizen gets an equal share), merit, needs, proportion of one's contribution,



or other considerations. The principles of distributive justice can be found in many aspects of law. For example, rules of taxation form part of a system of redistribution of wealth in society. Eligibility criteria for social assistance reflect allocation of supports on the basis of need. Certain rules of contract law (e.g., those that help protect weaker parties from being taken advantage of by more powerful parties) can also be said to help ensure more equal distribution of wealth in society (see Chapter 9).<sup>9</sup>

**Corrective justice** focuses on remedying inequality that results from wrongdoings or unfair dealings between individual parties. Unlike distributive justice, which deals with issues in society at large, corrective justice is focused on individual interactions. For example, if an individual's property is damaged, the initial equality between the wrongdoer and the victim is lost. A corrective justice approach seeks to restore equality and return the victim to their original position. Corrective justice principles can be found, for example, in tort law (see Chapter 10) and certain aspects of criminal law (e.g., wrongdoers being ordered to pay reparations to victims).

**Retributive justice** provides a different perspective on how to respond to wrongdoings. It reflects an idea that a wrongdoer should be subject to punishment proportionate to the degree of blameworthiness. The suffering imposed on the wrongdoer is intended to punish and to deter, as well as to advance social objectives such as order, safety, and crime reduction. The ideas of retributive justice are most commonly found in criminal law.

**Restorative justice** offers yet another approach to addressing wrongdoings. It views an offence as an event that ruins the relationship between a wrongdoer and a victim as well as the relationships within a community. Correspondingly, restorative justice focuses on re-establishing the harmony in these relations through problem solving, dialogue, reconciliation, and forgiveness. The direct communication between the wrongdoer, the victim, and the community is key to the process. Restorative justice is employed in various contexts, including criminal law (e.g., victim–offender mediation, sentencing circles (see the chapter on alternative dispute resolution and restorative justice on the Companion Website)), and national reconciliation in the aftermath of civil wars and widespread human rights abuses.

## 2.3 Social Change

Law shapes our understanding of what is acceptable, reasonable, and “natural.” It influences how we conceive of our rights and interests and ways of pursuing them; how we think of justice and fairness; and where we draw the line between public and private activity.<sup>10</sup> Law is a powerful force that not only establishes parameters for our conduct but also creates a frame of reference for our thinking. Correspondingly, law can play an important role in promoting **social change** (that is, modifications in how individuals interact with each other and the state, how they govern themselves, what values they consider important, and how they organize various activities in public and private spheres).<sup>11</sup>

There is a complex interplay between law and social change. On the one hand, law has to follow changes in society: it reflects society's values and responds to new developments that need a regulatory framework. For example, the expansion of Internet use necessitated



legal regulation of various related issues such as privacy, freedom of speech, electronic commerce, and protection from cybercrimes. On the other hand, law can also help promote changes in society. For example, the adoption of federal and provincial human rights codes can be said to contribute to the strengthening of the overall culture of equality and nondiscrimination. In most cases, however, law can be seen as both a result and a cause of social change. For instance, the recognition of same-sex marriage in Canada can be considered to reflect the growing acceptance of same-sex relationships in society. At the same time, such official recognition can also be seen as strengthening the protection of gay rights and promoting further acceptance of same-sex marriage by the wider public.

### 3. WHAT VALUES DOES LAW REFLECT AND WHAT VALUES SHOULD IT REFLECT?

This issue has been the subject of extensive and ongoing debate. Chapter 5 provides a more detailed overview of various theoretical approaches to understanding the law. In this section, we will only commence the discussion by raising a few questions: how do we determine what values laws should reflect? Are laws neutral and objective?

Natural law and positivism were among the early theoretical approaches to grapple with some of the above issues. **Natural law** theorists argue that there exist objective, identifiable, “natural values” and that it is these values that must be reflected in man-made laws. If laws are inconsistent with natural law principles, such laws are invalid. For example, criminal laws punishing murder can be seen as reflecting a natural law principle that protects the sanctity of human life. We can expect to find natural law principles universally across all societies, cultures, and historic periods. Now, pause for a moment and think: can you identify any values that can be considered natural values?

You may have named such values as liberty, dignity, or inviolability of the individual person and property. Although we can find the reflection and protection of these values in laws of various societies, the understanding of other natural values may vary from society to society. For example, is adultery a crime? Should gay couples be allowed to marry? Is the death penalty permissible? Even within the same society there may be disagreements as to what constitutes a natural value in these cases. For instance, in relation to assisted suicide, what is the core natural value that should be protected: the sanctity of human life (even where the person does not wish to continue living in extreme pain), or the individual right to choose when and how to die?

**Positivism** provides a different perspective on law. It focuses on what laws actually say as opposed to their consistency with moral or natural law principles. The validity of the law is not tied to morality, but rather depends on whether it was enacted by a legitimate authority according to a prescribed procedure. Thus, a positivist approach to the issue of assisted suicide would be to examine what laws are in place and how they have been enacted.

The twentieth century (particularly, its second half) saw the development of critical scholarship that started to question the neutrality and objectivity of laws. Among these critical approaches are legal realism, critical legal studies, critical race theory, and feminist



## Law and Its Underlying Values: Examples

Different societies may prioritize different values. For example, Western tradition places paramount importance on individualism, autonomy, and equality. Correspondingly, legal rules focus on protecting individual freedoms and creating preconditions for persons to freely pursue their choices in life.<sup>12</sup> The responsibility for bettering oneself rests with the individual. The law does not define what a good life is and is not intended to ensure that everyone has a good life;<sup>13</sup> it only creates preconditions for individuals to pursue their visions of a good life. We can find these principles reflected in many areas of law: individual rights and freedoms in constitutional law, freedom of contract in contract law, various remedies to protect individual interests and property, and the like.

However, not all cultures place the same emphasis on autonomy, equality, and individualism.

For instance, the First Nations legal tradition is more community oriented. Law interwoven with cultural and spiritual practices is seen as a guide for how to live a good life, in harmony with the community and the land. Land itself is considered not merely a resource, but a source of spirituality. It is a part of an interconnected system that is necessary for a community's survival.<sup>14</sup> Control over land is framed not in terms of ownership but rather of trusteeship where the current generation is taking care of the land on behalf of future generations. From this comes the importance of protecting the land from being taken away or being subject to extensive development that can alter a community's way of life. This view often contrasts with Western tradition, which usually views land merely as a resource that can be owned and used for the owner's benefit or general economic development.

studies. The detailed discussion of these approaches is contained in Chapter 5, so here it will suffice to briefly mention only two points. First, these approaches highlight that law must be understood in its broader social context and with the consideration of economic, political, and other factors that influence its content and application. Second, the unequal position of various groups in society impacts their ability to shape the law. Groups that have more power or are more vocal in society have a better chance to have their perspective reflected in legal rules. For example, feminist and critical race theories expose that laws tended to reflect the views and interests of white, middle-class men who dominated legislatures and courts. Thus, in order to identify what values a law reflects, we need to find out how that law came about and what its actual effect on various groups in society is. Box 1.2 gives some examples of law and its underlying values.

## 4. WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF LEGAL RULES?

In contemporary societies, a variety of rules regulate our conduct but not all of them are legal rules. For example, the rules of etiquette and good manners are not officially prescribed, yet we often feel compelled to follow them. So, what distinguishes legal rules from social norms?



As in relation to other questions discussed in this chapter, there is no universal agreement on characteristics of legal rules. Various theories of law would define somewhat differently what makes a rule legal. For the purpose of our discussion, we will take note of three factors that can help us determine whether a rule is a legal one: how a rule is created; whether it is backed up by a particular authority; and what the “virtues” of legal rules should be.

First, legal rules are created in a particular manner, following a certain process having more or less formality. What process specifically is to be followed depends on a given community and its legal tradition. For example, in Western tradition, norms are created through legislative enactment as well as judicial decision making. In the First Nations communities, they are created through various formal and informal processes, which often involve broad community participation and cultural practices.

Second, legal rules are usually identified with appeal to a particular authority and official recognition of that rule. Some consider that it is the enforcement authority of the state that makes a rule legal. If a legal rule is violated, the offender may be subject to sanctions and/or the victim may turn to authorities to affirm or restore violated rights. In contrast, this is not the case for social norms, for example. However, not everyone agrees that backing by a state authority is an essential element of a legal rule. As briefly mentioned in section 1, legal pluralism recognizes that law may come from both state and nonstate authorities. For example, rules of First Nations communities are not technically backed up by the authority of the state, but they still constitute law and rely on community enforcement.

Third, some theorists identified virtues that legal rules should possess. For example:

- Legal rules should be prospective rather than retroactive. As a matter of fairness, individuals should know the rules in advance in order to be able to make informed decisions about compliance.
- Legal rules should be reasonably constant. On the one hand, laws should not be changed too frequently, but, on the other, they need to be amended from time to time in order to respond to changes in society.
- Legal rules should be intelligible. Individuals should have a reasonably clear idea about what the rule is and what the consequences of a given course of action are.
- Legal rules should be accessible. Individuals should know where to find them and whom to speak to if they have a question about those rules.<sup>15</sup>

## 5. WHY DO PEOPLE OBEY LEGAL RULES?

Most of the time, people follow legal rules. Why is this so? Is it because they are afraid of being caught and punished? Or because they believe that disobeying the law is morally wrong? Or do they do it out of habit?

All of the above-mentioned reasons may partially explain why people obey legal rules. The threat of sanctions can be a powerful motivator to follow the rules. In fact, the whole of criminal law is based on this presumption. It is often argued that the more severe and