



Guide
to the *Canadian*
HOUSE OF COMMONS

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Guide to the Canadian House of Commons. 2nd edition — Ottawa:
Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons, 2002.

14, 14 p. : ill.; cm.

Cover title.

Text in English and French with French text on inverted pages.

Title on added t.p.: Guide de la Chambre des communes du Canada.

ISBN 0-662-66253-9

X9-26/2002

1. Canada. Parliament. House of Commons. I. Canada. Parliament. House of Commons.

JL 161

Second Edition

Catalogue No. B100 (01/02)

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House of Commons
Chambre des communes

Every day, there is something in the news about the House of Commons. It may be about a bill that was passed or a statement by a Member of Parliament. Yet for all the attention the House receives, many Canadians still have questions about what happens there and the role that Members of Parliament play.

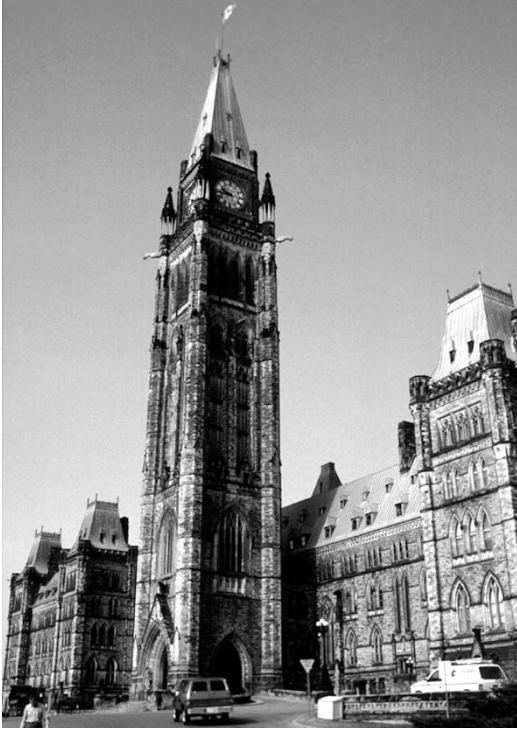
The idea behind this guide is to answer some of those questions. It explains how the House of Commons fits into Canada's parliamentary system of government. It also describes the work done in the Commons and gives a look at the day-to-day life of a Member of Parliament.

The House of Commons is a fascinating place. It is a forum where all Canadians have a direct link to the governing of the country. In the Commons Chamber, the nation's most critical issues are debated, and Members can express the views of the people they are elected to represent. By understanding how the House of Commons works, Canadians will be in a better position to judge the performance of their representatives and to see how they themselves can participate in our system of government.

Peter Milliken, M.P.
Speaker of the House of Commons



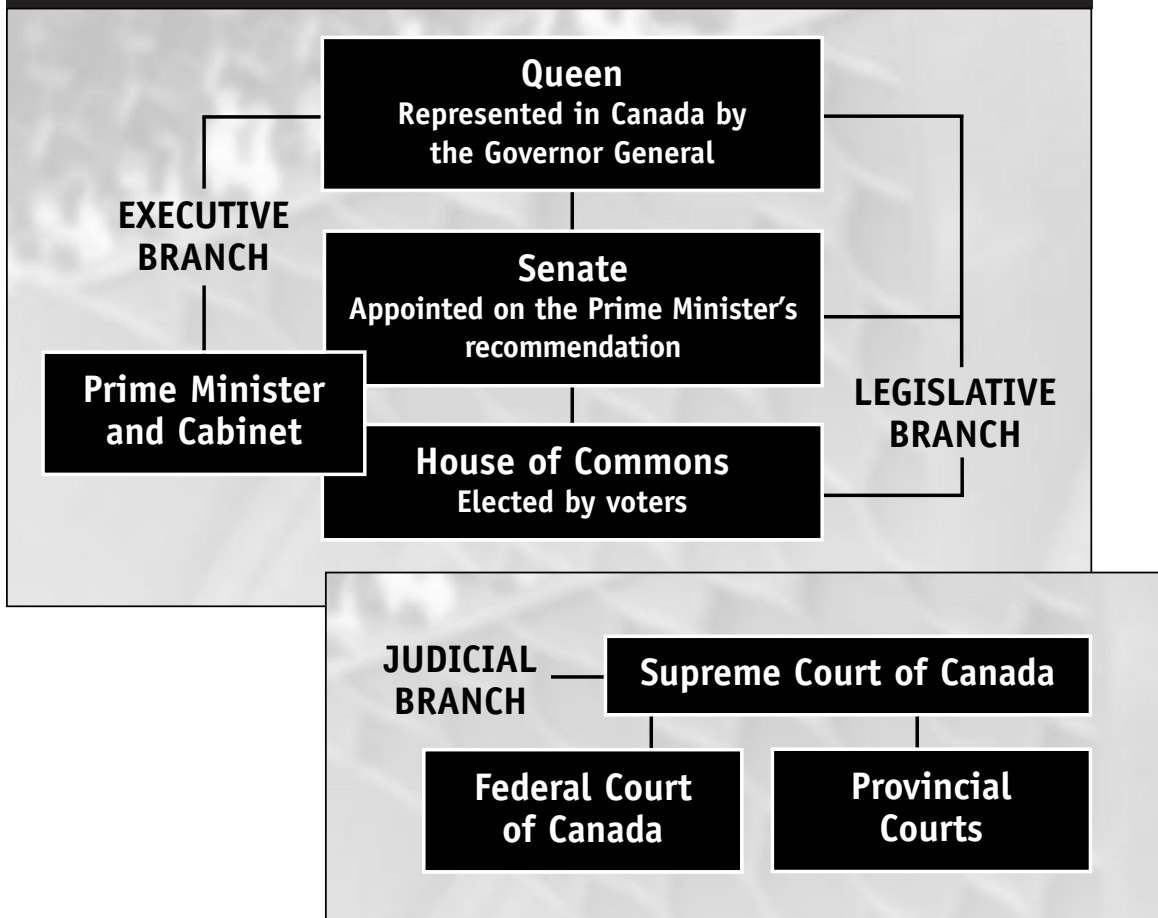
THE CANADIAN PARLIAMENT



Our system of government is part of the reason why Canada is known around the world as a good place to live. Canada's parliamentary system is open and democratic. It offers the opportunity for people to give their input and it is designed to make sure proposals for laws are carefully considered.

Canada's Parliament consists of three parts: the Queen, the Senate and the House of Commons. They work together to make the laws for our country. The Queen, the Prime Minister and Cabinet make up the executive branch. They carry out or "execute" the laws. The legislative branch makes the laws, and the judicial branch — which is not part of Parliament — applies them.

CANADA'S PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEM



THE QUEEN

Canada is a constitutional monarchy. This means that the laws governing Canada recognize the Queen as the formal Head of State. All federal laws are made in the Queen's name. She also performs many important ceremonial duties when she is visiting Canada.

THE GOVERNOR GENERAL



The Governor General's Standard is a symbol of the Crown's sovereignty in Canada

The Governor General is the Queen's representative in Canada. The Queen appoints the Governor General on the advice of the Prime Minister. The Governor General usually serves for five years. One of the most important roles of the Governor General is to ensure that Canada always has a Prime Minister. For example, if no party had a clear majority after an election, or if the Prime Minister were to die in office, the Governor General would have to choose a successor.

The duties of the Governor General include giving Royal Assent to bills passed by the House of Commons and the Senate so that they can become law. The Governor General also reads the Speech from the Throne, signs state documents, summons, opens and ends sessions of Parliament, and dissolves Parliament for an election.

THE SENATE

DISTRIBUTION OF SENATE SEATS

AREA	SEATS
Ontario	24
Quebec	24
Maritimes	24
Nova Scotia	10
New Brunswick	10
Prince Edward Island	4
Western Provinces	24
Manitoba	6
British Columbia	6
Saskatchewan	6
Alberta	6
Additional representation	9
Newfoundland and Labrador	6
Northwest Territories	1
Yukon Territory	1
Nunavut	1
TOTAL	105

The Senate studies, amends and either rejects or approves bills passed by the House of Commons. It can also introduce its own bills, except those to spend public money or impose taxes. No bill can become law until it has been passed by the Senate. Senators also study major social and economic issues through their committee work.

One of the duties of the Senate is to represent the interests of Canada's regions, provinces, territories and minority groups. Seats in the Senate are distributed to give each major region of the country equal representation.

The Senate has 105 members. Senators are appointed by the Governor General on the recommendation of the Prime Minister. They hold office until age 75 unless they miss two consecutive sessions of Parliament.

THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

DISTRIBUTION OF HOUSE OF COMMONS SEATS

AREA	SEATS
Ontario	103
Quebec	75
Nova Scotia	11
New Brunswick	10
Manitoba	14
British Columbia	34
Prince Edward Island	4
Saskatchewan	14
Alberta	26
Newfoundland and Labrador	7
Northwest Territories	1
Yukon Territory	1
Nunavut	1
TOTAL	301

The House of Commons is the major law-making body in Parliament. In the Commons Chamber, Members devote most of their time to debating and voting on bills. Because its Members are elected, the Commons makes decisions on spending public money and imposing taxes. The Chamber is also a place where Members represent constituents' views, discuss national issues and call on the government to explain its actions.

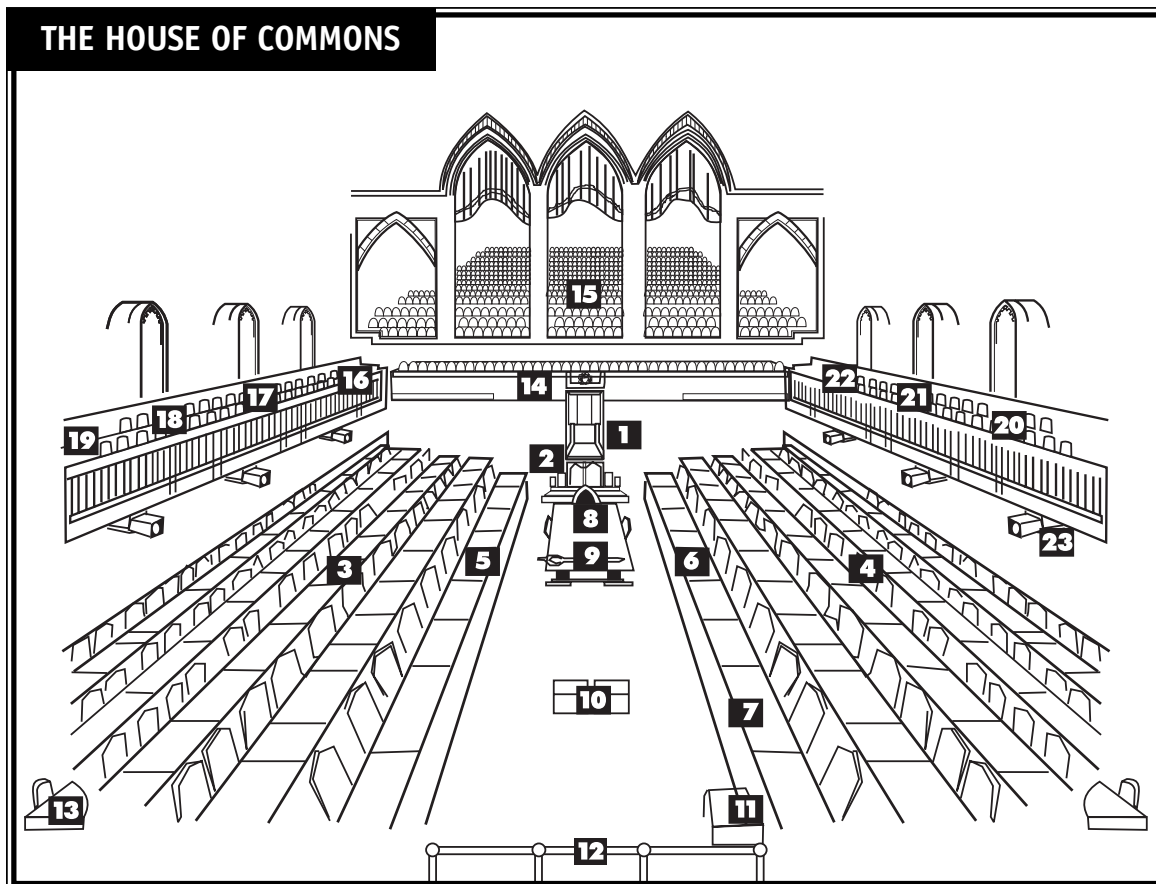
How do you become a Member of Parliament (MP)? By running in a federal election, which is held about every four years. In each of the country's 301 constituencies, or ridings, the candidate who gets the most votes is elected to the House of Commons, even if he or she gets less than half of the total votes.

Seats in the House of Commons are distributed roughly in proportion to each province's population. In general, the more people in a province or territory, the more Members it has in the House of Commons. Every province or territory must have at least as many members in the Commons as it has in the Senate.



WHO'S WHO IN THE HOUSE

When you think of Canada's Parliament, you might think of the Parliament Buildings — one of Canada's best known symbols and the place where Parliament's work is done. Parliament is a place and a process, but it is also about people, each doing a different job to make the whole system run well.



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THE SPEAKER

After each general election, the Members of the House of Commons elect a Speaker from among MPs by secret ballot. The Speaker presides over the House of Commons and ensures that everyone respects its rules and traditions. The Speaker must be impartial and apply the rules to all Members equally.

The Speaker represents the Commons in dealings with the Senate and the Crown. The Speaker is also responsible for the administration of the House and its staff and has many diplomatic and social duties.

THE PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister is the leader of the party in power and is the Head of Government. A Prime Minister's duties include attending Cabinet meetings, meeting official foreign delegations to Ottawa and answering questions in the House of Commons. Since the Prime Minister is usually a Member of Parliament (there have been two who were Senators), he or she also spends time helping constituents.

THE CABINET

The Prime Minister chooses the Cabinet Ministers, and the Governor General formally appoints them. Most are MPs, and there is always at least one representative from the Senate. The Prime Minister and Cabinet meet regularly to discuss important issues affecting Canada. These issues concern government spending, ideas for bills, and new policies, programs and services. Most Cabinet Ministers are in charge of a government department and they report on their department's activities to Parliament.

A key feature of Cabinet is the concept of collective responsibility, which means that all Ministers share responsibility for the administration of government and for the government's policies. They must all support a Cabinet decision. They may not agree with it, but they have to support it in public. If a Minister cannot support a decision, he or she must resign from Cabinet.

Collective responsibility is an important part of responsible government. Without it, the government could not maintain the confidence of the House of Commons. If the House shows by a vote that it does not have confidence in a Cabinet, the Cabinet must resign and make way for a new government or call an election.

SECRETARY OF STATE

Secretaries of State are assigned to Cabinet Ministers to help them in their work. The Prime Minister assigns them areas that are government priorities, such as science, research and development. Secretaries of State are not members of Cabinet but are bound by collective responsibility.

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY

Parliamentary secretaries are appointed by the Prime Minister to help Cabinet Ministers. They table documents or answer questions for a Minister, participate in debates on bills and speak to committees on government policies and proposals.

LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION AND CRITICS

The role of the Official Opposition is to give voters an alternative to the current government in the next election. Generally, the Leader of the Opposition is the leader of the party with the second largest membership in the Commons. This person leads opposition debates and suggests changes to government legislation or alternative proposals. Each opposition party in the Commons has its own leader and appoints critics from among its members. Each critic handles a certain subject, such as health or defence. They present their party's policies on the subject and comment on government policies.

HOUSE LEADERS

Each party appoints one member to be its House Leader. The House Leaders of all the parties meet once a week to discuss upcoming business in the Commons, how long bills will be debated and when special issues will be discussed. They try to reach an agreement on these matters, but in the end, the government has the final say, given its majority in the House.

WHIPS

Each party also has a Whip. The Whips ensure that enough party members are in the Chamber for debates and votes. Given the many responsibilities MPs have, this is not always easy. The Whips also determine which committees a party member will sit on, assign offices and seats in the House, and discipline members who break party ranks.

HOUSE OFFICERS

Seated at a long Table in front of the Speaker are the Clerk and other procedural officers of the House. They advise the Speaker and Members on the rules to be followed in the Commons. At the end of the Table lies the Mace, the symbol of the authority of the House of Commons. At the end of the Chamber, opposite the Speaker, sits the Sergeant-at-Arms. This person is responsible for the security and maintenance of the Parliament Buildings and has ceremonial duties. House officers and Members are assisted by the parliamentary pages, who carry messages to the Members in the Chamber.

A WORKING DAY IN THE COMMONS



A working day in the Commons starts when the bells ring to call MPs to the House. The Speaker and the Clerks march through the Hall of Honour to the Commons Chamber, with the Sergeant-at-Arms leading the way carrying the Mace. The Speaker goes to the raised chair at the far end of the Chamber. After he leads the House in a brief prayer, the House is called to order and the day begins.

The House of Commons meets for about 130 days a year. Each day the House meets is called a sitting. When it is in session, the House sits Monday through Friday.

A day in the House is divided into different parts so that Members can discuss all the business at hand.

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

A 15-minute period is set aside each day for any Member who is not a Cabinet Minister to make a statement on a subject of national, regional or local importance. Each statement lasts one minute.

ORAL QUESTIONS

This closely watched 45 minutes is best known as Question Period. It is a chance for opposition Members, and sometimes government Members, to ask questions of the Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers. It is an exercise in accountability: any Member can ask any Minister any question about their area of responsibility, without letting them know in advance.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

For one hour each day, Members who are not Cabinet Ministers can have their bills and motions debated by the House. These items are selected in a draw and some of them are chosen to come to a vote.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

Government orders are any items of business (such as motions or bills) that the government puts on the House of Commons' agenda.

NOTICES OF MOTION FOR THE PRODUCTION OF PAPERS

Members can ask the government to present certain documents to the House of Commons. The government can respond to the requests at this time.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS



Routine proceedings can cover many different subjects:

- Ministers and parliamentary secretaries table committee reports, responses to petitions and other documents;
- Ministers make short announcements or talk about government policy, and the opposition parties reply;
- Members present petitions to the House, and committees table their reports;
- Government bills are introduced and given first reading, and Members introduce their Private Member's bills for first reading.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A Member who is dissatisfied with an answer given in Question Period can ask, in writing, for the matter to be raised again during the adjournment proceedings at the end of the day. A Cabinet Minister or parliamentary secretary responds.

CAUCUS

Daily business does not start until 2 p.m. on Wednesdays so that Members can attend morning caucus meetings. At these meetings, Senators and Members of Parliament from the same party talk about policies and the work being done in Parliament.

PARLIAMENTARY HIGHLIGHTS

THRONE SPEECH

When a session of Parliament opens, Senators and Members meet in the Senate Chamber to hear the Speech from the Throne. It describes the government's policies and the bills it plans to introduce during the session. The speech is written by the Privy Council Office and is read by the Governor General, or sometimes by the Queen.

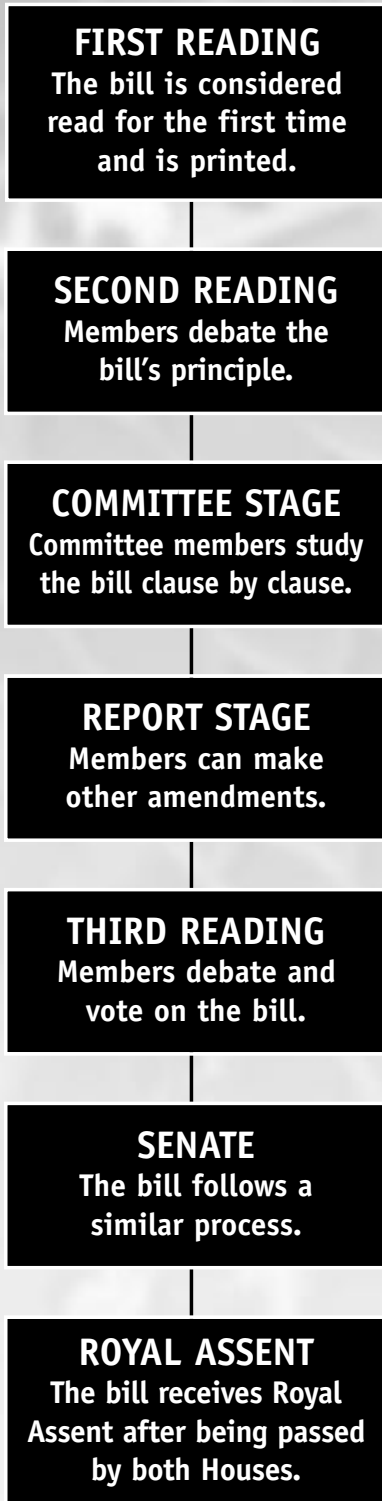
BUDGET SPEECH

At some point each year, the Minister of Finance makes a statement known as the Budget Speech. It describes the government's economic policy and its plans for collecting and spending public money.

ROYAL ASSENT

Royal Assent is one of Parliament's oldest ceremonies. A bill must receive Royal Assent before it can become law. Royal Assent is given by the Governor General or by one of her deputies (the Chief Justice of Canada or other justices of the Supreme Court of Canada) in the Senate Chamber with Senators and Members of Parliament present.

HOW A BILL BECOMES LAW THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS



When you fly in an airplane, visit a national park or buy a product in a store, you are doing something that has been touched by a law made in Parliament.

An idea to make a new law or to change an existing law starts out as a "bill." Each bill goes through several stages to become law. At first reading, the bill is considered read for the first time and is printed. There is no debate. At second reading, Members debate the principle of a bill — Is the idea behind it sound? Does it meet people's needs? If a bill passes at second reading, it goes to a committee of the House.

Committee members study the bill carefully. They hold hearings to gather information. They can ask for government officials and experts to come and answer questions. The committee can propose amendments, or changes, to the bill.

When a committee has finished its study, it reports the bill back to the House. The entire House can then debate it. During report stage debate, Members can suggest other amendments to the bill.

Once report stage is over, the bill is called for third reading debate. Members who voted for the bill at second reading may sometimes change their minds at third reading after seeing what amendments have or have not been made to the bill. After a bill has passed third reading in the House of Commons, it goes through a similar process in the Senate. Once both Chambers pass the bill, it is given Royal Assent and becomes law.

The chart on the left shows the usual path followed by government bills introduced in the House of Commons.

THE ROLE OF A MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT

A Member's job is as varied as the many regions of Canada and the people who live here. To understand their role, it helps to look at the different places where Members work.

IN THE CHAMBER



Television brings the Commons Chamber into homes and schools across the country. This is where Members help to make Canada's laws by debating and voting on bills. They also introduce their own ideas for bills.

The Chamber is also a place where MPs can put local, regional or national issues in the spotlight. They represent their constituents' views by presenting petitions, making statements and asking questions in the House.

With such a high profile, it is easy to think that Members do most of their work in the Chamber. Actually, Members spend about 15 hours a week there. The rest of their day — and many evenings — is spent in committee rooms, at meetings and wherever their constituents gather.

IN COMMITTEE

Committee work is an important part of a Member's job and the law-making process. Members can look at bills in greater depth than is possible in the Chamber, where there is a large group of people involved and a full timetable. In committee, Members also study important issues such as finance and health, and the spending plans of federal departments. Many Members sit on at least two committees. Committees can sit from 6 to 40 hours a week and sometimes travel across the country to hear from people.

CAUCUS

Weekly caucus meetings are a time for Senators and MPs of the same party to talk about policies and strategy. They ask questions of their leaders and explain the views of their constituents. MPs from the same area also discuss common issues at regional caucus meetings.

IN THE OFFICE

To meet the needs of their constituents, MPs have an office in Ottawa and one or more in their riding. Their offices are often the first stop for people who need help. Members act as “ombudsmen,” helping constituents with questions about visas, pension benefits, income tax — anything that is the business of the federal government. Members are good resources because they understand how federal departments are organized and how to find answers.

As a Member, your schedule is always busy. A journalist has asked for an interview on a bill being studied by your committee. A visiting constituent wants to talk about a federal program. You have been invited to meet with parliamentarians from another country. A constituent is in Ottawa to accept an award and wants you to attend the ceremony. You have to prepare a speech to give in the House. Plus there are letters, phone messages and e-mails to answer. Fortunately, Members have dedicated staff to help them in their work.

They return to their ridings as often as possible. For many Members, the trip home covers several thousand kilometres. But being in the riding lets Members talk to constituents face-to-face and attend local activities. Opening a new business, speaking to a civic group, laying a wreath on Remembrance Day, attending a high school graduation — these are many of the events that Canadians invite their Members of Parliament to attend. Travel time plus this busy schedule means less time for their families and themselves.

BEING PART OF PARLIAMENT

The House of Commons provides a link between Canadians and their Parliament. Electing Members of Parliament gives Canadians a voice in the affairs of our country and in holding the government to account for its actions. Members make a difference by creating laws and helping their constituents with problems.

The people we elect to represent us — farmers, teachers, lawyers, business people and others — bring their ideas and experience to bear on their work. They work within the structure of Parliament and their parties to make decisions in the interest of Canada. We may or may not like what they do. The system gives us the chance to show our approval or displeasure at every federal election.

The House of Commons is like a vehicle, and people and ideas are the spark that ignites the engine — not just the people who serve there, but people across the country. When we vote, when we tell our Member of Parliament what we are thinking, or when we ask questions about the system, we help the engine to run better and the House — and our country — to move forward.

FINDING OUT MORE

The Library of Parliament has more information about Canada's House of Commons:

**Information Service
Information and
Documentation Branch
Library of Parliament
Parliament Hill
Ottawa, ON
K1A 0A9**

**Telephone:
Toll-free
1-866-599-4999
National Capital Region
(613) 992-4793**

You can also tune in to Commons debates and some committee meetings on the Cable Public Affairs Channel.

These web sites offer information on other aspects of Parliament:

- Parliament of Canada:
www.parl.gc.ca
- Governor General of Canada:
www.gg.ca
- Public Works and Government Services Canada:
www.parliamenthill.gc.ca
- Supreme Court of Canada:
www.scc-csc.gc.ca
- Department of Justice:
www.canada.justice.gc.ca
- Elections Canada:
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- Cable Public Affairs Channel (CPAC):
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- Communication Canada:
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