



■ COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE HOUSE

All MLAs are members of the Committee of the Whole House, responsible for examining each section of the bill. The committee may ask the bill's sponsor detailed questions about each section's meaning and purpose, and may also decide to amend the bill in some areas. Depending on the bill, the committee stage may last anywhere from a few days to several weeks.

When the committee has finished its debate and proposed amendments (if any), the members will vote to "report" the bill back to the House. Once this happens, no further changes can be made to the bill unless the House votes to send the bill back to the committee for a second review (but this is very rare).

THE SPEAKER

The Speaker is an MLA elected by the other members of the Legislative Assembly to oversee debates and make sure the House follows established rules of behaviour and procedure. The Speaker is neutral and only votes to break a tie.

To become the Committee of the Whole, the House symbolically "converts" itself by having the Speaker step down from the raised Speaker's Chair at one end of the Legislative Chamber. The Deputy Speaker then presides over the committee from the Clerk's Table in the centre of the Chamber.

Once the Committee of the Whole is finished, the Speaker steps back up into the Chair and again becomes responsible for House order and decorum.

■ THIRD READING

During third reading, MLAs may choose once again to debate the bill before a final vote. If the bill passes third reading, the Speaker will declare it to be an Act.

■ ROYAL ASSENT

The Lieutenant-Governor will come to the Legislative Chamber to give the new Act Royal Assent (the Queen's official approval) – and what started as a bill is now a law of the Province of British Columbia.



PROCLAMATION

Most Acts come into force immediately after Royal Assent. Others, however, will contain a special proclamation section that sets a different date for the Act to come into force. This gives the people affected by the law more time to prepare for the change.

VISITING THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

WE WELCOME VISITORS. Free tours of the B.C. Parliament Buildings are available Monday through Friday throughout the year, and on Saturdays and Sundays in the summer months.

To see MLAs in action, visitors are welcome in the public galleries of the Legislative Chamber whenever the House is sitting. The galleries are often full during Question Period – the 30-minute period every Monday to Thursday afternoon when MLAs ask questions about government activities, so plan to arrive early.

For more information on the work of the Legislative Assembly, please contact:

Public Education and Outreach
Room 144, Parliament Buildings
Victoria B.C. V8V 1X4
250-387-8669 phone
250-356-5981 fax
PEO@leg.bc.ca

For information on visiting the Parliament Buildings, please contact:

Tour Office
Parliament Buildings
Victoria B.C. V8V 1X4
250-387-1400

Or visit the Legislative Assembly website at: www.leg.bc.ca

HOW A BILL BECOMES LAW

SHAPING BRITISH COLUMBIA'S FUTURE

In the grand and historic British Columbia Parliament Buildings, our elected representatives – called Members of the Legislative Assembly or MLAs – come to meet, debate and pass the laws that govern the people of British Columbia, and help shape the future of our province.

GOVERNMENT IN B.C.

In British Columbia, one MLA is elected from each of 79 constituencies or ridings across the province.

Candidates are usually members of an organized political party, but may also run for election as independents.

The political party that wins the largest number of seats in a general election forms the governing party, and its leader becomes the head of the provincial government, known as the Premier. The opposition consists of elected members who do not belong to the governing party.

THE CABINET

The Premier selects a small group of MLAs from his or her party to work as ministers of the Crown, in charge of the day-to-day activities of government ministries (such as Health or Finance), and responsible for proposing new laws.

The Premier and the ministers together make up the Executive Council or Cabinet.

THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Together, MLAs from the governing party and the opposition make up the B.C. Legislative Assembly.

The primary function of the Legislative Assembly is to make laws.

The Legislative Assembly does not, however, actually write the laws. Draft laws (known as bills) are prepared and written outside the House, generally by the government ministry proposing them.

When the House is sitting, MLAs are responsible for studying and debating all bills put before them. It is their job to explore arguments for and against each bill and to consider the views and concerns of British Columbians before deciding to support or reject it. If the majority of MLAs support a bill, it will eventually become an Act of the Assembly (otherwise known as a law).

THE HOUSE

Another name for the Legislative Assembly.

Although MLAs work year round in their home ridings and on legislative committees, the House "sits" – is in session – only part of the year, usually February through March and October and November.

DIVISION OF RESPONSIBILITY

In general, the federal government of Canada passes laws and takes major responsibility for policies and activities – such as national defense and citizenship – that affect all of Canada.

Provincial and territorial governments look after such activities as education, health care and highways, and pass laws that affect only the people of their province or territory.

BILLS

Bills fall into two categories: **public bills** and **private bills**.

A public bill applies to the entire province. The law that sets the voting age, for example, started as a **public bill**, as did the laws that determine the age when someone in British Columbia can drive a car.

Most public bills are introduced to the Legislative Assembly by cabinet ministers. Any government bill that requires spending public money (our tax dollars) or imposes a new tax must be accompanied by a recommendation or "message" from the Lieutenant-Governor. This tradition dates back hundreds of years, when only the King or Queen could raise funds for public projects.

A public bill introduced by an MLA who is not a cabinet minister is known as a **public bill in the hands of a private member**.

A bill introduced by an MLA on behalf of a person or group outside the Legislative Assembly is called a **private bill**. Private bills generally deal with a specific problem affecting that person or group.

THE LIEUTENANT-GOVERNOR

As a member of the Commonwealth, Canada's head of state is Queen Elizabeth II.

In B.C., as in every other Canadian province, the Queen appoints a Lieutenant-Governor to act on her behalf.

READINGS

All bills must pass through three "readings" – as well as an in-depth study by the Committee of the Whole House – before becoming law.

These stages occur on different days, except in urgent cases, to make sure that MLAs and members of the public alike have the time and opportunity to examine each bill and suggest changes or improvements.

■ FIRST READING

At the first reading, the bill's sponsor introduces the proposed law and explains its purpose. MLAs do not discuss the bill's merits at this point, but simply vote on whether to accept it for future debate. If they vote yes, the bill is assigned a number, printed and scheduled for second reading – usually a few days later to give MLAs time to study it.

■ SECOND READING

During second reading, MLAs debate the bill's general principles and goals, but do not yet discuss specific sections. If a bill is complex or contentious, second reading may last for several days.

Once the debate is over, MLAs vote on whether the bill will proceed to the next step. This vote represents the House's opinion of the bill in general – some MLAs may vote in favour of sending it forward, even though they do not entirely agree with its contents. They know that at the next stage, Committee of the Whole House, they will be able to propose changes (known as amendments).

DID YOU KNOW...

B.C.'s system of government is based on that of Great Britain, which dates back over 800 years.

That means many of the procedures and even the words used by the B.C. Legislative Assembly also date back nearly as far.

Bills go through "readings" because, long before the printing press was in general use, hand-written bills were read aloud to the Members of the British Parliament. The term continues today.