

MLAs IN THE HOUSE

■ ASKING QUESTIONS

Every Monday to Thursday, MLAs participate in **Oral Questions**, an intense 30-minute period of rapid-fire questions and answers.

This is the time for members of the Official Opposition to question the Premier and cabinet ministers directly about government plans and activities.

■ SITTING ON COMMITTEES

Generally, committee work is undertaken by MLAs who are not in Cabinet, and they sit on at least one of the committees created by the House.

Select standing (permanent) committees are authorized by the Legislative Assembly to investigate and report on a particular aspect of government operations, such as Aboriginal affairs, finance and government services, or education, for the duration of the House session.

Occasionally, the House also sets up special committees to look closely at a specific issue, or to appoint a new statutory officer. A special committee ceases to exist after it has completed its inquiry and tabled its final report in the House.

■ REPRESENTING AND ACTING FOR THEIR CONSTITUENTS

While in the House, MLAs represent the people of their ridings (their constituents) by asking questions and raising issues of concern to them during debate.

They also act for their constituents by presenting petitions on their behalf that ask government to take action on a particular issue, and by introducing both public and private bills.



MLAs AT HOME

MLAs maintain an office year round in their home riding.

It is a major part of an MLA's job to provide his or her constituents with advice, guidance and, when necessary, hands-on assistance in dealing with government programs and agencies.

When the House is not sitting, MLAs can usually be found at their constituency offices or meeting with individuals, local businesses and community groups to keep in touch with what the people of their riding think and feel.

DID YOU KNOW...

MLAs who are not in Cabinet are called private members or "backbenchers", even though they actually sit in chairs at desks.

That's because, when our system of government was first established in Great Britain over 800 years ago, all Members of Parliament sat on benches — but only the leading members of each party got to sit in front. Everyone not in Cabinet had to sit on the benches in the back.

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
Room 141, Parliament Buildings
Victoria B.C. V8V 1X4
250-387-3046**

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

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THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

MEMBERS OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY



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.

BECOMING AN MLA

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

Any Canadian citizen, 18 years of age or older on election day, who has lived in B.C. for at least six months may be nominated as a candidate for election as an MLA.

Candidates must fill out a nomination form – signed by at least 25 voters – that states they are eligible for election, which political party (if any) they are affiliated with, and in which riding they intend to run (a candidate can live in one riding, and run for election in another). They must also file a financial disclosure statement and pay a deposit to the District Electoral Officer, who is responsible for the conduct of any election in the riding.



ELECTIONS

The Canadian Constitution requires that all provinces and territories – as well as the federal Parliament – hold a general election within five years from the date of the last election.

The Legislative Assembly in 2001 passed the *Constitution (Fixed Election Dates) Amendment Act, 2001, S.B.C. 2001 c. 36* so that British Columbia has fixed election dates every four years. On the advice of the Premier, the Lieutenant Governor dissolves the provincial parliament known as “issuing the writ”, before the 28 day campaign period can begin. A provincial general election may also be called if the government loses a vote of confidence in the Legislative Assembly.

On election day, preliminary results can be released to the public, but the election period is not over until the 50th day. Once all of the absentee ballots are counted, the Chief Electoral Officer certifies the final results and submits a list of the individuals elected in each riding to the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly. This is referred to as the “return of the Writ” and completes the election process.

Winning candidates are now MLAs and – after an official swearing-in ceremony at the Parliament Buildings – can take their seats in the Legislative Chamber.

POLITICAL PARTIES

Political parties play an important role in the recruitment, nomination and election of MLAs. During an election, political parties issue statements (also called party platforms) that announce their ideas and what changes they would make if elected.

Members who run for election under a party rather than as independents hold similar views on such issues as health care, education, and the environment.

If elected, candidates from one political party will form what is called a caucus, a group of MLAs who support similar policies and vote together as a bloc.

GOVERNMENT

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 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. Together, the Premier and the ministers make up the Executive Council or Cabinet.

ONCE ELECTED

Once elected, MLAs have a number of responsibilities, both in their home ridings and in the Legislative Assembly. They take these responsibilities very seriously, because what they do will ultimately affect the lives of every British Columbian in some way, large or small.

OPPOSITION

The party that wins the second largest number of seats in an election becomes the Official Opposition. The Opposition House Leader usually sets up what is called a “shadow” cabinet to provide citizens with the option of an alternative government.

The primary role of the Official Opposition, as well as other smaller opposition parties and independent MLAs, is to question government actions, and to present alternatives to existing government policies.

The opposition enjoys privileges and duties well established by tradition. It holds an important position in the Legislative Assembly and contributes to the overall effectiveness of Parliament by monitoring the Cabinet and encouraging the government to act prudently.

MLAs IN THE HOUSE

MAKING LAWS

Any MLA may propose a new law (called a bill). Most bills are introduced to the Legislative Assembly by cabinet ministers and are called **public bills**. A 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**.

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 parliamentary committees, the House “sits” – is in session – only part of the year, usually February through May and October and November.

GRANTING SUPPLY AND APPROVING TAXES

MLAs are also responsible for approving taxes and for debating and voting on “Estimates” – the money requested by government ministries each spring to fund programs and pay staff for the coming year. This is called granting supply.